Feeling Impersonal:
Gender and the Art of Detachment in Post-1960s American Literature

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Abstract

"Feeling Impersonal" offers an account of how American women writers take up and rework impersonality as a gendered aesthetic mode in the post-1960s, after the advent of second-wave feminism and amidst an increasing cultural fixation on individual feeling management and therapeutic self-fashioning. I trace the literary careers of three famously "cool" female prose stylists—Susan Sontag, Ottessa Moshfegh, and Lydia Davis—to examine how and why these writers participate in, reflect on, and revise an impersonal aesthetic (inherited from modernism and often associated with postmodern masculinity). Reading across genre, I show how these writers theorize selfhood and emotion on the page, as they each undertake stylistic and narrative experiments to figure poses of detachment and unfeelingness not as passive disengagement but as effortful and embodied tasks of self-performance, affective discipline, and social positioning. Reapproaching questions of postmodern cool in light of gender studies and the emotional imperatives of U.S. therapeutic culture in this period—and thus newly bringing together an aesthetic history with a cultural one—I suggest that stylized female unfeelingness on the page is more curious and complicated than narratives of postmodern affectlessness allow.

I begin with Susan Sontag's critical essays in the mid-1960s, arguing that her early commitment to impersonal, avant-garde art sets in motion an abiding interest in the relationship between feeling, selfhood, and gender that she works out in creative endeavors across her long career. Offering new readings of key essays, unpublished work on Japanese affect and aesthetics, and her novel *The Volcano Lover* (1992), I suggest that Sontag harnesses the historical romance as a writerly form able to encompass both passionate involvement and sober distance (as well as feminist solidarity and separateness). My second chapter reads Ottessa Moshfegh's contemporary novels of emotional convalescence as ironic commentaries on female

unfeelingness's commercial appeal, especially *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), which satirizes the elite whiteness of U.S. wellness culture and also puts the gender politics of the contemporary New York art world on full display. Moshfegh's deadpan narratives figure impersonal numbness as both a gendered spectacle and a disturbing postmodern beauty standard, even as they refuse interpretive closure and mock critics' desires for literary fiction to be therapeutic. Finally, my third chapter turns to Lydia Davis's minimalist stories to examine the ethics and aesthetics of feeling less. Characterized by philosophical playfulness and narratorial self-reflection on the mysteries of consciousness, Davis's work figures cool detachment not as a lack of affective engagement but as a stylistic commitment to minimizing the self by downplaying and interrogating personal feelings. A brief coda reflects on the impersonality of academic life and reads Weike Wang's novel *Chemistry* (2017), the story of a Chinese-American graduate student who drops out of her chemistry Ph.D., as reclaiming an impersonal pose. Taken together, these writers illustrate the philosophical and aesthetic work an impersonal mode requires, making that labor visible, meaningful, and open to critique.

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Introduction

In August 2018, the indie-rock artist Mitski released her fifth studio album, *Be the Cowboy*. The album's title signaled an emotional rebranding: Mitski, known for her weepy rock anthems and confessional lyrics, was here championing the aloof glamour of a "devil-may-care" frontier attitude, a distinctly American mythos of masculine cool.[1] In an interview with Trevor Noah, Mitski shared her thinking behind the title: "There's such an arrogance and freedom to [the cowboy myth] that is so appealing to me, especially because I am an Asian woman. I walk into a room and feel like I have to apologize for existing, and I was so attracted to that idea of freedom and arrogance" ("Mitski"). To be the cowboy, according to Mitski, is to reclaim a certain kind of affective pose, to perform a specific brand of unfeelingness that acts as an antidote to gendered and racialized stereotypes of emotionality. The album's cover art amps up the drama of this coolly withholding exterior, with a feminine, melodramatic twist. In a close-up image of just her face, Mitski appears against a white background in a white swim cap, in full makeup; a single hand reaches into the frame to continue applying her eyeliner (Ngo; Figure 1). At first glance, the hand looks like Mitski's own, twisted strangely into a precise gesture. On tour, Mitski combined expressive dramatic monologues with calculated body movements and defamiliarizing performance art, drawing on stage strategies from Japanese

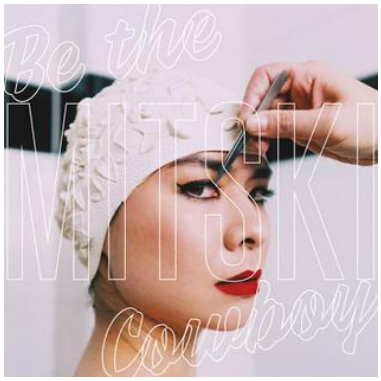

Figure 1: Be the Cowboy *album cover*

[1] Earlier album titles include *Bury Me at Makeout Creek* and *Puberty 2*, for reference.

dance and avant-garde theatre to captivate her audience and render her melodramatic songs moving yet also affectively strange.[2]

By making a spectacle of affective control and its gendered conventions, Mitski offers an example of what an artful performance of female detachment might look like and why an artist might undertake it (to combat stereotypes, to shock the audience, to roleplay different selves, to increase art's impact). Her performance also complicates models of emotion that figure feeling as purely the province of an individual self, since it is a decidedly impersonal one: the erasing and distorting of Mitski's individuality in favor of a cooler, more detached persona shifts attention from the singer as an expressive vehicle to the stylized nature of her body movements, suggesting both technical skill and mastery over emotion. She isn't getting caught up in the moment: her moves are carefully planned and executed. Mitski likely makes a spectacle of emotionality and affective control not in spite of but because of the powerful, even melodramatic feelings probed in her music; her stylized performance complements but also counteracts the emotional charge of her songs. Reviewer Quinn Moreland has observed that Mitski herself describes her "icy exterior" as "hid[ing] the vast cosmos of her internal passions." This coldness, then, is not an absence of feeling but an artful intensification of it.

This project, "Feeling Impersonal," examines similar gendered poses and textual performances of affective control in post-1960s American literary fiction, analyzing the variety of ways that famously "cool" female prose stylists draw on impersonal aesthetics to defamiliarize and disavow personal feelings while also stylizing themselves as artful manipulators of them. I focus on the careers of Susan Sontag, Lydia Davis, Ottessa Moshfegh,

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[2] For accounts and video of Mitski's performances, see Margaret Talbot, "On the Road with Mitski" and Amanda Hatfield, "Mitski Began Her Brooklyn 'Be The Cowboy' Run (Pics, Review, Video, Setlist)."

and Weike Wang, all of whom take up and rework impersonality as a gendered aesthetic mode in a period of mounting focus on the personal, in the aftermath of second-wave feminism and amidst an increasing cultural fixation on individual feeling management and therapeutic self-fashioning. Reading across genre, I argue that these writers theorize selfhood and emotion on the page to remake and reclaim the cool, impersonal affects inherited from modernism and often associated with postmodern masculinity, as they each undertake stylistic and narrative experiments that figure poses of detachment and unfeelingness not as passive disengagement but as effortful and embodied tasks of self-performance, emotional discipline, and social positioning.

To feel impersonal, as I invoke the phrase here and in my project's title, is necessarily ambiguous and even paradoxical: it looks differently for different writers at different moments, and insofar as one person can "feel" "impersonally"—apart from or unlike themselves—the tensions and contradictions this phrase holds together are provocative and meaningful. As Sharon Cameron points out in *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (2007), impersonality "as a practice, as an ethic, a representation…since it is undertaken by persons, could only be contradictory by definition" (7). Sometimes, in the texts I study here, to feel impersonal looks like a kind of numbness; at others, it appears more as a receptivity to the transpersonal circulation of affect; at even others, it seems the disciplined professionalism of a clinical gaze. In all events, however, feeling impersonal is not simply a disengaged pose of neutrality—it's an effortful and sometimes even absurd performance of dispassionate and unaffected selfhood.

Crucially, these literary performances of detachment take shape not only against an aesthetic history of modernist and postmodernist experimentation with theorizing subjectivity but also against a distinctly modern American cultural backdrop of therapeutic and affective industries bent on "curing" or "eradicating" unwanted feelings. In the mid-twentieth century,

managing mood and emotional life became a big industry in the United States, a phenomenon with clear links to our contemporary era of wellness: with the growing popularity of psychoanalysis and talk therapy, a government-funded pharmaceutical industry, a focus on "emotional health" in the 1970s, and, later on, the 1990s' corporate push toward "emotional intelligence" in the workplace, individual feelings and affective states became newly manageable, manipulatable, optimizable, and the topic of much debate about healthy self-styling in this period.[3] In examining the aesthetics of detachment in literature, my project tracks the modern mutations of the impersonal mode in this post-1960s American context, viewing impersonality's literary career both in light of institutionalized modernist influence and popular U.S. discourses and industries of feeling management that proliferated at midcentury and have developed and persisted in the twenty-first.

By doing so, I demonstrate that gendered questions of feeling management—especially those relating to disposition, mood, and temperament—shape the cool aesthetics and prose experiments of modern and contemporary American literature in previously unacknowledged ways. We all know the critical clichés of postmodern cool, which hover in the background of any discussion of affect and literature in this period; however, the writers I study here, while deeply aware of postmodern theories and techniques, invite us to think beyond those terms and categorizations. Thus, rather than reiterating critical cliches or becoming trapped in their logic and conceptual double-binds, I aim to elaborate a counter-tradition of feeling impersonal that simultaneously draws on, mimics, and critiques those well-known poses and narratives of

[3] See Merve Emre's "The Repressive Politics of Emotional Intelligence" for a discussion of the cultural history of emotional self-management.

alienation, emphasizing instead the social, mental, and bodily difficulty of striking and/or maintaining an impersonal or unaffected pose.

I look to Susan Sontag, Ottessa Moshfegh, Lydia Davis, and, briefly, to Weike Wang because they are each theorists and chroniclers, in their own ways, of impersonality and clinical detachment, as their work both exhibits and enacts self-consciousness about the process of mentally observing and monitoring feeling itself—keeping it in check. They also each draw attention to the role of the body in this task, rejecting notions of disembodied selfhood even while seeming to entertain them. These writers are not usually examined alongside one another, but through putting them together, we can see that their work both thematically and stylistically pokes and probes questions of affective disposition, artful feeling management, and emotional improvement. Formally, they all revise and rework an inherited aesthetic of the impersonal, drawing on literary techniques of dramatic monologue, tonal ambiguity, irony, deadpan, and self-reflexivity in their fiction to dramatize and even satirize feeling management, as well as to engage the challenge of disciplining one's body and mind so as to act or feel the proper way. By drawing attention to both the thematic and stylistic poses of unfeelingness in their fiction, across three chapters, I show that seemingly feeling less is a much more curious and complicated task than narratives of postmodern affectlessness allow. Cool female detachment, I suggest, is a sought-after affective and aesthetic ideal in literary fiction that is even weirder and more unpredictable (politically, aesthetically, tonally) than we think.

Even if we haven't paid much attention to this phenomenon of affective and aesthetic play, writers themselves have. They have taken up this meta-critical task themselves, investigating through their work the ways that certain kinds of emotional difficulty are inseparable from aesthetic difficulty, while also playing to and with popular affective scripts and

expectations for their writing. Ralph Clare draws attention to a related phenomenon in contemporary writing that he calls, riffing off Patricia Waugh's definition of metafiction, "metaffective fiction"—a "fiction that self-consciously calls attention to the ways in which emotion and affect are represented in order to interrogate the relationship between them" (266). One of the key ways these writers reflect on affective dynamics and expectations is through experiments with form and especially through their distinctive, cool style. Sontag, Moshfegh, and Davis do not just thematize problems of feeling, in other words, or explore these questions narratively; they also strike a particular pose and orientation to them in their (mostly) first-person prose.

All three of these writers, I should point out, are known and praised for their unsentimental—maybe even anti-sentimental—sensibility, a sensibility they have both on and off the page. In American literary studies, the unsentimental is practically synonymous with "female cool."[4] Deborah Nelson includes Susan Sontag, for instance, in her account of postwar female unsentimental style, *Tough Enough* (2017), which traces a countertradition of female intellectuals (including Joan Didion, Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt, and Simone Weil) who opposed the excessive emotional displays of American therapeutic culture. Nelson describes how such a carefully constructed, "unsentimental" pose is both an ethic and an aesthetic, an "emotional style" that refuses both the gendered expectations of twentieth-century womanhood and the stoic masculinity of a John Wayne type (3). I owe a lot to Nelson's work: it has invigorated my own interest in the aesthetics of affective discipline.[5] However, as I explain more

[4] Merve Emre at one point had *The Female Cool* as a working title for a project that appears to have since morphed into something else; still, I credit her for the coinage of the term, which has informed my own thinking. See Regan Penaluna, "Merve Emre: Portals to Self Discovery."
[5] In addition to engaging *Tough Enough*'s theoretical insights, I see myself building on Nelson's work and also shifting its focus is by exploring what emotional discipline looks like not in non-

thoroughly later on in this introduction, I find myself wanting to move beyond the unsentimental as the conceptual horizon for discussing cool, female style.

I also want to open up, as I feel Sontag, Moshfegh, and Davis do, renewed questioning of whether or when disciplining one's feelings and cultivating or performing emotional detachment is desirable, ethical, or good—for the feeling self and for everyone else. Decades ago, Amanda Anderson, in *The Powers of Distance* (2001), defended detachment as an ongoing, morally ambiguous, and aspirational "practice of the self" (4,7); more recently, Lee Konstantinou, in *Cool Characters* (2015), linked postwar American fiction's characterological fixation on irony and attitudinal orientation to questions of ethics and political engagement.[6] My project extends these lines of questioning while also casting them in a different light. What's striking to me, and what the writers I study reflect on to varying degrees, is that impersonality is an important pose to adopt and yet, perfecting emotional discipline is not at odds with what we Americanists so often disdain: U.S. therapeutic culture's obsession with discipling and regulating female bodies to feel less and take up less space (and monetizing such an imperative).[7] If unsentimental detachment is not inherently revolutionary or socially subversive, as Ottessa Moshfegh shows us in her ironic stories of emotional self-improvement, what is it good for? If one can make a method out of impersonal observation, as Lydia Davis has, practicing a certain kind of emotional

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fictional and essayistic prose writing but in fiction and other imaginative writing. Teasing out how an "unsentimental" mode entangles with an "impersonal" one, my chapter on Susan Sontag analyzes how and why Sontag strikes a dispassionate narratorial pose in her creative work as well as her critical thought.

[6] It is worth noting that, for Anderson, "detachment" encompasses a range of distancing practices that include disinterestedness, objectivity, irony, parody, etc.

[7] Tim Aubry and Trysh Travis, in *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture* (2015), note that "therapeutic culture," as shorthand for a web of industries, attitudes, and practices, is much-maligned in U.S. literary and cultural studies because of critics' indebtedness to Michel Foucault's analysis of institutional, disciplinary power. See also Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-help* (2008).

minimalism, can literature still attend to matters of the heart and of human connection? And finally, as Susan Sontag's work and career prompts us to ask, what forms of sociality and political engagement are possible when one feels—and wants to be known for feeling—impersonally?

In the pages that follow, I explain a bit more why I turn to the language of the impersonal and its anchoring in modernist aesthetics to account for this contemporary move writers are making in their representations of the feeling/thinking self.

Impersonality Revisited

Impersonality is most often associated with the aesthetics and sociohistorical context of high modernism. We tend to cite Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" as the ur-text of this formalist, anti-personal poetics, glossing impersonality as a poetic ideal of muted (or transmuted) selfhood linked to elite aesthetics.[8] Yet, as scholars such as Rochelle Rives and Colleen Lamos have shown, impersonality is a more slippery concept even for Eliot than we often realize or admit.[9] Even aside from Eliot, Rives argues that we should understand impersonality not as the province of only a handful of canonical modernists but as "a mode of engagement that moves beyond humanist understandings of selfhood and psychology" (16). Rather than viewing impersonality as a modernist renunciation of subjectivism and psychologism, Rives sees the impersonal mode as a complex negotiation of problems of selfhood that are present in fiction as much as in poetry. Similarly, Sharon Cameron in *Impersonality:*

[8] Maud Ellman's *The Poetics of Impersonality: T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (1987) is a foundational text exploring Eliot's key concept and probing its contradictions.
[9] See Rochelle Rives, *Modernist Impersonalities: Affect, Authority, and the Subject* (2012) and Colleen Lamos, *Deviant Modernism* (1998).

Seven Essays (2007), a collection of essays which focuses on American literature from Edwards to Melville, urges us to approach impersonality not as the province of one historical milieu but as a radical philosophy that manifests differently for different authors.

Though impersonality is somewhat definitionally elusive (Cameron states that we don't know what the "im" in "impersonality" means), a cluster of meanings and associated literary practices have coalesced around it (*ix*).[10] An impersonal mode is often associated with a lack of feeling, though critics have also problematized this assumption. As Heather Arvidson summarizes, impersonality "came to denote modernism's characteristically dispassionate tone and fragmented or abstract forms," especially its anti-sentimental streak (15). Others have noted that an impersonal mode relies on an aesthetics of negativity and absence. As Judith Brown points out in *Glamour in Six Dimensions* (2009), the literature of modernist detachment has a particular glamour, an enigmatic quality that hinges on mysterious withholding: "Glamour is coming to terms with loss—the loss of the ability to feel among other things—and the reformulation of feeling itself within literature (a subject to which Eliot applied himself with much energy)" (16). Rives notes that, for Brown, impersonality is "an affectively strange and mysterious condition," a condition expressed at the level of literary form (6). It is not, then, as Arvidson points out, that impersonality "precludes feeling" but that it "reconfigures" it, turning what could be recognizable into something strange and estranging (*ii*).

In a contemporary American literary context, postmodernism's famed affective deficits and deconstructive, self-reflexive aesthetic moves can be seen as an transmutation of modernist

[10] Perhaps the "imp" in "impersonality" is worth isolating as well: there's a mischievous shape-shifting to the term, something impish about it.

impersonal ideals.[11] David James argues as much in *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicizing Postwar and Contemporary Fiction* (2011), pointing out that postwar American fiction—not poetry—is the arena where writers have built on and worked out this aesthetic inheritance of impersonality, and, in "Modernist Affects" arguing that discussions about contemporary literature often revolve around the "affective afterlives of modernism."[12] Katie Murphy-Owens has suggested something similar; in *Lyrical Strategies: The Poetics of the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (2018) she argues that, by separating poetry and fiction so thoroughly in our minds and dividing up scholarship by genre, we've missed the ways that modern and contemporary American novels draw on poetic and rhetorical techniques (such as dramatic monologue, apostrophe, etc.) to achieve their particular effects. Sidestepping the modernism/postmodernism divide, she suggests that to better describe the poetics of American literature across the twentieth century, we need a wider conceptual net, one that isn't derived from only one genre. Perhaps poetic impersonality has a different afterlife than we expect?

American literary/cultural studies, however, has been primarily fiction focused, and scholarship on the impersonal, following Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005), has tended to examine the textual representations of affect through novelistic form. Most notably, Rachel Greenwald Smith's *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (2015) celebrates formally experimental novels that draw their aesthetic energy from "impersonal feelings" rather

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[11] Though the primary contribution of this project is not to modernist studies, I concur with scholars in the field who have rethought the period's geographies and temporal boundaries in past years, suggesting that modernism's reach should best be understood as continuing and simultaneous with other aesthetic practices. See Susan Stanford Friedman's *Planetary Modernisms* (2015), for example.

[12] For a related elaboration of this idea that modernism's legacy can be seen in contemporary literature's cool affects, see Alys Moody, "Indifferent and Detached: Modernism and the Aesthetic Affect" in the same special issue of *Modernism/Modernity* edited by David James.

than recognizably "personal" ones. Her book figures the impersonal mode as a crucial antidote to mainstream American culture's fetishization of individual feelings and a suspect sentimental literary tradition. "Impersonal feelings," as Greenwald Smith refers to them, "are not easily codifiable or recognizable; they do not allow for strategic emotional associations to be made" (2). For Smith, feelings are not just something represented though the emotional interiority of characters in a novel or felt by a reader—they are "objectified emotion," as Ngai sees them, embedded in the art object itself, diffuse and unrecognizable as they may be, a matter of literary form and aesthetic surface. Smith suggests that the trouble with textualizing personal feelings is that they risk a transactional sentimentalism (readerly investment, emotional payoff) and partake in neoliberal logic: personal feelings are too easily commodified and manipulated by a capitalist cultural system that trains individuals to see themselves as isolated entities responsible for managing their own "emotional portfolios," an argument she builds by reading Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections* (2001) (18). Smith urges us to see, instead, that novels that depict impersonal feelings on the level of literary form are participating in an affective counter-tradition that moves beyond the distancing effects of postmodernism while also dodging the contemporary pendulum swing back towards sincerity and earnestness.[13] Smith explains "what feels cold is, instead, a feeling produced from the very act of withdrawing, in very specific ways, from the project of representing and transmitting easily recognizable sentiments" (18).

Smith's use of the language of "impersonal feelings" highlights an important conceptual, yet undertheorized, intersection between modernist studies and contemporary American literary scholarship: here, the discourses of emotion/affect and of impersonality/aesthetic orientation

[13] See Adam Kelly's "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction" for an elucidation of this powerful periodizing idea.

collide. “Impersonal feelings,” seen in relation to postmodern theories of the self, are not the same conceptually as impersonality, per se. Though Smith does sketch a cultural/artistic history of impersonal feelings—drawing a line from early affect theorists such as William James to Brecht (and mentioning Eliot and the modernist disposition along the way)—her focus is on refuting psychological theories of a bounded self with an “inner climate,” drawing instead on Brian Massumi’s work on affect as bodily charge to shift attention from individual subjectivity to affect’s transpersonal circulation and flows (Smith 11-21). In opting for this vocabulary, Smith defines her term (“impersonal feelings”) of analysis contra a cultural imperative—that is, in opposition to personal feeling, sentimentality, and economic logic, which she sees as dominant forms to resist—rather than in relation to impersonality as modernist doctrine. Yet Smith, in calling for an art that is aesthetically estranging—and therefore supposedly, by extension, less entrepreneurial and implicated in capitalist logic—repeats the modernist credo in a different key: not “make it new” but make it “affectively strange.” Make it feel impersonal. Make it so we don’t recognize it.

What I want to point out and ponder is that, even while scholars in American literary studies have rightly rejected modernist impersonality’s conservative and authoritarian glean, we tend to end up repeating its anti-popular-culture logic by figuring impersonal aesthetics as inherently radical and oppositional. Even Nelson pits a high-brow, cool, “unsentimental” literary mode against the pulp sentimentality of “therapeutic culture” (even as she acknowledges that unsentimentality “has been the default style of serious and important aesthetic work since the advent of modernism”) (2). This move is familiar: our critical preference for affective estrangement is anything but new. It’s the same old rejection of modernism’s self-constituting middlebrow and feminized other, sentimentality. If the “impersonal” is a close cousin of the

"unsentimental"—figuring sentimentality as the estranged relative of good literary taste—the gendered terrain of these modes is inseparable from their supposed literary merit and affective difficulty.

Working to (Not) Feel, or Who Gets to Be Impersonal?

The sentimental—that is, the improper or excessively emotional—hovers around discussions of impersonality as an aesthetically unpleasing other, one that is associated especially with loose or messy feminized feeling. Leslie Jamison has described sentimentality as a scarlet letter that critics might pin to a text, the label a kind of literary death sentence: "Texts are dispatched by the clean guillotine strokes of accusatory words: saccharine, syrupy, sentimental," she writes (114). Her essay "In Defense of Saccharin(e)" suggests that we critics are just as tied up in the neoliberal, Horatio-Alger "pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps" logic we so often decry: we want to work to feel, she argues, and we quickly condemn texts that we see as emotionally indulgent.[14] Jamison compares the supposed emotional excess of sentimentality to the empty calories of artificial sweeteners, and she defends the sweetness—or the temporary sugar high—of both. As she sees it, part of what we disdain about artificial sweeteners is that they allow us to "taste without consequences," without calories; sentimentality similarly offers us too-easy emotional responses. We pretend we need to "earn" our emotional responses to art:

> How do we earn? By parsing figurative opacity, close-reading metaphor, tracking nuances of character, historicizing in terms of print history and social history and institutional history and trans-oceanic history and every other kind of history we can think of. We think we should have to work in order to feel. We want to have our cake resist us; and then we want to eat it too. (120)

[14] Sianne Ngai's recent work on the gimmick as "simultaneously overperforming and underperforming," both a labor-saving and labor-creating device, is interesting in light of this, too. See Ngai's *Theory of the Gimmick* (2020).

I find Jamison's explanation compelling, if a bit sweeping in its polemic. Jamison suggests that "our" wariness about unearned feeling is a gut problem, something to do with our critical appetite—a matter of taste. One can sense Jamison's take on the gender politics of impersonality here. The dieting metaphors of her discussion are as relevant as they are uncomfortable, given that sentimentality is often figured as excessive female feeling and we live in a culture that constantly tries to slim female bodies down. In contrast to the affective mess of the sentimental, the affective discipline of the impersonal is seen as akin to vigorous exercise—a lean, male athleticism of the heart. Our dismissal or repudiation of the sentimental, Jamison suggests, is in fact a kind of anorexic tendency. At the risk of metaphorizing a disease, she writes, "We dismiss sentimentality in order to construct ourselves as arbiters of artistry and subtlety, so sensitive we don't need the same crude quantities of feeling—those blunt surfaces, saggy corpses. We will subsist on less" (114).[15]

In framing the repudiation of the sentimental as improving self-denial, Jamison calls attention both to the embodied nature of feeling and to the body politics at play in an impersonal mode. She suggests that an "urge to subsist on less" is tied up not only with aesthetics but with power—with who is permitted to feel what and how much. As theorists of emotional displays, Sontag, Davis, and Moshfegh each explore and break down this gendered imperative to "subsist on less" in their writing, never neglecting the role of the body in matters of feeling even under the guise of the impersonal. By taking up a mode that can seem to erase embodiment and refuse personhood—the mode of impersonality—while also making the body and its social meanings a

[15] Other critics have made a similar point about the gendering of literary mode. For example, in "Two Paths for the Personal Essay," Merve Emre glosses the difference between an "essay" and a "personal essay" as often corresponding to the gender of its author.

matter of concern and experimentation in their prose, Sontag, Davis, and Moshfegh implicitly critique an abstraction that ignores or polices physicality and sensual experience.

Yet, for these famously "cold" writers, the impersonal textual beauty standards Jamison describes come from within as much as from without. Affective discipline *is* something that drives their art. The impersonal "urge to subsist on less," in other words, is not purely imposed upon them but also something they hold close. Sontag seeks a literary form for passionate emotional excess that does not overwhelm the mind or dull the bodily senses; Davis perfects a self-conscious minimalist technique that can interrogate strong feeling even while observing it with detachment; Moshfegh, easily the most crude and anti-sentimental (anti-everything?) of the bunch, seems bent on exposing female unfeelingness as a contemporary spectacle of self-shrinkage and numbness. At the same time, these writers pry apart our sentimental/unsentimental dyad—a conceptual shorthand that, I find, is not all that useful for describing their work's dispositional intrigues. Instead, in approaching the impersonal as both an ideal and a problem, these writers prompt us to move beyond polemics either for or against unsentimentality and ask, instead, what such a pose might *do*.

One answer is that it allows female writers to gain respectability and high literary status precisely by avoiding the "woman writer" label and the terrain of the sentimental. As Jamison suggests, female writers must negotiate a literary scene that privileges a cool, masculine-coded aesthetic (and one that threatens to label their work as more emotional, and less serious, than their male peers'). Nelson makes this point in *Tough Enough* as well, implying that to be a "female intellectual" in postwar America required an "unsentimental" brand. With the advent of literary postmodernism in the 1960s, one might think that sentimentality had all but died out in elite literary circles. However, as Lisa Mendelman writes in an essay on Marilynne Robinson's

reworking of the sentimental tradition in *Housekeeping* (1980)—a novel known for its evacuated subjectivity and tonal paradoxes (Amy Hungerford went so far as to describe its "anorexic aesthetic")—"sentimental affect does not wane in the postmodern era, nor does its literary proxy dissipate into hackneyed cliché. Rather, the sentimental mode evolves in tandem with discourses of femininity and artistic practice" ("Unaffected"). Sentimentality and unsentimentality are intertwined, relying on each other for shape and significance, just as the impersonal and the personal constitute each other. Elsewhere, Mendelman observes that the intensely ironic, modernist novels of writers such as Cather, Loos, Wharton, and Faucet feature female protagonists who, as artists themselves, negotiate "the imperatives of a [modern] femininity that alternately demands sincere feeling and ironic intelligence," engaging the "sentimental expectations of female authorship" in a self-aware way, with formal maneuverings and innovative ironic tones nevertheless incorporating the terrain of sentimental narrative (*Modern Sentimentalism* 14). Central to Mendelman's argument is the idea that women writers perform a certain feeling self in their fiction (often through "fictional proxies") and at the same time reflect on that performance as a way to navigate a literary world that is ready to classify their fiction and categorize *them* as certain kinds of writers.

Cathy Park Hong gets at something similar in her essay, "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde." She exposes how the so-called difficult and affectively-estranging art intertwined with avant-garde aesthetics and institutions draws on whiteness and the supposed neutrality of impersonal aesthetics to exclude marginalized artists, especially artists of color, from its ranks by classifying their work as socially-tainted and therefore not impersonal and not high art. Hong argues that avant-gardism's depersonalized, disembodied artist can only escape the "taint of subjectivity" because of white male privilege:

> The avant-garde's 'delusion of whiteness' is the luxurious opinion that anyone can be "post-identity" and can casually slip in and out of identities like a video game avatar, when there are those who are consistently harassed, surveilled, profiled, or deported for whom they are…

Hong's continuing description of avant-garde impersonality shows how such an aesthetic category violently creates its own "other"—the pejorative category of "identity politics poets," those who cannot transcend their own embodiment or personality:

> Without such formal restrictions, Philip's *Zong!* would be in danger of being dismissed as "identity politics," a term that has turned into quite the bogeyman of a moniker, gathering an assortment of unsavory associations within the last few decades. To be an identity politics poet is to be anti-intellectual, without literary merit, no complexity, sentimental, manufactured, feminine, niche-focused, woefully out-of-date and therefore woefully unhip, politically light, and deadliest of all, used as bait by market forces' calculated branding of boutique liberalism.

Hong's elaboration of the supposed aesthetic ills of the personal mode here ("sentimental," "feminine," "anti-intellectual"—"used as bait by market forces") makes clear how quickly the charge of personhood (and its sentimental associations) is used against only certain persons, shoring up a quite literally exclusive and exclusionary category of literary merit and proper aesthetic difficulty.[16] Though Hong is discussing avant-garde poetry, the same dynamic can be traced in the prose of the period, with "impersonal" writing praised for its anti-confessional and supposedly unsentimental content, thereby associated with grander intellectual and aesthetic concerns. By asking who gets to be impersonal, Hong emphasizes that impersonality is a tool and trick of power.

These questions about the gendered and racialized politics of impersonality are important and threaded through each chapter of this project. Is the mode purely conservative? Can it be

[16] It is interesting to note that Rachel Greenwald Smith, in her subsequent work after *Affect and American Literature*, also turned her eye to avant-garde aesthetics and the contemporary art scene to describe how deep the manifesto tendency runs in our veins, leading us to channel its logic of rage even when trying to repudiate it. See her piece in *Post45*, "Fuck the Avant-garde."

reclaimed by those it has traditionally excluded? Are writers who seek to use its authority and access its prestige complicit in its marginalizing of other voices, simply hoping to secure a place for themselves in the canon? In a piece for *The New Inquiry* titled "Cool Women," Elena Comay del Junco wonders as much, reflecting on Nelson's book and the recent burst of critical interest in the "fantasy of cool female intellectualism." Comay del Junco gets straight to the heart of the matter by questioning whether rejecting the personal isn't also a rejection of political solidarity with those seeking rights—for her, specifically, feminist solidarity:

> So the question no one, then or now, seems to be asking is whether there is a connection between how *cool*—in both senses—a writer is and her attitude toward taking gender as a topic worthy of serious writerly attention. Does the cool, impersonal distance that allows for unemotional apprehension require, from a woman writer, a disinterest in gender or feminism? Is an interest in gender inevitably going to be seen as the expression of a personal grievance? Or, more bluntly: Is it just cooler not to be a feminist?

These are questions that I take up in this project, and broach especially in my first chapter on Susan Sontag, a figure whose career has been understood and even periodized in relation to her shifting political commitments (and feminist commitments, especially). Can impersonal fiction be politically engaged? How might it represent or allow for new symbolic modes of identification and solidarity? In answering these questions, I trace the impact of second-wave feminism on American writers who have traditionally been seen as indifferent or antagonistic to it. Sontag's gender and sexuality also figure questions of impersonality as inseparable from strands of thinking in queer theory about identity performance and play.

I also want to stress that, while I focus primarily on questions of gender and aesthetics in analyzing these writers and texts, as Cathy Park Hong suggests the racialized politics of feeling impersonal are also operative here. What has emerged across my chapters is that an impersonal mode tends to be associated not only with elite whiteness—Ottessa Moshfegh makes this critique

quite clear in her novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018)—but also at times with an orientalist fascination with emotional illegibility, spurred on by American imperialism in the Vietnam war, by Western colonialism and legacies of empire in East Asia more generally, and by popularized and Americanized versions of wellness practices that became marketed as "Eastern" medicine/philosophy in the 1970s.[17] In addressing and critiquing instances of orientalist tendencies in this period and in certain texts I study—especially in strands of Sontag's work on Vietnam and on Japanese theatre—I aim to break down such stereotypes and highlight the fraught power dynamics at play in representing feeling and unfeeling selves. I also give Weike Wang's novel the last word, as *Chemistry* overturns racist stereotypes to reclaim the impersonal mode.

Impersonality in a Therapeutic Age?: or, why post-1960s?

My project locates itself historically beginning in the United States of the late 1960s—during the rise of second-wave feminism and at a cultural moment uniquely invested in understanding, regulating, and otherwise manipulating individual feeling. Tim Aubry and Trysh Travis point out in their edited collection, *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture* (2015), that at this midcentury moment, an intense focus on the individual psyche and on psychological needs began to deeply influence Americans' "values and ideals," and today, in our age of emotional health and wellness, we continue to be invested in industries and practices that attend to mental and emotional well-being (3).[18] This cultural fixation of the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries,

[17] See Kyle Garton-Gundling's *Enlightened Individualism* (2019) for a discussion of how Eastern concepts of the self influenced primarily male American writers and poets in the postwar period.
[18] See also Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-help* (2008). Illouz claims that therapeutic language has been one of the largest influencers of

what Travis and Aubry term "therapeutic culture," is best understood as "a complex web of shared assumptions, behaviors, and institutions" that figure the "cultivation of the self" as a social good and a personal duty (3). The 1960s were a key moment for rethinking how feeling, gender, identity, and self-expression relate (and how they *ought* to relate) because it set into motion certain ideas about managing individual feeling and cultivating dispositions that reverberate across the twentieth century and the twenty-first. As Philip Rieff argued in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966), this midcentury moment saw new formulations of personal motivation and individual purpose coming from psychology dominate cultural consciousness.

Not unrelatedly, the 1960s were also the golden age of American psychiatry and psychopharmacology, when various neurobiological approaches to mood and mental health resulted in the widespread popularity of psychopharmaceutical drugs, such as Miltown (introduced in 1955 as an "emotional aspirin," amid anxiety over a polio epidemic) and Valium (approved by the FDA in 1963). As Andrea Tone chronicles in *The Age of Anxiety: America's Turbulent Affair with Tranquilizers* (2008), these minor tranquilizers, the first of their kind, were meant to restore a sense of peace and serenity to ordinary Americans struggling with nerves or everyday anxieties, yet their addictive quality and outsized popularity among educated, middle-class, white women quickly led to political backlash in the 1970s and 80s" (175). Mood-altering drugs, which began as fairly uncontroversial pills that were broadly popular with business executives and housewives alike, soon became associated with countercultural politics, anti-war sentiment, and feminist rejections of normative American domestic life as dissent groups like the Beats and Vietnam-war protestors embraced them. Betty Friedan famously described women

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"twentieth-century models of selfhood" (6). She also discusses the therapeutic as the dominant "emotional style" of the twentieth century (15).

taking tranquilizers in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), associating symptoms of boredom and listlessness with the disease of patriarchy. To feel impersonal in this way was to temporarily cast off the self in its imposed social role, to opt for a chemically-induced state of escape by reaching for a pill to stop the pain.

This midcentury medicalization of mood quickly led to the gendered pathologizing of certain feeling states and those who were seen as indulging them. As early as 1966, the same year that Susan Sontag published her aesthetic manifesto against sensorial numbness *Against Interpretation*, the Rolling Stones memorialized the figure of the drugged-up and blissed-out white suburban housewife in their song "Mother's Little Helper" (1966)—a jaunty but dark tale of an ailing mother addicted to Valium. Mick Jagger sings, "Mother needs something today to calm her down / And though she's not really ill, there's a little yellow pill / She goes running for the shelter of her mother's little helper / And it helps her on her way, gets her through her busy day." The song, a tragedy and a warning, sounds upbeat but bodes ill, figuring motherly feeling mismanagement as a uniquely modern ailment ("things are different today, I hear every mother say"). That the market provides quick fixes beyond talk therapy is part of what seems so scary in this "brave new world" of modern medicine. (Sontag's own decrying of capitalism's numbing effects in "Against Interpretation"—and her call for us to "feel more" in response to modernity's beleaguering sensorium—picks up on a similar anxiety in a different register, largely bracketing emotion to focus on sensation ("erotics"), which I'll discuss in my first chapter.)[19]

[19] In subsequent decades, anxiety over managing personal feelings hasn't gone away or been disentangled from scientific and medicalizing discourses that figure feeling a certain way as "objectively" good or "normal." In the 1970s, the term "emotional health" gained U.S. cultural momentum, being used especially in relation to the social and interpersonal education that women's colleges should provide their female students. In our own contemporary age of health and wellness, the industries and discourses of feeling management intrude on almost every aspect of life.

Alongside these cultural developments focusing on individual optimalization, certain key aesthetic movements theorizing emotion and selfhood were underway at this moment as well. As modernism and New Criticism became enshrined in universities, and as Cold War liberals privileged understandings of the individual as a self set apart from his surroundings, a New York avant-garde art scene shifted toward abstraction and minimalism and revolted against bourgeois materialism, drawing attention away from the rational, expressive individual and toward affectively-provocative performances and artworks. Embracing the impersonal, instead, this theatrical art, which Sontag helped champion, troubled popular ideas about the value of emotional expressivity.

On the literary side of things, confessional poetry and life writing gained steam with the publication of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959). The confessional movement quite explicitly drew on therapeutic culture and on writers' experiences with modern psychiatry to critique the stuffy norms of Eliot's poetic formalism and to break new ground in representing trauma, emotions, and the self. In delving so deeply into personal experiences and neuroses, and in bringing formally taboo subjects into the literary limelight, confessional poets emphasized subjective and felt experience, rejecting impersonality for the messy, taboo particulars.

The confessional mode is a kind of boogeyman for the writers in my project: they revolt against it, not only because its emphasis on raw experience and autobiographical power couldn't be further from ideals of impersonality but because the confessional is so often feminized and associated with unliterariness. I should declare my loyalty now: a photograph of Sylvia Plath, my muse, sits on my desk, and I admire confessional writing very much. In fact, the confessional / impersonal dyad we tend to operate with occludes what the modes share: a vision of the self as performance and an implicit or explicit response to US therapeutic culture. Plath's dramatic

monologue "Lady Lazarus," after all, includes a punchy awareness of its audience and rhetorical context ("The peanut-crunching crowd / Shoves in to see / Them unwrap me hand and foot—— / The big strip tease"), underscoring the sexualized nature of her choreographed show as well (26-29). I'd claim that the poetic masks adopted in confessional writing have more in common with the masked poses of detached neutrality in impersonal writing than we generally assume. By focusing on an American impersonal mode in relation to gender and therapeutic culture in this project, I hope to illuminate how impersonal prose is engaged in asking similar questions about identity and self-styling, yet with a different emphasis.

The Chapters, and a Note on Close Reading

The historical, aesthetic, and cultural context that I have just sketched informs each of my chapters and the close readings within them, with different socio-historical and cultural elements surfacing and resurfacing at various points and interlacing throughout the project as writers engage them or are shaped by them. I have been describing how a cultural field enmeshed in the politics of the personal exists alongside these literary experiments with the impersonal. Yet, while critics will sometimes speak of an "age of" neoliberalism, or postmodernity, or feminism, I'm hesitant to paint in such broad strokes and do not mean to characterize the post-1960s period in any one way, as useful as this move can sometimes be. As I study the ever-changing careers of these three writers, and the many texts they produce within them, I attend to the particulars: to the shifting historical, cultural, aesthetic intersections at play, and to the changing contours of what feeling impersonal looks like at different moments and in different texts.

The start of Susan Sontag's critical career in the early 1960s inaugurates my project. Sontag, as a critic and essayist known primarily for a cool, impersonal style and a commitment to

formalist, avant-garde aesthetics, grappled with feeling's proper role and expression in art, politics, and public life across her career. In this chapter, I examine Sontag's writerly poses of detachment (which are more diverse than we often acknowledge) and the affective thinking that informs them, arguing that Sontag's essays and the fictional experiments of her late career probe questions of feeling's transpersonal circulation even as they refuse expressive paradigms. Focusing especially on Sontag's writing on the proper role of emotion in aesthetics and politics (late 1960s, early 70s), her meditation on mood, temperament, and melancholy in Benjamin (1980), her interest in Japanese aesthetics and theatre, and her historical romance about revolutionary feelings and feminist politics, *The Volcano Lover* (1992), I excavate Sontag's interest in the possibilities, rather than just the problems, of shared feeling (attachment rather than detachment) while also teasing out more carefully how certain emotional imperatives—that is, demands to express feeling in a particular way—structure her thought and art as a queer, "radical, unaffiliated American writer."

My second chapter takes up the millennial author Ottessa Moshfegh and her moody, misanthropic novels to examine the ways her work both indulges and mocks gendered tropes of unfeelingness in postmodern and contemporary American fiction. In *Eileen* (2015) and in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) especially, novels that satirize self-care and feature female protagonists seeking numbness and brutalizing their bodies in acts of self-erasure, eliminating personal thoughts and feelings looks nothing like an ethical—or simple—task. Characterized by deadpan irony and a cruel anti-sentimentalism that her protagonists actively nurture, Moshfegh's novels turn on poses of female unfeelingness, highlighting that emotional dysfunction are clichéd tropes of the art world and of elite literary culture, and troubling any utopian hopes that impersonality might look like nirvana or subversion. In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018),

for instance, Moshfegh's privileged and misanthropic protagonist sets out to hibernate in her Manhattan apartment for an entire year in a psychopharmaceutical slumber. Her antics stage the performance of total impersonality as a gendered, embodied spectacle that is effortful and costly (while signifying on a masculinist genealogy of postmodern disaffection peopled by figures such as Bret Easton Ellis's Patrick Bateman). I also point out that, taken to tragicomic extremes, the impersonal aesthetic in Moshfegh's work also highlights our critical stuckness in unfeeling tropes, which, if they no longer have the capacity to shock, can still cause scandal. In other words, by remixing the tropes of affective malaise and self-help in postmodern American fiction along with contemporary discourses of "emotional health," Moshfegh offers a portrait of female exhaustion with both personal and impersonal feelings—and with our usual critical ways of writing about them, too.

My third chapter strikes a different, and quieter, note by turning to Lydia Davis's minimalist stories to examine what they can tell us about the ethics and aesthetics of self-consciously feeling less. Lydia Davis is a writer and translator celebrated for her extremely short, technical, and cerebral stories; although her work has received wide praise, it has also been considered cold or emotionless, fixating as it does often on states of negativity—on what's not there rather than what is. I argue, however, that Davis's work figures cool detachment not as a lack of affective engagement but as a stylistic commitment to minimizing the self by downplaying personal feelings. Her early and mid-career stories also take up and, in some cases, satirize popular Americanized therapeutic practices of mindfulness and feeling management. In this chapter, I build on scholarship that has positioned Davis within a feminist literary minimalist tradition, a tradition with a complex relationship to feeling's absence and to poses of impassivity. Many of Davis's stories, like those of Mary Gaitskill or Lorrie Moore, feature tonally-neutral

narrators who exhibit clinical detachment but who do so with decidedly different politics than Hemingway's male stoics. I also reconsider the political implications of Davis's impersonal method across her career, focusing especially on her most recent collections, *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007) and *Can't and Won't* (2014), which as Maggie Doherty has glossed, offer visions of solidarity and female community across distance ("Cool Confessions").

Finally, a brief coda reflects on the impersonal nature of academic work and dissertation writing, surveying recent contemporary literature about academic contingency that features withdrawn, alienated, or depressed female protagonists before reading Weike Wang's debut novel *Chemistry* (2017) as an example of a more hopeful, impersonal fiction.

Taken together, these chapters and coda address the variety of ways that impersonal self-styling has been both a formal and thematic concern of modern and contemporary American writers. Affective discipline is something that is both theorized and performed on the page, a matter of style and form and often of ethical and political urgency. It is not limited to one genre or medium—the texts and creative outlets these writers engage play with the boundaries of the novel and of narrative itself, dipping into theatrical modes as well. (Lydia Davis's dramatic monologues appear much like soliloquies.) For all the writers I study here, representing feeling and cultivating and expressing the proper disposition through language is a task of paramount importance, and to notice and respond to how they do this, I stick close to their texts and proceed by close reading, as I attend to impersonal style—and to the sentence as a privileged unit of thought—throughout. As Lydia Davis writes of Proust's *Swann's Way*, "The shape of the sentence was the shape of the thought, and every word was necessary to the thought" ("The Architecture of Thought"). I have benefitted from reading and dwelling with the sentences of these writers, and I present the following chapters and their careful sifting of their language with

the hope and belief that such attention gets at the very stuff of literature: words, placed in sequence, creating meaning.

Chapter 1:

Between Separateness and Solidarity: Susan Sontag's Forms of Passionate Detachment

On March 27, 1957, a then 24-year-old Susan Sontag reflected on a marital disagreement in her journal: "Philip is an emotional totalitarian. / "The family" is his mystery. / An ejaculation of weeping" (*Reborn* 140). These terse, enigmatic lines are tightly compressed, as if formed under pressure, and though we aren't given any specific details, the situation Sontag describes here is one in which she's under pressure, too. Philip,[20] her husband, presumably wants agreement; he wants her to feel the same way he does. This agreement is affective and tonal as much as it is intellectual or rational; an "emotional totalitarian" won't tolerate dissent of any variety. If this situation is full of pent-up frustration, though, an "ejaculation of weeping" suggests affective and sexual release—if a pathetic one. His weeping is rhetorical, meant to persuade, affect, and even control his observer.

In describing this masculine bid for sympathy or emotional solidarity as a kind of totalitarianism, Sontag figures the terrain of the sentimental (tears, rhetorical appeal) as that of authoritarian politics, casting the intimate, emotional exchanges between life partners as a form of dictatorial coercion. In this analogy, Philip is a ruler who's throwing his mood weight around; Sontag is the disenfranchised citizen who is expected to comply totally with his whims and desires. The husband as tyrant is not a new metaphor, of course, but the husband as emotional tyrant—that's a Sontagian twist. Her description here highlights the gendered power dynamics and the emotional imperatives at play in ordinary relationships, and the ways that women, especially, are often expected to perform certain feelings and revere certain attachments. That "the family" is "his mystery"—a source of meaning possessed by her husband, whom she will

[20] Philip Rieff, a sociologist, was married to Sontag for eight years.

divorce a year later—signals the heterosexuality of this arrangement and Sontag's Bartlebyan desire to opt out and refuse this usual affective contract.

In this chapter, I revisit Sontag's thinking about feeling, and especially its aesthetic and political uses and forms, across her career, casting her not as a glamorously-detached female intellectual but as a conflicted writer-thinker preoccupied by the dangers and the pleasures of shared feeling and passionate, even absorbing, emotional involvement. Her refusal to feel as others want her to—and her penchant for adopting a detached, impersonal pose in her creative and critical writing—is provocative, and not simply because she tends to be an emotional contrarian.[21] Sontag is an important figure for coming to terms with impersonality's career in American writing and literary fiction, as Sontag's championing of impersonal art and her own late modernist sensibility shaped the critical and aesthetic consciousness of a whole generation of American readers.[22] Sontag was an intellectual force beginning in the '60s, bringing innovative European art and ideas to an American audience through publications in the *New York Review of Books*, the *Partisan Review*, and later on in the *New Yorker*, to name just a few. Known at first insultingly as the "Dark Lady" of American letters, her identity as a female intellectual placed her in a difficult position; her prose had to ward off sexist expectations about women writers and her intellect had to be proven sentence by sentence. As a queer writer loathe to embrace her sexuality publicly as well, Sontag's impersonal style, her careful degendering of pronouns when discussing her erotic life, and her resistance to autobiographical readings of her work, all played a role in shaping her public figure and her aesthetics themselves (Davidson 2-3).

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[21] As Ben Kunkel puts it, "Sontag had a gift for saying what people would rather not hear. She once famously told a convocation of leftists that reading *Reader's Digest* over the years would have given one a better idea of the moral character of the Soviet Union than a subscription to the *Nation*."

[22] Her time studying philosophy in postwar Paris also shaped much of her thinking.

Sontag's mistrust of sentimentality and her implicit critique of postwar American therapeutic paradigms of individual expressivity, has been well documented recently, and scholars have connected Sontag's stylized unfeelingness to questions of gender performance and to resisting cultural imperatives. In *Tough Enough* (2017), for instance, Deborah Nelson praises Sontag for her "unsentimental" "emotional style," describing Sontag's tough pose as a carefully-cultivated ethical alternative to the too-easy pleasures of sympathy and intimacy in postwar America, a style specifically honed at midcentury in relation to postwar pain and suffering. In Nelson's account, Sontag's important contribution to U.S. culture bent on indulging extreme feeling and insisting on empathy was to insist on the importance of strict feeling management, of facing facts rather than bursting into tears and turning away from painful reality. She traces the strand in Sontag's thought that embraces realism over romanticism: Sontag's idea was that, to ethically engage the world, one must police any emotional response that threatens to diminish one's agency or capacity for action. Nelson writes that, for Sontag, "[f]eelings are an impediment to feeling—that is, sensation—and thus to knowing what something is and how it is what it is" (120). Nelson's reading of Sontag's "autobiographical absence" in *Illness as Metaphor* (1975) and Sontag's commitment to art that solicits action in *On Photography* (1977) drives home her point that Sontag continually opposed a culture bent on the "overvaluation of feeling" and a tendency toward indulging emotional extremes (120, 100).

Nelson's study has invigorated work on Sontag, and I admire it very much. But in thinking about the significance of Sontag's career and about her engagement with problems of art and emotion—especially literary art and its emotional appeals—we must think around and beyond the category of the "unsentimental." Sontag's aloofness, and her continued theorizing of emotion and emotional engagement, surely goes beyond responding to painful reality in a

principled way. I ask, instead, what Sontag's impersonal and detached style, and her interest in the relationship between feeling and power, add to our critical story about the gendered politics of feeling. Moving beyond popular conceptions of personal emotion or emotional expressivity, Sontag searches for philosophies of feeling that dodge popular midcentury psychological models: she is drawn to thinking, especially, in terms of temperament and mood and to 18th-century, neo-classical models of the passions.

While other investigations into Sontag's deep-seated ambivalence about powerful emotions have privileged Sontag's affective reticence and unsentimentality, I take a different tack. I explore why there is something perversely alluring to Sontag about powerful emotion and even getting a little carried away with it, even as she champions impersonal detachment. Sontag's aspirations as a novelist frame her career, and like Nelson, I see Sontag's early criticism as something she comes back to and which shapes her novelistic endeavors later. In other words, I see Sontag as preoccupied—even obsessed—with the proper role of feeling in aesthetic and political life, and with how certain feelings might be shared or passed on. Sontag wrestled with how to embrace messier feelings of attachment—how to join in and feel strongly with others, how to get swept up in a work of art or in a collective feeling, how to infect others with her own enthusiasms—without betraying her own aesthetic and philosophical commitments. Particularly towards the end of her career, Sontag was drawn to reconsidering her work's influence and affective reach and, of course, much of her work was explicitly the work *of* influence (Irving Howe once insultingly dubbed her "a capable publicist" (qtd. in Kennedy 132)). Though Sontag's signature pose was one of aloof detachment, she also wanted to make disciples, to follow and be followed by others, to shape sensitivities and the reception of certain ideas, writers, technologies, artworks, and politics.

We must take seriously Sontag's interest in the possibilities, rather than just the problems, of shared feeling, while also teasing out more carefully how certain emotional imperatives—the demand to feel and also to express that feeling in a particular way—structure her thought as a queer, "radical, unaffiliated American writer." As a writer and activist who struggled against the dictatorial—a complicated a position, since writers compete with dictators for the power "to say" or "dictate" reality ("dictare" = to say")—Sontag knew that questions about shared feeling are always also questions of language, of the available conceptual terms for describing affective experience and its revolutionary and collective potential. The tension between expressing full emotional solidarity, of totally joining a cause, and also maintaining the individuality of separateness through emotional discipline is one that preoccupies her throughout the decades, and it looks differently at different moments precisely because Sontag is responding to ever-changing political and cultural circumstances.

In what follows, I re-examine key moments and works throughout her career, focusing on Sontag's ongoing interest in affective discipline, theories of emotion (especially those of mood and temperament), and impersonal aesthetics, alongside her rejection of humanist individualism and popular psychological models of feeling. Taking cues from Terry Castle and others, I also connect Sontag's interest in identity play and performance to a queer impersonal aesthetic tradition, as she draws on Wildean aestheticism and looks to Japan for a conceptual language of emotion that transcends the personal and private. Finally, because Sontag viewed herself (or wanted to view herself) primarily as a novelist, I finish this chapter by revisiting her late novel, *The Volcano Lover* (1992), a historical romance about an aristocratic love triangle and the French revolution, and argue that it is her most successful literary meditation on problems of feeling and politics and on feminism precisely because of its movement between the immediacy

of the action and the distanced role of the narrator-author-observer.

I. Cool, Impersonal Art in *Against Interpretation*

From the start, Sontag styled herself a cool, yet passionate, observer. In *Against Interpretation*, she proclaimed her aesthetic rebellion from the art of the past, breaking with the Cold War literary establishment by rejecting a widespread investment in interpreting art's hidden messages. "A great work of art never simply (or even mainly) a vehicle of ideas or of moral sentiments," she proclaimed in "One Culture and the New Sensibility" (281). As Liam Kennedy has shown, Sontag's early work seemed carefully designed to provoke the New York Intellectuals, whose humanistic and overly rational approach to art and its moral purpose was symptomatic of a broader cultural problem of sensory anesthesia (20). Sontag's critical manifesto in "Against Interpretation"—"in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art"—shifted the aesthetic focus from the mind to the body, celebrating a sensual rather than intellectual experience of art: "For we are what we are able to see (hear, taste, smell, feel) even more powerfully and profoundly than we are our furniture of ideas we have stocked in our heads," she proclaimed (Against 14, One Culture 281). As Deborah Nelson has glossed, however, Sontag saw contemporary culture as marked not only by late capitalism's numbing effects but also by an opposite reaction—the "cultivation of feeling, especially extreme states of feeling, its wild mood swings between intensity and affectlessness"—and Sontag thus understood "aesthetics as a tool not merely of apprehension and knowledge…but also of feeling management" (98). Sontag has said that these early essays were written "out of enthusiasm," but her enthusiasm was for a very particular kind of emotional restraint.

Against Interpretation sets in motion key concerns of the 1960s that reverberate across

Sontag's career and the latter half of the twentieth century: problems of feeling associated with the impersonal effects of industrialization and with "the anonymous style of urban life" under late capitalism; struggles with psychological conceptions of the individual person; and questions about the relationship between art, sensory experience, and emotion regulation (One Culture 275). Interestingly, Sontag's essay collection came out the same year her then ex-husband, Philip Rieff, published *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966), a text that diagnosed contemporary American culture's fixation on individual feeling and argued that the explanatory power of psychology was replacing that of religion. In a similar vein, Sontag's early essays seek to name and analyze, among other things, how such cultural changes in philosophies of the self relate to changing artistic depictions of character, motive, and narrative form. As she champions difficult, formally-innovative, and often European art, her frustration with humanist models of emotional subjectivity is clear. She especially faults the novel for its inability to move beyond romantic conceptions of individual expressivity and to "keep up" with technical and formal innovations in the plastic and cinematic arts—a judgement that seems to haunt her own efforts at literary creation in later years.

Much of this criticism crystallizes in the 1963 essay "Nathalie Sarraute and the Novel," in which Sontag decries straightforward emotional involvement in literary art and sentimental absorption in the lives of characters. The novel, Sontag writes, is in great need of reinvigoration, especially in the English-speaking world, and modern French writers such as Maurice Blanchot, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Nathalie Sarraute have provided one way forward: "they reject the idea of the 'novel' whose task is to tell a story and delineate characters according to the conventions of nineteenth century realism, and all they abjure is summed up in the notion of 'psychology'" (102). These French novelists, as Sontag introduces them, offer instead a Heideggerian

phenomenology or "behavioristic, external description" that obviates the psychological in the traditional sense (102).

In lambasting the modern English-language novel for failing to live up to didactic and technical innovations in painting, the theatre, and film, Sontag figures Sarraute's program for the novel—"which insists on an unlimited respect for the complexity of human feeling and sensations"—as a counter both to dominant U.S. criticism focused on dissecting characters' psychological motives and on sentimental reading practices (106).[23] Modern novels, Sontag asserts, will disrupt and estrange rather than forge the old intimacy. The third-person narrator of nineteenth-century realism especially irks Sontag, as she refuses feel the way the dictatorial, "omnipotent" narrator wants her to feel:

> *Vanity Fair* and *Buddenbrooks*, when I reread them recently, however marvelous they still seemed also made me wince. I could not stand the omnipotent author showing me that's how life is, making me compassionate and tearful; with his obstreperous irony, his confidential air of perfectly knowing his characters and leading me, the reader to feel I knew them too. (104)

Sontag here broadcasts her distaste for a naively "realist" representational mode, as she later calls into question the accuracy of realist representation—"life is not that lifelike," she counters. But in truth, she faults the novel not for its failure to move readers but for its very success: it is "the immediate cozy recognition" that the lifelike and the sentimental mode inspires that is the problem. Sontag's objection to the nineteenth century novel comes not from its irrelevance but from its powerful allure, its seductive promise of—and demand for—intimacy with fictional characters and their worlds. Sontag, characteristically uncooperative, distinguishes herself from

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[23] Sontag does quibble with Sarraute's specific technical directions for novelists—that they reinvent dialogue to write in continuous monologue, that they immerse readers into a scene—but that is only because she finds Sarraute's prescription too narrow. Sontag believes an "aerial view" might achieve the same effect as Sarraute's immersion technique, and indeed, that kind of spatial and distanced view informs Sontag's own narrative experiments (107).

these unenlightened readers, giving physiological evidence of her sensibility: these nineteenth century novels make her "wince," rather than cry.

In advocating for readerly estrangement rather than emotional participation, Sontag suggests that innovative, even avant-garde literary art, must allow for and cultivate readerly detachment: "Not only must the novelist not tell a story; he must not distract the reader with gross events like a murder or a great love. The more minute, the less sensational, the better" (105). Getting wrapped up in love stories, or in any "great event" predetermined to have important meaning mistakes art's function; the sensational distracts from the senses. (This is fascinating given Sontag's choice to tackle a historical romance in her late career return to novel writing—but more on that later). That Sontag describes these events as "gross" conveys not only her disgust at their sentimentality but also at their total, or totally absorbing, nature. In "Notes on Camp" too, Sontag sketches out an aesthetic that feeds ironically on exactly this kind of gross, or excessive, sentimentality. Sontag's early formalism, and her characterization of modern art, is thus strongly underpinned by the assumption that humanistic feelings—the sentimental response, the identification with a circumstance or character, the desire to see oneself reflected in art—are unhelpful distractions at best and naïve emotional traps at worst.[24]

Coolness is the answer to this forced closeness and the mark of modern art. In "One

[24] In fact, if "the romantic spirit" of the nineteenth century is the collection's main villain, he emerges as an emotional and tearful dictator who must be overthrown, echoing the language Sontag uses to describe Philip in her journal. In "On Style," Sontag takes aim at Walt Whitman, the romantic bard who boldly proclaimed in *Leaves of Grass* that "what I assume you shall assume," critiquing the claim that art could or should channel a person's direct personality (1). Whitman's pose is casual, yet his words are imperial and imperative—perhaps this is what irks Sontag as much as his separation of form and content, his claim of having no style. Rejecting Whitman's pose of total honesty and sincerity, she counters his brag: "All art founded on some distance from lived reality represented…for in order to appear to us as art, the work must restrict sentimental intervention and emotional participation, which are functions of closeness" (22).

Culture and the New Sensibility," an essay that Sontag insisted close every edition (including translated ones) of *Against Interpretation*, Sontag describes modern art as having "the style of science" and demanding technical appreciation and training (297). Her championing of modernist anti-psychologism is clear here:

> Many of the serious works of art of recent decades have a decidedly impersonal character. The work of art is reasserting itself as an 'object' (even as a manufactured and mass-produced object, drawing on the popular arts), rather than as 'individual personal expression.'
>
> The exploration of the impersonal (and the trans-personal) in contemporary art is the new classicism; at least, reactions against what is understood as the romantic spirit dominates most of the interesting art of today…Today's art, with its insistence on coolness, its refusal of what it considers to be sentimentality, its spirit of exactness, its sense of "research" and "problems" is closer to the spirit of science than of art in the old-fashioned sense. (278-9)

Sontag does not want art to be a lamp or a mirror; she wants the eerie glow of an LED lab light. (I am not so sure she would be as delighted by the proliferation of humanities "labs" at universities across the country.) Rather than being a statement or commentary about the world, art is an "instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility" (277). Though art might result in the emotional intensity of earthquakes—as Bresson's films or Brecht's theatre do—the reverberations won't occur in the chest of the reader, as old humanistic models would have it, but throughout the whole body.

What I am drawing attention to is this: across the early essays collected in *Against Interpretation*—and mirrored in Sontag's unsuccessful fictional attempts of the 1960s*, The Benefactor* (1963)[25] and *Death Kit* (1967)—Sontag is drawn to formally experimental, estranging art that lays bare its own techniques of mediation, art that she sees being produced not primarily by novelists by those in film, theatre, and the visual arts. Yet Sontag positions feeling

[25] One *New York Times* review of this solipsistic "anti-novel" refers to Sontag's "tone of detachment" and an unfortunate hollowing out of her main character (Stern).

as a key element of properly navigating the dialectic of self and world, as she tries to sculpt a sensibility that is morally sharp yet aesthetically open, to find a pose of receptivity that is attuned to others but also protects separateness. (In her autobiographical short story "Pilgrimage," Sontag associates separateness with intelligence and moral courage, writing of her childhood friend, "I had seen that he was smart. Really smart. Therefore capable of separateness" (Debriefing 8)). Sontag is trying to find a way of feeling—in relation to art and to other people—that is politically effective, morally sound, and aesthetically astute, and her interest in how fiction and the novel might do this in new ways is something that she returns her throughout her career.

II. Revisiting "The Demands of the Heart": Political and Emotional Affiliation in "Trip to Hanoi" and Beyond

In *Styles of Radical Will* (1969), Sontag's engagement with questions of feeling moves explicitly into the realm of the political. Indeed, the essays in this collection are often seen as inaugurating a shift in Sontag's career away from formalism and toward political commitment—they are taken to be Sontag's own change of heart, her (temporary) acceptance of and interest in powerful emotion, attachment, and affiliation, rather than impersonal aloofness. While in *Against Interpretation* Sontag explored the emotional dynamics of art through formalism (as certain formal techniques control or channel feeling in particular ways), in *Styles of Radical Will,* Sontag's gaze shifts to the kinds of personal and collective feelings that ought to accompany the global reality of US imperialism. In "What's Happening in America" (1966), for example, Sontag writes, "Everything that one feels about this country is, or ought to be, conditioned by an awareness of American *power*: of America as the arch-imperium of the planet, holding man's biological future as well as his historical future in his King Kong paws" (452). The global totality of American power (its reach is "planetary," not national or even continental), its raw,

destructive, and untamed energy ("King Kong paws") is the backdrop against which Sontag's affective thinking must now play out. In this 60s revolutionary moment, American imperialism is the global emotional tyrant to oppose, and indeed, revolutions in Vietnam and Cuba are playing out this power struggle while cultural revolutionaries dissent with the ideologies of capitalism at home.

Reflecting on *Styles of Radical Will*, Sontag wrote in 1985 that "the essays [were] steeped in a brew of feelings, among them my revulsion against the American war on Vietnam, and my euphoria at finding my intense loyalties to the canon of high culture not contradicted but rather served my belief in the moral seriousness of transgressive strategies in the arts and of utopian thinking."[26] It's worth noting that the metaphor Sontag uses to describe feeling here figures it as atmospheric and porous—not the property of an individual self but something in the air that seeps into and through people. One might connect this description, in fact, to a mood or a cultural feeling, which Ben Highmore has recently described as a political and cultural formation that shapes one's orientation and consciousness. In retrospectively describing these essays as influenced by the late 60s' revolutionary moment—and specifically, an immersion in certain feelings and revolutionary sentiments—Sontag offers a model of emotional involvement and writerly political engagement that affirms the usefulness of getting swept up in shared feeling and also maintains that this need not interfere with a commitment to high art's "transgressive strategies."

If *Styles of Radical Will* seems a departure from Sontag's earlier aesthetic program, the collection stems from Sontag's renewed awareness of her position as "a citizen of the American

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[26] Drafts of afterword for Spanish translation. Box 59, Folder 5. Susan Sontag papers (Collection 612). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

empire," as she puts it in "Trip to Hanoi" (462); the essay is an account of her invited visit to North Vietnam in the summer of 1968. Deborah Nelson reads "Trip to Hanoi" both as a conversion narrative and as a "striking anomaly" in Sontag's work (113).[27] Characterizing it as "an internal debate over emotional expressivity," Nelson admits that, here, Sontag "fully aligns herself with the cultural feeling of the Left," embracing the 1960s American enthusiasm for shared feeling (an embrace that Nelson claims Sontag later repudiated) (112). The form of this essay itself—a journal entry—is a departure from the anti-autobiographical prose that Sontag had published up to that point (a debate over emotional expressivity is also a debate over genre and style). Barbara Ching argues something similar, pointing out that a "trip" can refer both to physical travel and, in the context of 1960s drug culture, an experience that is "consciousness-transforming, mind-altering, and stumbling"—chaotic yet transformative; after this trip, Ching notes that Sontag "turns away from the aesthetics of silence, transforming her experience into personally revealing prose" (61).

"Trip to Hanoi" may be a strange star in the constellation of Sontag's career, but it's a bright and guiding one—how we connect it to her other work determines what kind of picture we see. In my view, this essay is not merely an "anomaly" in Sontag's thinking or a momentary lapse of self-control, as Nelson seems to suggest.[28] Instead, it's a complex working through of contradictory affective and political impulses, a transcription of the effort to find a conceptual language of emotion that can allow for solidarity but also separateness (not individuality, per se,

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[27] Sontag certainly uses the language of conversion, or even of convalescence, to describe her change of heart: "And then suddenly, my experience started changing. The psychic cramp with which I was afflicted in the early part of my stay began to ease and the Vietnamese as real people, and North Vietnam as a real place, came into view" (487).

[28] Sontag didn't seem to think this herself. In 1973, in a preface to the Vietnamese translation of "Trip to Hanoi," she wrote, "Everything I have written now seems to group itself before or after 'Trip to Hanoi'" (qtd. in Ching 62).

but the singular experience of the self). Trading in her signature pose of detachment for the "euphoria of comradeship" in "Trip to Hanoi," Sontag does temporarily throw off her anxieties over shared feeling (512). Rather than fearing the effects of emotional consensus—or perhaps seeing shared feeling as the best available way to oppose the totalitarian dimensions of US imperialism—Sontag celebrates the radical potential of getting emotionally swept up in a cause. In 1968, Vietnam offers Sontag an experience that leads her to renounce her "old posture of alienation" toward American revolutionary feelings, as well as to relax her principled opposition to straightforward emotional involvement (517). Yet doing so requires a recalibration of certain understandings of expressivity, the self, the ethics of distance and closeness, even of language's political usefulness itself.

Sontag's internal debate over feeling and expressivity in "Trip to Hanoi" isn't settled quickly or easily; Sontag has to work herself up to wholeheartedly embracing the shared feeling that she ultimately praises by her essay's end. Throughout much of the essay, she is feeling out her stance on revolutionary feeling as she reflects on her own affective orientation during her trip, which she felt was incorrect and insufficiently radical at first. Sontag begins, in fact, by admitting her own emotional failure: she's been "largely unable to incorporate into either novels or essays [her] evolving sense of radical political convictions and sense of moral dilemma at being a citizen of the American empire" (462). Her choice of words is telling here. To "incorporate" is to "take or absorb into the body" or "to embody" something, and what Sontag is struggling with is a sense of not feeling aright, of not being able to match her intellectual commitment to the Vietnamese cause with the full-body "emotional solidarity" she feels this commitment requires (*OED*).

The Western concept for this alignment between inner feeling and outer action is "sincerity," which Lionel Trilling would describe in the 1970s as distinct from "authenticity." Sontag, as usual, is interested in the relationship between thought and deed, writing, "If you can't put your life where your head (heart) is, then what you think (feel) is a fraud" (478). Sontag's struggle in this essay is to realign herself—her feeling body, her emotions—with her intellectual goals and sympathies. She must get her head and heart to agree, lest she be "only fit to share a people's revolutionary aspirations from a comfortable distance from them and their struggle—one more volunteer in the armchair army of bourgeois intellectuals with radical sympathies in the head" (478). She does not want to be an "American friend"—a term of passivity and immobility—a mere commenter: she wants to be "incorporated" in the cause, not to offer vague or rhetorical support from the sidelines. Sontag requires full devotion from herself to the Vietnamese, in mind and body.

It is not that Sontag feels nothing, rather that she can't seem to properly calibrate or channel her feelings effectively in appropriate action: "My problem was not to try to feel more inside myself. My problem was that I (luckier than Godard) was now actually in Vietnam for a brief time, yet somehow was unable to make the full intellectual and emotional connections that my political and moral solidarity with Vietnam implied" (467). Though Sontag is deeply sympathetic to the Vietnamese's political cause, she struggles to identify with or fully relate to their emotional style (this is in contrast to her response to the Cuban revolution, which, in its emphasis on sexual freedom, feels familiar, even "American," to her). In visiting a culture different from her own, Sontag misses the usual Western coordinates of selfhood that she had so derided in *Against Interpretation*: psychology, individuality, originality, expressivity. Immersed in a culture of restraint, she wants the opposite: "I long for someone to be indiscreet here. To talk

about his personal life, his emotions. To be carried away by 'feeling.' Instead, everyone is exquisitely polite" (481). Her desire for a kind of straightforward, overwhelming emotion here—for even the indiscretion of getting "carried away"—sits oddly with her previous pronouncements about emotional restraint. Now, in Vietnam, Sontag is ready to trade in a self-styling aristocratic irony for sincerity and the bonds it might build; her comments here revise her bold assertion in "Notes on Camp," written just five years before, that "sincerity is not enough. Sincerity can be simple philistinism, intellectual narrowness."[29] Sontag fears not only that her own feelings won't be compatible with revolution (that she doesn't have total sympathy and thus won't be able to fully participate) but that the culture of emotional expressivity in Vietnam might prevent comradeship or intimacy in some crucial way.

Yet as Sontag spends more time in Vietnam, as she begins to better understand the Vietnamese, she realizes that passionate feeling is not absent, just expressed in foreign ways; this was invisible to her previously because she was operating within Western frameworks of the expressive, individual self. Sontag's writing verges on the ethnographic when she tries to explain how Vietnam differs from the West culturally. She reports, for example, that a "mood of exaltation has to be inferred by the sympathetic observer—not because the Vietnamese are unemotional, but because of their habitual emotional tact, a cultural principle of the conservation of emotional energy" (497). There is a "shift in the meaning of honesty and sincerity" in Vietnam:

> I discovered their politeness to be quite unlike "ours," and not only because there was more of it. In America…politeness always carries a hint of insincerity…For us, politeness means conventions of amiable behavior people have agreed to

[29] Andrew Ross, in "Uses of Camp," describes camp aesthetics as elitist, operating through exclusion and depreciation, in contrast to Pop Art, which has a "democratic" spirit. Such a description echoes Sontag's worries here over "detached intellectual concern" as she seeks to recalibrate her own affective orientation in order to integrate herself into a political network.

> practice, whether or not they "really" feel like it, because their "real" feelings aren't consistently civil or generous enough to guarantee a working social order. By definition, politeness is never truly honest; it testifies to the disparity between social behavior and 'authentic feelings'…[Western] culture subscribes to an empirical or descriptive notion of sincerity, which measures whether a man is sincere by how fully and accurately his words mirror his hidden thoughts and feelings…The Vietnamese have a normative or prescriptive notion of sincerity…Sincerity, in Vietnam, means behaving in a manner *worthy* of one's role; sincerity is a mode of ethical aspiration. (490)

The Western description of sincerity Sontag offers here—that it is measured by "how fully and accurately…words mirror hidden thoughts and feelings"—reflects the understanding of sincerity she had been working with up to this point. Sontag had wanted to get her head and her heart to align or agree, as if they are the subject and the verb of a sentence. Achieving this kind of "total" commitment would allow her to avoid the divided or "detached intellectual concern" so common in the West and in intellectuals. But she sees an alternative to this logic in Vietnam, an alternative both alluring and threatening in its collective and affective potential. If "sincerity" is not an expression of the inside to the outside—that is, of the private, individual self to others—then the old divide between the public and the private disappears: politeness is no longer a betrayal of the self in imposed social deference to others. Instead, it and sincerity are "ethical aspirations," ways of relating to others with intention and commitment, ways of sharing feeling by sharing words and actions.

In this worldview, then, one in which feeling does not emanate from the private self but is rather produced by and through certain scripts—what is shared and repeated gains significance and aesthetic value rather than losing it. Feeling itself stems not from an individual's depths but from social interaction. Sontag observes, for instance, how the language of the Communist party allows the Vietnamese to "privilege feelings and practice at the expense of language and theory," noting that this language was not imposed from without but came from deep aesthetic leanings

and resources in Vietnamese culture. The simplicity of this language, and the fact that "everybody here seems to talk in the same style and to have the same things to say," Sontag ultimately decides, is a deep resource for collective feeling, a kind of "*felt* history" or "history for use" (475). Sontag sees this simplistic language as channeling strong feeling. What may look like emotional coercion or naiveté to skeptical Americans is instead a different idea of what language is even for, of how it might unite people.

Elsewhere in this essay, Sontag directly contrasts feeling and rhetoric: "What brings about genuine revolutionary change is the shared experience of revolutionary *feelings*, not rhetoric, not the discovery of social injustice, not even intelligent analysis, and not any action in itself. And one can indeed 'talk' revolutions away, by a disproportion between consciousness and verbalization, on the one hand, and the amount of practical *will*, on the other (512). In other words, the body and the mind are "incorporated" in Vietnam because "talk" of a certain kind has been done away with, at least according to Sontag; language is not divorced from the realm of action.[30]

I want to pause here and acknowledge the problematic orientalism of Sontag's gaze. In turning to Vietnam as a model for revolution and for finding ways out of Western conceptual

[30] Sontag repeatedly condemns the Western penchant for skeptical analysis—for "talk"—even when talk seems an action. Maybe the proverb "actions speak louder than words" is part of the problem: when actions themselves are seen as speech acts, they are gestural rather than meant to accomplish a particular thing. The barricades that the French students set up, in Sontag's view, were a kind of talking because they failed to "reorganize the administration of their captured universities." In other words, the barricades were really used for their symbolic value, not for any practical purpose. Lee Konstantinou, however, puts forward a more nuanced view in *Cool Characters* (a book that grapples with questions about the political effectiveness of certain attitudinal stances), that it is impossible to clearly disentangle the symbolic from the active. He suggests instead that "we should…remain critical of anyone who would pursue symbolic political projects at the expense of organizing efforts and coordinated activism while also recognizing that there is no simple way to blithely differentiate between the real and the symbolic (or, as Burke put it, the realm of motion and the realm of action)" (33).

binds, Sontag "others" the Vietnamese and risks essentializing their cultural practices. On some level, she is aware of this risk and attempts to avoid it—or at least to offer a theoretical disclaimer. Leo Marx writes, for instance, that Sontag is uncomfortable with finding herself falling into representing Vietnam as a "pastoral ideal," even though she bases her essay off nineteenth-century forms such as the travel romance (300-301). She addresses this herself:

> If some of what I've written evokes the very cliché of Western left-wing intellectualizing idealizing an agrarian revolution that I was so set on not being, I must reply that a cliché is a cliché, truth is truth, and direct experience is—well—something one repudiates at one's peril…I found, through direct experience, North Vietnam a place which, in many respects, deserves to be idealized. (508-9)

It is interesting that Sontag turns to personal experience to defend her admiration of a culture that she represents as, in many ways, offering an opposing sensibility. Sontag does acknowledge elsewhere, too, that some sympathy for the revolution in Vietnam is simple primitivism,[31] while she nevertheless affirms that her direct experience led her to this new attitude, drawing her out of cynicism. That she must represent her own experiences and her observations of others in writing that is politically effective is the ethical task at hand.

Liam Kennedy has suggested that the core problem Sontag tackles in "Trip to Hanoi," is that of language: as a writer, an "unaffiliated, radical American writer," as she labels herself towards the end of the essay (a label that is as anti-label as possible), Sontag struggles to match feeling with language, and even language with action. The problem is that, in the glossy pages of New York publications, being a writer is estranging; it separates one from a collective, since

[31] "Understandably, one fears succumbing to that cut-rate sympathy for places like Vietnam, which, lacking any real historical or psychological understanding, becomes an instance of the ideology of the primitivism. The revolutionary politics of many people in capitalist countries is only a new guise for the old conservative culture-criticism: posing against overcomplex, hypocritical, devitalized, urban society choking on affluence the idea of a simple people living the simple life in a decentralized, uncoercive, passionate society" (508).

one's words must be original, new. Because "talk is perhaps the most intricately developed expression of private individuality," it often functions as a wedge, a "substitute for more organic connections between people. A feeling [in Vietnam] is a total intention, full commitment to an end or outcome rather than the expression of a position or a cultivation of a particular personal identity" (512). Sontag does not want language to be a wedge: she wants it to forge connections between people, to create a kind of revolutionary intimacy that does not divorce thought from feeling or thought from action.

` In other words, Sontag desires a new orientation toward language, a different approach to the entire task of being a writer, and this is what Vietnam ultimately provides: a new orientation towards imitation, the ethical and aesthetic permission to be a follower, to join in. The slogan emerges, in Vietnam, as a formal resource that "both overrides and transforms…personal feelings," not as a form of coercion (492). Feeling and expressing feeling the way others do—and feeling "simply"—Sontag realizes, may be the opposite of a moral failure. Earlier in the essay, Sontag had expressed anxiety that she'd "feel reduced if there were no place for contradictions and paradoxes" in her consciousness, yet by her essay's end, she's been converted by these "new feelings" of warmth and trust (477, 514, 521). Linking this epiphany to lasting changes in Sontag's style, Barbara Ching observes that, in this essay, Sontag "reconfigures the relations between sophistication and simplicity, making them potential allies rather than opposing sensibilities" and notes that Sontag never wrote a piece as complicated as "The Aesthetics of Silence" again (59). Indeed, Sontag writes, "It is not simple to be able to love calmly, to trust without ambivalence, to hope without self-mockery, to act courageously, to perform arduous tasks with unlimited resources of energy" (512).

Sontag's trip to Vietnam is thus restorative rather than estranging. And it gives words back to her, specifically the "simple" words of shared revolutionary consciousness. The Vietnam war allowed Sontag to re-embrace what she had seen as the "flat" or "false" language of systematic critique, remarking: "that I've begun to use some elements of Marxist or neo-Marxist language again seems almost a miracle," though in Vietnam, those words first seem part of an "official" discourse, "an alien way of talking."[32] Certain words, such as "capitalism" or "imperialism," had felt worn out and off-limits to her, no longer helpful because they had been coopted by others: "For more than fifteen years, though capitalism and imperialism hardly ceased to be facts in the world, the words themselves seemed dead, dishonest, (because tools in the hands of dishonest people)" (472). Now, however, Sontag rejects a pose of alienation, both affectively and intellectually, renewing her commitment to the linguistic and conceptual waters muddied by others. Rather than fearing a kind of emotional totalitarianism here, or the feelings encouraged by the state through its language, Sontag sees shared feeling as a collective resource, one that can lead to the radical social and political change she desires.

Sontag even suggests that recalibrating one's affective orientation toward the "tarnished idea of patriotism" in the US might provide a future for a "serious radical movement" in America (515). The words that Sontag recuperates through this experience are not just those used by Leftists: they are also those "seemingly simple" terms that have been weaponized within sentimental US national discourse. In the essay's crescendo, Sontag reclaims the "tarnished' language of American patriotism:

> Ever since WWII, the rhetoric of patriotism in the US has been in the hands of reactionaries and yahoos; by monopolizing it, they have succeeded in rendering the idea of loving America synonymous with bigotry, provincialism, and selfishness. But perhaps one shouldn't give up so easily…If what I feel is that the Legionnaires

> and Irish cops and small-town car salesmen who will vote for George Wallace are the genuine Americans and not I—which I fear part of me does feel—isn't that cowardly, shallow, and simply untrue? Why should I (we) not think of myself (ourselves) as a genuine American? (515)

The clear movement from the first-person singular to the plural form here is an invitation for others to join Sontag's fight, to join her in feeling this way. At the same time, she's rejecting the implicit emotional politics or political connotations of certain words—"patriotism," "love of country," etc.—by reclaiming their connotations and their history of use. Sontag here is refusing to feel what an opposing group wants her to feel: that she's not a genuine American, that certain language has become a possession of others. Sympathy is not something to discipline or resist to achieve an ethical society: emotional bonds might offer a way out of present conditions rather than reinforcing the bourgeois status quo. Here and throughout "Trip to Hanoi," Sontag gives up the glamour of the detached stance of the intellectual for "new feelings" of political affiliation and affirmation. Her journey in this essay is not only from America to North Vietnam and back again but from a posture of alienation to one of solidarity and identification.

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Despite this epiphany and its supposed ongoingness, however, Sontag's political engagement and commitment often proved unsatisfactory to other writers and intellectuals of the Left. Many have written of their disappointment with Sontag's political affiliation and involvement in the following decades, understandably so. Ben Kunkel, for instance, acknowledges Sontag's almost perverse delight in antagonizing the Left in his eulogy essay for *n+1*. Barbara Ching and Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor's edited collection, *The Scandal of Susan Sontag* (2009), takes its title from Sontag's "volatile blend of art and activism" that "inflame[d] many critics," emulating what they call her "style of provocation" (1, 3).

One specific point of contention is Sontag's ambivalent relationship to both the women's

movement and the gay rights movement in the early 1970s and beyond, with her stylistic preference for impersonality (and her allergy to autobiography) relevant to both. In the early 1970s, she wrote a series of feminist essays—including "The Third World of Women" (*Partisan Review*, 1973) and "The Double Standards of Aging" (*The Saturday Review*, 1972)—that explicitly took up cultural and political questions of women's liberation in light of claims of the US and international women's movement. "The Third World of Women" rejects the assumption that socialism will in and of itself liberate women from patriarchy,[33] while "The Double Standards of Aging" leans on the familiar vocabulary of liberal feminism to protest the sexist "emotional privilege" that men have of growing old with dignity. These essays are too often glossed over in narratives of Sontag's career due to their being uncollected (a marginalization of them that, admittedly, Sontag herself seems to have endorsed and orchestrated). But they are also often overlooked, I think, because we fail to take Sontag's self-contradictions seriously, to see them as more than self-serving hypocrisy. It is frustrating, however. As Ching and Wagner-Lalor point out, "While Sontag's gender preoccupied commentators, until the early 1970s she wrote in the classic humanist mode, using 'he' as a universalizing pronoun even in the intimate pages of her journals" and even describing her lesbian relationships through the lens of "homosexuality" with an "almost self-obliterating inattention to gendered language" (10). Ching and Wagnor-Lawlor similarly observe that, in "The Third World of Women," Sontag "retains her impersonal tone as she argues for non-sexist usage" and resent that "Sontag took few explicit actions to improve the status of women or to undermine what Adrienne Rich calls 'compulsory

[33] Sontag writes, "Socialism will not inevitably bring about the liberation of women. Nevertheless, only in a society that one calls, for want of a better name, socialist, would it be *possible* to invent and institutionalize forms of life that would liberate women" (781).

heterosexuality'" (10, 11).

What's interesting about these essays, however, is that some of their preoccupations (the focus on language and the usefulness of cliches and slogans, for instance) echo "Trip to Hanoi" in a new key, and they also foreshadow Sontag's later novelistic commentary on feminism, *The Volcano Lover*. In "The Third World of Women," Sontag takes aim at certain slogans of the international women's movement because their effect is pacifying: for example, that "the liberation of women is the liberation of men" (773). She sees an impersonal threat in this one, especially: "Like many cliches which are true, it disarms thought and pacifies rage…The cliché that when women are liberated men will be liberated too shamelessly slides over the raw reality of male domination—as if this were an arraignment in fact arranged by nobody, which suits nobody, which works to nobody's advantage" (774). The mystifying nature of this language is something Sontag won't endorse, and f she advocates for militant action from women's groups to disrupt gendered stereotypes of women as either compliant or out of control and, crucially, to show this to themselves, as a form of consciousness-raising: "Undeterred by the fear of confirming sexist cliches (e.g. women as creatures of emotion, incapable of being detached, objective), militant groups must commit themselves to behavior that does violate the stereotypes of femininity" (788).

But doesn't Sontag herself fear confirming these sexist cliches? To be detached, objective, and unemotional is, after all, her prose style and *modus operandi*. In a move that feels protective and perhaps a bit artificial, Sontag addresses her own situation toward the end of this essay, in a turn to the personal that also sweeps it away: "the problem didn't exist for me," she says of sexism influencing her own imagination and choices (798). She describes her sickly childhood, how she daydreamed of being a biochemist after having read a biography of Marie

Curie, etc. (797-8). Yet, in disavowing a personal connection to her subject matter, Sontag may be protesting too much. Moreover, her penchant for the impersonal appears as more than a simple rejection of the manifesto of second-wave feminism; impersonality involves its own patterns of self-examination and self-exposure, or a differing optics of visibility. Terry Castle, writing of Sontag's "Notes on Camp," describes how her careful avoidance of affiliating herself personally with gay counterculture in that essay actually harkens back to the aristocratic, queer posturing of Oscar Wilde. She writes, "It is very hard, for me at least, not to hear an autobiographical note in the arch (and Wildean) first sentence" (29).[34] Castle reflects on how Sontag disliked admiring readers referring to the essay later in her life and speculates that this was because the piece was just too revealing, too "obvious about her own erotic orientation" in its impersonal reticence (29). "Although Sontag regularly referred to her 'homosexuality' in her diaries of the 1950s and early 1960s she refused, as everyone knows, to speak publicly about her lesbian relationships until late in life," she explains (29).

Sontag also had a vexed relationship with feminist activists after publishing these essays in the early 70s, especially when it came to safeguarding or defending her detachment. In Sontag's infamous exchange with Adrienne Rich over her essay "Fascinating Fascism" in *The New York Review of Books* in 1975, Sontag had condemned the primitivist fascist aesthetics of Leni Riefenstahl's films and, in Rich's eyes, betrayed the feminist movement. Sontag uses the language of totalitarianism again to describe the feminist movement's demands on her writing. Rich, Sontag argues, is essentially trying to solicit an affective statement of faith from her:

> Rich explains that she is "simply eager" to see my mind "working out of a deeper complexity, informed by emotional grounding." But it seems to me—from where

[34] Castle also puts her finger on what Sontag either can't or won't face—the psychic underpinnings of such an orientation, or what she calls "the emotional dimensions of camp" (24).

> I stand (sit, write)—that it's just because the complexity deepens and thickens that I am unable to put my shoulder to the feminist wheel in the fashion she would like me to. Despite her demurrer about "*not* looking for a 'line' of propaganda or a 'correct' position," this is exactly what she is doing. Why else would I be chided for not bending the immense subject of the image-world created by photography (the *NYR* essays) or a meditation on death and report on the current agony of the state of Israel (my recent film *Promised Lands*) to the concerns of feminism? But it is surely not treasonable to think that there are other goals than the depolarization of the two sexes, other wounds than sexual wounds, other identities than sexual identity, other politics than sexual politics—and other "anti-human values" than "misogynist" ones.

Defending her reading of Riefenstahl's films, Sontag suggests that the idea that it is "treason" to disagree—or even, to not demonstrate loyalty at a certain moment in the preferred way—is the logic of fascism. Sontag is accusing Rich of emotional totalitarianism, of trying to coerce her both into feeling a particular way and into expressing that feeling along party lines. This is a bold claim. But Sontag provides a specific reason for her reticence for not joining in:

> …[Rich's] well-intentioned letter does illustrate a persistent indiscretion of feminist rhetoric: anti-intellectualism. "One imagined Sontag not to dissociate herself from feminism," Rich observes. Right. But I do dissociate myself from that wing of feminism that promotes the rancid and dangerous antithesis between mind ("intellectual exercise") and emotion ("felt reality"). For precisely this kind of banal disparagement of the normative virtues of the intellect (its acknowledgement of the inevitable plurality of moral claims; the rights it accords, alongside passion, to tentativeness and detachment) is also one of the roots of fascism.

Sontag is claiming the latitude not only to think and write about other topics than the ones specifically of direct interest to feminists but also to operate in a different tonal register: to cultivate her own affective orientation. What she specifically attacks and resists here is the kind of thinking that separates feeling from thought, linked here to the aesthetics of fascism that fetishize brute strength and the athletic body while denigrating "civilization," a code word that only thinly veils anti-Semitism and anti-intellectualism. In doing this, Sontag is going against the energy of radical movements, especially feminist ones, which sought to harness feeling for its

revolutionary and destabilizing power. For example, the poet-activist Audre Lorde would soon unequivocally celebrate feeling, "the erotic" "life-force of women," as inherently progressive and positive in her "Uses of the Erotic" in 1978: "The white fathers told us: I think therefore, I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free" (38). Sontag is uncomfortable with accepting such binaries—perhaps because she is wary of overthrowing "the white european mode" entirely—but also because Sontag wants radical action to safeguard her "tentativeness" and "detachment" as well.

The topics that Sontag does pursue at this time—most notably, discourse around health in *Illness as Metaphor* (1975) and the image-world in *On Photography* (1977)—do not explicitly champion feminist themes or champion her personal experience. The anti-autobiographical energy and urgency of *Illness as Metaphor*, specifically, emphasizes the importance of viewing illness, and cancer specifically, not in metaphorical or militaristic terms but as a basic, biological reality that must be faced. That Sontag was going through breast cancer treatment at the time but did not mention this in the book has been remarked on by several critics. (It is interesting, too, that Audre Lorde also had breast cancer but fused the personal and the political in *The Cancer Journals* (1980).) Barbara Ching and Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor note that "in retrospect, [Sontag's] films and fiction of this period suggest a struggle over what form Sontag would give her work on feminism" (11).

Elsewhere, Sontag continues to safeguard her own penchant for separateness and inscrutability but in ways that show an evolution in her thinking, a working through of what writerly forms might allow for the full expression of her critical sensibility. In "The Last Intellectual," a piece published in the *New York Review of Books* in 1978 but later collected under the title "Under the Sign of Saturn" in 1980, Sontag reviews an English translation of

Walter Benjamin's writing, describing his work as intimately connected with a theory of his own melancholic temperament—which it is clear Sontag shares. The resulting essay is a fascinating, indirect self-portrait of Sontag's own orientation, as she herself is an admirer of Benjamin's idols and aesthetic. Benjamin, she claims, "thought of himself as a melancholic, disdaining modern psychological labels and invoking the traditional astrological one: 'I came into the world under the sign of Saturn—the star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays.'" "His temperament," Sontag asserts, "determined what he chose to write about"—labyrinths, diagrams, maps, memories, dreams, and vistas. As a translator of Proust (which is interesting in and of itself, in relation to Lydia Davis), Benjamin was drawn to solitariness, identifying with Baudelaire's *flaneur* figure, the nineteenth-century Parisian urban wanderer. Sontag also describes his visits to Brecht. It is clear that Sontag admires and wants to elucidate in her own review Benjamin's unique and unmodern view of how feeling and personality overlap.

Later in the essay, in fact, Sontag repeats this idea and explicitly names the alternative theory of emotion that she sees Benjamin endorsing. Benjamin "preferred the doctrine of the four temperaments as a psychological theory to Freud," she explains, in part because he liked to be reading what everyone else wasn't. (Sound familiar?) Sontag's essay on Benjamin is crucial—and I bring it up now—not only because she sketches Benjamin's interest in a melancholic temperament but because this essay is a striking attempt at sketching her own sensibility—a "self-portrait" of her orientation toward the world. Her sensibility and penchant for detachment is what she is theorizing here, through Benjamin, in a form that satisfies her need to dodge the purely personal or autobiographical. Through criticism, Sontag writes of herself: "[Benjamin] is indicating a general problem about orientation and erecting a standard of difficulty and complexity…the metaphor of the labyrinth also suggests Benjamin's idea of obstacles thrown up

by his own temperament." Her next novel, the essayistic *The Volcano Lover*, which she began writing in the late 1980s, takes up Benjamin's visual theory and the act of collecting, positioning Sontag herself as a narrator-observer—a literary *flaneur* of sorts—her intellect taking in and processing the historical wreckage and revolutionary ruin of the French cause and the Napoleonic wars. At the same time, this novel also echoes and brings forward some of the concerns Sontag probed in the feminist essays: stereotypes of emotionality, the relationship between coloniality and patriarchy, whether scientific detachment can allow for revolutionary solidarity or only separateness.

This turn to exploring such problems through fiction, rather than essays, was crucial, though Sontag never lost her interest in theatre. Sontag's semi-autobiographical fiction of the 1970s, and her interest at the time in Japanese theatre and impersonal aesthetics, also influenced her investigation of impersonality, Wilde's aesthetic legacy, and the artistic possibilities of figuring the self as performance.

III. Sontag's "Japan Project": On Theatre and Performing Emotionality

If Sontag's travel to North Vietnam inspired a shift in her thinking and urged her both into personal self-reflection and also public expression of shared political commitment, travel elsewhere in Asia also played an important role in Sontag's investigation of feeling's possibilities. Sontag's fascination with China is no secret, as her short story, "Project for a Trip to China," published in 1977 and included in her book of short stories *I, Etcetera* (1978), is one of her most praised pieces of fiction. Following the diary format that she inaugurated in "Trip to Hanoi," the closing line of her short story ostensibly about travelling to China reads: "Perhaps I will write the book about my trip to China before I go." In her journal, Sontag emphasizes her

desire not to rewrite "Trip to Hanoi" in a different locale with this short story: "I can't do the 'West meets East' sensibility trip again. And I certainly have no intention of recounting my actual trip. I'm not a journalist" (7/20/72; 328). This is the travel romance flipped on its head—and occurring all in the head. As Sontag explains in the essay "Questions of Travel," "Some countries are perennial objects of fantasy" (276). This is especially true of Japan in the Western imperialist imagination, a country that Oscar Wilde famously referred to as "pure invention," and one whose aesthetic culture Sontag was drawn to.

Though relatively little has been written about Sontag's engagement with Japanese thinking, Sontag had a "Japan project" during the late 1970s and 80s, as UCLA Special Collections terms her research.[35] Her personal and professional interest in all things Japanese spanned several decades, and her files of Japanese ephemera reflect a desire to accumulate a collection from a country remote yet, to Sontag, aesthetically and affectively familiar. Sontag clipped newspaper articles about Japanese politics and culture, purchased travel dictionaries, and saved restaurant menus and maps of Tokyo.[36] Sontag visited Japan in 1984, taking a three-week trip with her then-partner, the choreographer Lucinda Childs. It appears Sontag learned several Japanese words and phrases for this trip, taking careful notes on conventions of politeness. (Try picturing Sontag on a plane with one of those quick foreign language vocab books—that's what she used.) In notes from these travels, Sontag is a tourist on a guided tour; her trip consisted of sightseeing and many cultural events. One note of hers emphasizes her desire not to miss the

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[35] Thanks to the librarians and staff at the Charles E. Young Research Library at UCLA for assisting me with the Susan Sontag Papers. Citations from archival materials in this section are footnoted and include a brief description of the item along with box and folder numbers. All come from the Susan Sontag papers (Collection 612). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

[36] Japanese travel dictionary. Box 282, Folder 1; Tokyo restaurant ephemera and notes, Box 282, Folder 2.

Imperial Villas of Kyoto, which had inspired Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture.[37] Hotel stationery is what she often scribbled her notes on, jotting down insights and snippets of conversation that might prove useful to her writing. Though she didn't publish much from her Japan project—an exception is the essay "Notes on Bunraku" (1984), a reflection on the dispersed "emotionality" of Japanese puppet theatre, which I'll turn to soon—decades later, Sontag still had Japan on her mind. Sontag organized film screenings in the early 2000s for the "Japan Society" in New York, and when she passed away in 2004, the historical novel she had been working on was set in 1920s Japan and was inspired by Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's novel *Naomi* (1924) (Kunkel).

During the late 1970s and 80s, Sontag looked to Japan for a new orientation toward emotion—for a way of feeling or a way of expressing feeling—that could act as an alternative to American individual expressivity. On her mind, especially, was the relationship between a person and a body politic: the "I" and the "we" that she had so optimistically collapsed at the end of "Trip to Hanoi." In looking to Japan, she is interested in how the self relates to a collective. One typed note from her files, undated, reads: "The Japanese have different notions of privacy, of discretion—of what is to be seen, shown, said (and what is not). A different sense of ego. As often as possible in Japanese, the subject is *om* one omits the subject. One says "I" only when it is absolutely necessary. It is the vague situation itself which is the subject. Versus Western faith in the thinking subject."[38] For Sontag, a "Japanese" understanding of the self does not rely on American expressive ideals such as authenticity; instead, it hinges on the awareness that one is continually produced by and through interactions with others, something embedded in the

[37] Ephemera. Box 282, Folder 9.
[38] Typed note. Box 282, Folder 7.

grammar of the Japanese language.[39] Not only does this understanding of the self avoid the illusions of personal autonomy, it also disrupts the Western emotional premium put on individual expressivity and originality, supplying alternative affective concepts.[40] To follow another's lead, in this tradition, is valued rather than ridiculed, and Sontag was especially intrigued by the esteemed status of imitation in Japanese culture. To model oneself after others—and particularly older, historic others—was a socially responsible and responsive act, a respected way of simultaneously achieving selfhood *and* fusion with a larger collective by participating in a shared history. A social role is something one is supposed to play, to perform.[41]

In her interest in Japan, of course, Sontag was herself following in the footsteps of queer European aesthetes such as Oscar Wilde and the French theorist Roland Barthes, who were drawn to Japan as an artful land of aesthetic play. Barthes published his book-length exploration

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[39] In Frank Gibney's 1975 "The Japanese and their Language: Letter from Tokyo," Sontag marked a passage describing the different conceptual and grammatical affordances of Japanese: "English and Japanese are in many ways polar opposites. The Japanese do not care about the same things in language that Westerners are taught to care about. The structure of the phrase does not count as much as the manner in which the words are directed. Japanese is an "I" and "thou" language. Its purpose is to establish a feeling of communication between two or more people…pronouns are sparingly used in Japanese." Box 282, Folder 6.

[40] In "A Vocabulary of Taste," an article Sontag clipped from *House and Garden*, Donald Richie describes Japanese aesthetics and Japanese language for feeling as counters to Western materialism and to American frivolity and gushiness, specifically. Focusing on the spiritual and ethical resources of the Japanese language, he details aesthetic terms that have no equivalent in English, such as *shibui*, which means something like "astringent" but pleasantly so. American advertisers had adopted—or, rather, coopted—these terms with little understanding of their real meaning. *Wabi-sabi* is another example, a term that in Richie's estimation could usher in a period of "new sobriety" that America desperately needs: it denotes something akin to "the ostentatiousness of the unostentatious." This article ends with a kind of affective bait-and-switch: "If America has this real need for Japanese autos, transistors, computers, and it seems it does, how much more real its need for Japanese aesthetic terms to really define how it is feeling." Box 282, Folder 7.

[41] A newspaper clipping details the building of a Shakespearean theatre in Japan, citing a strong cultural affinity for tragedy as one factor in this cross-cultural exchange. Sontag underlined this detail. Box 282, Folder 5.

of Japanese aesthetics, *Empire of Signs* in 1970; the text was translated into English and published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Sontag's publisher, in 1982, though Sontag's journals contain notes on it as early as 1972 (*As Consciousness* 330). In "Writing Itself," Sontag's essay on Barthes, she acknowledges the long tradition she is participating in: "Barthes was hardly the first Western observer for whom Japan had been an aesthete's utopia…[a] culture where aesthete's goals are central—not, as in the West, eccentric" (78). Sontag was no doubt aware that this exoticizing cultural fascination trafficked in imperialist ideologies, and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is marked up in her personal library.

Jeff Nunokawa describes how the idea of Japan as a space of pure play entered the British imagination in the 1880s, citing Western orientalism's warped vision of Japan as a land of fantasy: "the land of the rising sun, in contrast to various regions of the other non-Occidental world that imperial cartography mapped as a wildlife park, was apprehended by Western eyes as a palace of art" (48). At this time, and in the midst of Japan's own imperial expansion, Japanese art and handiwork circulated in Britain as fine luxury goods, figuring Japan as a glossy aesthetic ideal rather than a real place. Gilbert and Sullivan parodied this cultural fascination with all things Japanese in *The Mikado* (1885), an uncomfortably unreal love story and an ode to performativity. But perhaps Oscar Wilde summed up Victorian Japonisme best in his essay "The Decay of Lying" in 1889, when he boldly claimed that "the whole of Japan is pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people...the Japanese people are, as I have said, simply a mode of style, an exquisite fancy of art" (38).

While this statement of total erasure should give us pause, Grace Lavery has pointed out that Wilde's description of an orientalist gaze cuts two ways, in true Wildean style. On one hand, denying a racial other's very existence is an epistemologically imperialist move, an imaginative

colonization; by this, the West generates its own power by "asserting the absolute right to produce, define, and exhibit the Oriental subject" (162). On the other hand, Lavery points out that Wilde's statement might also serve as self-critique, a cleverly disguised acknowledgment that "the Orientalist discovers only himself" when staring into the mirror of Japan's glossy surface (161-2). Aestheticism coincided with Japan's rise as a global power able to contest British interests in East Asia, as this dialectic movement between the real and the unreal was key to Western responses to this geopolitical situation, allowing Britain to consume Japanese products without grappling with the very real-world circulation and presence of Japanese artists in the cultural sphere (thus neutralizing Japan's threat, at least imaginatively) (Lavery 1163). Aestheticism in this mode, then, was a way of not dealing with the realities of a place, of opting for comforting mystifications in the name of identity play.

In the midst of extensive Cold War US imperialism in East Asia, Western intellectuals both replayed and interrogated this history of British-Japanese enthusiasm a century later, with Japan newly reasserting its global power as a formidable American industrial and technological competitor (a *New York Times* article laments "How Japan Won the VCR Race: The Key Ingredient was the Will to Win"), and while radical intellectuals looked to the Maoist East for alternative political arrangements.[42] In *Empire of Signs*, Barthes was more critical than his predecessors of the racist and imperial epistemologies that undergirded the West's view of Japan as "a palace of art" removed from "the realm of the real," as Jeff Nunokawa puts it; Barthes argued that "an enormous labor of knowledge is necessary" to re-see the "objective realities" of the place (51-2). Yet even while Barthes condemned the orientalist tenor of Western thinking

[42] Clipping. Box 282, Folder 8.

about Japan, the idea of Japan as an aesthetic landscape of pure play was still captivating to him—and to Sontag, who delighted in its "culture of simulacra."[43] [44]

Barthes wanted to recuperate an aestheticism that could also ethically engage geopolitical realities—an aestheticism, in short, that could address the ethics of global citizenship. Sontag shared this desire, and she went back to Oscar Wilde to theorize how the aesthetic might be imbricated with social and political engagement rather than separated from it. In fact, though Wilde's famous description of Japan has no people in it—the land's "inhabitants" cannot be glimpsed by the tourist and are said not even to exist—according to Sontag, Wilde's aesthetic thinking is actually quite concerned with the social: it is fundamentally relational rather than solipsistic. Sontag curated moments when "Wilde takes off the aesthete's oxygen mask" in her notes, citing "De Profundis," "R Gaol," and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" as examples, presumably, of Wilde's belief that art should transform social relations and be a form of social practice.[45] (Interestingly, she also jotted down William Carlos Williams' *In the American Grain* (1925) here, though this is crossed through—perhaps she thought Williams' quest to correct American historical amnesia through a poetic reimaging of colonial history had something in common with Wilde's thinking.) Queer theorists agree with this assessment of Wilde, as Lavery, for one, suggests that aestheticism is "a collective enterprise," one predicated on a queer

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[43] In her essay, "Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes," collected in *Where the Stress Falls* (2001), Sontag praises Barthes for not pitting the mind and body against each other, for refusing "Romantic clichés about the opposition between sensual and mental alertness"—which, in her mind, Japan also dodges or reworks (174).

[44] Sontag praised, for instance, Japan's attention to the "artificiality" of "naturalness" itself, citing the unapologetic and assertive artificiality of the fake plastic leaf typically included with sushi. Handwritten note. Box 282, Folder 14.

[45] Notes. Box 282, Folder 12. Sontag's notes on Wilde also occur in close proximity to notes on haiku, a pithy short form whose rebuke of context is embedded in a long history, and which Wilde's aphoristic style drew on.

intimacy between strangers ("the too-close modulated by the too-remote") that luxury editions of Wilde's work incubated and circulated (1178-9). Aestheticism in this mode, then, exposes the implicit cultural context and social pressure that a seemingly self-absorbed and anti-social slogan like "art for art's sake" appears to deny. In other words, and as Andrew Goldstone has shown in relation to modernist assertions of aesthetic autonomy, such a slogan actually presupposes what it ostensibly denies: a social world.[46]

Japan (or "Japaneseness") thus offered a super-charged queer space in which Sontag could rethink emotional and expressive categories while reconsidering the ways feeling might be shared—both politically and aesthetically. That Sontag's interest in Japan does reproduce exoticizing and orientalist gazes (including the idea of the East as offering affective release) is problematic. Furthermore, though Sontag's contrasting of American and Japanese attitudes might suggest that she saw the two as diametrically opposed, this was not the case. The American journalistic coverage of Japan she collected in the 1970s and 80s, in fact, did emphasize the plural and contradictory nature of Japanese style and its imbrications with globalization. Rather than existing as some kind of untouched or "pure" sensibility beyond the reach of Western defilement, Japan in the 70s was a decidedly hybrid and rapidly changing country, though American media often portrayed this reality negatively and simply coopted Japanese concepts for advertising.[47]

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[46] In *Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to De Man* (2013), Goldstone uses the example of "boys will be boys" to show that tautology, while seemingly entirely non-referential (in that it refers only to itself), is in fact entirely socially embedded because such a statement presumes a context in which the statement does in fact mean something. His chapter on Wallace Stevens' tautological aphorisms is especially relevant to discussions of Sontag's work, as Sontag was drawn to Stevens and seems to have been planning an article for *House & Garden* called "15 Ways of Looking at a Garden in Japan." Handwritten note. Box 282, Folder 7.

[47] A 1987 article, "The Golden Age," in *TIME* reads, "Japanese style? Japan is all about aesthetic discipline…Japanese style? Japan is a wild hodgepodge of gimcracky downtowns and kitschy

Yet Sontag sought to bring Japanese aesthetic ideals to American audiences, just as she had championed European avant-garde art in the 60s. In her only published work from her trip, Sontag turned her attention to Japanese puppet theatre in "A Note on Bunraku" (1984), an essay that is essentially a rewriting of Barthes' piece "On Bunraku" (1971). Japan's celebrated tradition of Bunraku puppet theater offers emotional intensity while providing a space in which to unite spectators in shared feeling that is conceptually divorced from Western ideas of the feeling self as private or autonomous. Sontag celebrates how puppet theatre embraces the transpersonal, through the use of inanimate puppets manipulated by both seen and masked actors, to "delight the senses and wring the emotions" (16). In Bunraku theatre, a two-thirds life-size doll is operated by three people, making its movements of "emotional and gestural potency"; spectators see this maneuvering as part of the performance. Sontag describes this in contrast to opera, since at an opera, the spectator is meant to look over the orchestra. In Bunraku, there is no such hierarchy of space. In addition to the puppets and their operators, there is also a reciter, who reads the story with maximum expressiveness, fanning the pathos of the situation: "Most of the texts, which consist of narrative and commentary as well as dialogue, are floridly emotional, and the narration may modulate into a lengthy crescendo of sobs and gasps" (16). Though feeling here and its public expression ("sobs and gasps") is exaggerated, this heightens rather than neutralizes its effect on the audience.

In the drama, the puppets are "fragile, persecuted Lilliputians," moved this way and that by their operators (16). This extreme display of emotion—the excess, the hyperbole—is affecting, even individually overpowering:

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international design ideas mixed and mismatched…Both visions of modern Japanese design, are of course, correct." Clipping. Box 282, Folder 7.

> [Bunraku] [p]uppets have the ability to move audiences, move them to tears, unmatched in any other puppet tradition. But apart from widening the emotional range and expressiveness of the puppet (a gain we may or may not choose to identify with realism), the fact of multiplying the operators—and of necessity, putting them onstage with the puppets—decisively shapes and transforms the emotional register of puppet drama…What the audience sees is that to act is to be moved. (And simultaneously, observed.) What is enacted is the submission to a fate. That one operator's face is exposed and two are veiled is another device making Bunraku's characteristic double statement: hyperbole and discretion, presence and absence of the dramatic substance. (16)

This drama of pathos is driven not by personality but by impersonality. Sontag continues: "The presence of the operators is what gives Bunraku its elevated, mythic impersonality and heightened, purified, emotionality." What does it mean for emotion to be purified? It is presented in some ideal, or transpersonal state, not merely as one person's direct expression of feeling. The entire scene—or text itself—must be "charged with feeling," as Chikamatsu believed, rather than one merely aspect of it. The restraint embodied in puppet drama hinges upon "silence, placidity, and immobility"—these are "as impressive, even more so, than rage, delirium, ecstasy."[48] Sontag's evaluation of these techniques as "impressive" certainly connotes her approval, but at the same time, it reflects the way the puppet show "touches" her – the way it leaves an impression, an affective trace.

Sontag's embrace of this art form's "florid emotionality" and its general pathos seems to hinge on how it includes and provokes the viewer to participate in a shared feeling, which is here an affective response rather than a specific emotion. Part of this pathos stems from a kind of recognition on the viewer's part that the puppet shares a fundamental situation with the spectator: they are both "moved" upon by outside and inside forces. Though Sontag wants to resist equating Bunraku puppets' expressivity with realism (an art of mimesis), it does seem that

audiences are meant to identify if not with the specific puppets, who after all are far from characters, then with the general situation—the state of being moved by others. Sontag calls the relationship between the operators and the puppets "the cruel mystery at the heart of Bunraku drama," but perhaps the relationship between the spectators and the puppets/operators is also at the core of it. Sociality itself—and an awareness of how one's movements are influenced or even enacted by a shared affective atmosphere—is Bunraku theatre asks us to recognize and respond to.

In "Remote Proximities: Aesthetics, Orientalism, and the Intimate Life of Japanese Objects," Grace Lavery re-envisions the social dimensions of aestheticism, arguing that Japanese aesthetic objects allowed for "queer intimacy," an experience of "queer sociality" configured beyond gendered (or even raced) embodiment (1164). For Lavery, the performativity of "Japaneseness," as pure invention, has the power to "undo the normative logic of gendered embodiment," activating instead the "queer potentiality of rendering all identity as always already a kind of drag" (1165). Since "Japaneseness" has little to do with actually being Japanese—and "Japanese effects" can be seen anywhere—personal and even embodied identity is written out of the equation, allowing for affective experiences that aren't circumscribed by individual expressivity. The impersonality of Bunraku puppet theatre seems to activate a similar experience for Sontag. Lavery emphasizes the importance of touch to this queer aesthetic and affective exchange, and Sontag's primary metaphor—that of being "moved" emotionally—echoes this, not only because puppets are literally moved by another's touch but also because of their emotional effect on the viewer. There is the sense that one is part of the action and also not part of it in Bunraku theatre. And this reflects a kind of simultaneous closeness and distance—what Lavery calls "proximity and strangeness, a too-closeness felt as too remote"—instigated by

the touch of Japanese vellum or high-end paper, an aestheticism that produces a queer "intimacy among strangers"—or perhaps by the touch of a Bunraku puppet (1166).

That Bunraku theatre achieves this relational effect through the use of puppets is perhaps one reason Sontag finds it so compelling: influence or compulsion itself is thematized by the art form, since puppets move on stage in response to the coordinated actions of their overlord manipulators ("what is enacted is the submission to a fate"). Such a situation interestingly also recalls Hannah Arendt's description of Totalitarianism, in which "total power can be achieved and safeguarded only in a world of conditioned reflexes, of marionettes without the slightest trace of spontaneity"—yet, there's a difference here. Bunraku theatre's use of puppets rather than marionettes dispels the illusion that individuals operate as "organic unities" or fully integrated selves who are manipulated. Bunraku disrupts the conceptual binary of inside/outside forces; the puppets are nothing by themselves. That more than one handler moves each puppet, too, is important: there is a kind of coordinated intention. Yet while the fear of becoming marionettes—of losing one's individuality or agency within a system of total conformity—is often expressed, here Sontag sees the potential of being overcome with feeling, of being touched and moved by others, as desirable and even enlightening.

If Sontag sees this puppet theatre as offering a communal emotional experience that is not coercive or predicated on an idea of the expressive individual self, this is in contrast to other available forms of emotional expression, especially that of nationalist melodrama. Around this time, a wildly popular soap opera in Japan called "Oshin," was airing every morning except Sunday—so many people watched the show that water usage went down for fifteen minutes

during its airing.[49] "In Japan, 'Oshin' Means It's Time for a Good Cry," an article in Sontag's files published in March 1984, the year Sontag took her trip and one year after her piece on Bunraku theatre; the newspaper article details the unprecedented popularity of the Japanese soap opera. Described as "a four-hankie heart-tugger if there ever was one," the show centers on the life story of Oshin, an 83-year-old Japanese woman who has endured great suffering and cultural change; she is seen as a "symbol of Japan's postwar emergence from hard times."[50] The narrative is told in flashbacks, with an "unbearably cute" young actress playing Oshin at age ten, and the audience follows the heroine through her decades as a young wife, a struggling businesswoman, and eventually an old lady, her struggle and progress mirroring that of the nation. Like Bunraku theatre, it deeply moved its audiences, even to tears: the article explains, "There were not many dry eyes in the house when little Oshin lay down in the cupboard that was her bed and fell asleep, moaning softly, "Mother."[51] The show was so loved, in fact, that "Oshin" herself became a synonym for endurance and a model of good behavior invoked in casual conversation. The show had the highest rating ever for a television drama, with 60.6% of the population tuning in, and it was so successful that a "brand new tear-jerker" was commissioned about an aspiring movie-maker, called "Romance."[52] Though there isn't evidence of how exactly Sontag responded to the popularity of this show, yet she would soon begin work on her own historical romance, *The Volcano Lover,* a novel that seeks to theorize the relationship between overwhelming emotion and political revolution. And, rather than blithely endorsing or fully

[49] Newspaper clipping. Box 282, Folder 6. See https://www.nytimes.com/1984/03/11/arts/in-japan-oshin-means-it-s-time-for-a-good-cry.html for a live link.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.

condemning politics' cooption of feeling, in her own late fiction, Sontag rethinks the power of sympathy and of romance itself.

IV. Romancing Revolutionary Feeling: Political Commitment and Volcanic Moods in *The Volcano Lover*

In August of 1992, *The Los Angeles Times* ran a rather provocative headline: "Susan Sontag Lightens Up: 'The Dark Lady' of American Letters Ventures from her Lofty Terrain into the Steamy Times of an Adulteress and her Besotted Lover" (Hopkins). Sontag had just published her historical romance *The Volcano Lover,* her first novel-length work of fiction since the 1960s. Perhaps because Farrar, Straus & Giroux hoped to distribute Sontag's novel widely (with a first run of 50,000 hardcover copies and a $75,000 advertising campaign), the jacket copy breathlessly proclaimed the book "about sex and revolution . . . [Having] all the excitement of a major historical romance—and more," a surprising description from a generally reserved publisher (Hopkins). One Australian fan, apparently in despair at this news, wrote to Sontag in concern, inquiring why she had abandoned intellectual seriousness for the bestseller list, a move he found "incomprehensible" from "someone such as you."[53]

To this impassioned query, however, Sontag did not reply. Perhaps this is because the novel speaks for it itself on such matters: *The Volcano Lover* is a sustained reflection on the passions and on the politics of being dispassionate, and on the violence of scientific objectivity, set in revolutionary Europe during the time of the Napoleonic wars. When pressed about her book by a *New York Times* interviewer, Sontag defended her novel as a form of political engagement and civic participation: "I don't want to express alienation," she explained, "it isn't

[53] Box 18, Folder 1.

what I feel. I'm interested in various kinds of passionate engagement. All my work says be serious, be passionate, wake up" (Garis). Sontag sees her twist on the romance not as escapist but as ethically *affecting* and perhaps even politically effective.

As a historical romance set in the Enlightenment—both the "Age of Reason" and the "Age of Sensibility"— and a love story played out against the backdrop of Vesuvius and the erupting French Revolution, *The Volcano Lover* is preoccupied by the politics of feeling and deeply seeped in theories of emotion.[54] Specifically, the novel thematizes the problems and possibilities of shared feeling—with the ways feeling circulates and moves through and between bodies. In the eighteenth century, a language of "passions" rather than "emotions," was still dominant, though words to describe varieties of feeling abounded: "feelings," "sentiments," "affections," and "sensibilities" all denoted "movements of the soul," complex cocktails of feeling, thinking, and willing (Dixon 13). As Stephen Ahern points out, this vocabulary for feeling—like Sontag's own—saw emotion not as an interior reality, as current psychological models of emotion have it, but, rather, as a way of "being acted upon" or "moved" by another (283).[55] Fundamentally social, all feeling was, essentially, shared, since "to feel" meant "to be affected." The somewhat redundant term "shared feeling," then, both emphasizes this circulating, transpersonal nature of feeling and also highlights shared feeling's "unevenness," the ways in which it is "both generally felt and specifically articulated" (Ahmed "Cultural Politics" 6,

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[54]As Stephen Ahern explains, the eighteenth century was the best and worst of emotional times: "from midcentury on, polite society in England and the Anglo-Atlantic world was preoccupied by feeling" (283).

[55] Sontag was so deeply drawn to this classically rooted understanding of emotions that she raved, ten years later, about Philip Fisher's book *The Vehement Passions* (2002) in the *Times Literary Supplement*: "I reveled in the new book by the brilliant American critic Philip Fisher, *The Vehement Passions*, which is about nothing less than what the title promises: thoroughness, rashness, fear, anger, grief, and more."

Highmore 3). Sontag's novel, as a story about revolution, is also an investigation into emotional inequality and misogyny's affective circuits.

Sontag revisits the novel form, then, to synthesize her interests in the possibilities of emotional display/performance, feminist solidarity, and aesthetic and scientific detachment; that she chooses to do so in the form of a historical romance allows for her experimenting with a narratorial voice that is both passionate and dispassionate, aloof and intimately close. Sontag's own love for the book, as Terry Castle has humorously recorded, suggests that she viewed it as a success, unlike her earlier work ("Some Notes"). In what follows, I discuss the novel's theorizing of mood, moodiness, and its gendered dimensions, showing how *The Volcano Lover* posits powerful feeling, and particularly shared feeling, as a key site of political struggle and a potential resource for shared action. Though critics have already approached the novel as Sontag's rejection of aestheticism in favor of a utopian political project—as her own revolt against her formalist position in "Against Interpretation"—what we haven't yet taken into account is precisely how the novel's political thinking is affective thinking.[56] By interrogating emotional power dynamics as related to imperial projects and forms of social control, *The Volcano Lover* wrestles with the politics of emotional discipline while experimenting with the radical possibilities of getting swept up in, and joining in on, shared feeling—feeling that is, in this novel, quite literally revolutionary. Reading *The Volcano Lover* with an attention to feeling, though, requires us to think of it as more than a treatise on emotional politics: it is also Sontag's attempt—which is perhaps not entirely successful—to affect her readers, to seduce us into an ethical community of shared feeling, to show how protest feels (Jasper *x*). In other words, I

[56] See, for example, Cielo Festina, "The Volcano Lover: A Rewriting of Susan Sontag's Aesthetic Theory," 142-8; and also Stacy Olster, "Remakes, Outtakes, Updates in Susan Sontag's *The Volcano Lover*," 117-40.

suggest that rather than simply renouncing a formalist position here, as others have claimed, Sontag's romance "marries" aesthetics and radical political commitment by seeking to change our mood, to nudge us into feelings of solidarity with the novel's victims. In pursuing this symbolic project, Sontag implies that political action may in fact come from art's affective nudges. As Sara Ahmed writes, "a movement requires us to be moved" ("Living" 199).

Under the Sign of Vesuvius

The Volcano Lover opens with a passionate eruption even before we're thrust into the Neapolitan heat: the novel's epigraph, or what perhaps should be considered its overture, comes from Act II of Mozart's opera, *Cosi fan tutte*. Dorabella speaks the line, "*Nel petto un Vesuvio d'avere mi par*"—translated, "I have a Vesuvius in my breast." Dorabella's words cast us as spectators of an erotic and passionate performance, awaiting an eruption. Linking the volcano explicitly with feminine passion and feeling—to both powerful emotions and sexual desire—this epigraph attunes us from the very beginning to the gendered social and sexual politics of feeling. Like Sontag, who appears in the novel's frame as a kind of time-traveling tour guide, we "enter in" because "desire leads" us to watch this affective pyrotechnical show (4).

The novel's short prologue, in fact, describes this scene of narratorial immersion in autobiographical terms, a recognizable postmodern framing move. Sontag as author/narrator figures herself at the "entrance to a flea market"—picking through the discarded rubbish of history—to choose what appeals to her. "I must pick up, fondle," she explains, lest we assume she will be looking only (3). We are also positioned within history—"In my jeans and silk blouse and tennis shoes: Manhattan, spring of 1992"—before being plunged in to a picture auction in London in 1772 and a 1944 eruption of Vesuvius (4).

The Volcano Lover is set mainly in Naples at the end of the eighteenth century, its action unfolding against the backdrop of Vesuvius' sputtering mouth and lava tongue. The volcano, Sontag's explicitly tells us, is passion's emblem—fascinating yet dangerous, like feeling, it is unpredictable, mutable, potentially annihilating (7). As an object of desire, Vesuvius is recognizably both a psychoanalytic icon of repressed desire and a personification of affect's raw energy and destabilizing potential. As the narrator explains, or perhaps commands the reader, "[y]ou project onto the volcano the amount of rage, of complicity with destructiveness, of anxiety about your ability to feel already in your head" (82). This description, which seems to resist or even confuse our theoretical distinctions between emotions, affects, and sexual drives, suggests that, in the novel at least, the language of passion subsumes all varieties of affective experience.

Vesuvius is also explicitly linked to revolutionary feeling, which Sontag warns can erupt without warning. As a geological embodiment of republican potential energy, the mountain exists as a looming threat to Enlightenment reason and geopolitical order. As Amy Elias describes, Vesuvius is an amalgam of everything that "stands outside Enlightenment logic and representation: the elemental and primitive, spectacle, passion, and natural catastrophe," a destabilizing force of nature (174). Its occasional eruptions, which intriguingly correspond to political flare-ups, seem to be part of the tide of revolution sweeping Europe: "No image for what was happening in France seemed as apt of that of a volcano in action—violent convulsion, upheaval from below, and waves of lethal force that harrow and permanently alter the landscape" (161). In 1794, with "the lava of the revolution flowing" and "nature rhyming with history," the volcano erupts with unprecedented violence "just as the Terror was reaching its climax" (185). Its lava is blood red.

If the volcano symbolizes is a threat to Enlightenment reason, though, its danger is also a turn-on for the Cavaliere, a collector and English diplomat stationed in Naples and Sontag's fictional double of Sir William Hamilton (1730-1803). Although he is man of learning—"an envoy of decorum and reason," even a caricature of Enlightenment thinking—the Cavaliere becomes obsessed with the volcano, madly climbing its heights and staring into its crater, wanting to get even closer to it (25). The Cavaliere decides then rationalize his interest as a scientific and aesthetic pursuit by collecting the volcano, gathering specimens of cooling lava in a lead-lined pouch or bottling samples of salts and sulphurs to be sent back to museums in England (27). Taxonomizing and taming the volcano's movements and moods thus become his "disinterested passion" (27).

The Cavaliere's aesthetic detachment has been read as a nod toward Sontag's own early aesthetic theories—with some even claiming he's an ironic self-portrait. But what critics haven't fully discussed is the Cavaliere's deep investment in strict feeling management and the politics Sontag associates this with (Festino 148). Though the Cavaliere is only an amateur collector, he is an "expert" at dismissing or avoiding "dangerous feelings"—anything that might threaten his composure and reserve (259). He himself is calm, cool, and collected, as throughout the novel, he carefully disciplines his own feeling, hardening his heart whenever he feels a tug of sympathy, a tinge of envy, or a flash of anger. In this styling himself, contradictorily, as a "man of considerate feelings" who nevertheless refuses to express his feelings or to be moved by those around him, the Cavaliere demonstrates feeling's implicitly moral and political stakes (56). Safely cordoned off from the stinky London city streets in his carriage at the start of the book, for example—"with enough accouterments of privilege to occupy his senses" and preoccupied by a book on his way to Italy—the Cavaliere "looks away" from the poverty and suffering

around him, even when a beggar is run down by his vehicle (18). Though the Cavaliere pretends that getting carried away by a feeling is a threat to his own agency, in fact, it is his impassivity that is to be feared. His coldness recalls Sara Ahmed's observation that "hardness is not the absence of emotion, but a different emotional orientation towards others" ("Cultural Politics" 4).

The Cavaliere's adept feeling management quickly emerges as a tool of empire when he arrives in Naples, where the hot passion of Vesuvius and the Italian sun—"the fabled laxity of the South"—pose a threat to his cool-headed composure (20). "Feeling superior" and "disdainful of local magic and superstition," in the Cavaliere's racialized geographic fantasy, he is afloat in "the Neapolitan torpor," an atmosphere of permissiveness and indulgence that he worries might seep into his system (392). Under the influence of the volcano, in a city where passion is indulged without consequence and it's "carnival all year round," the Cavaliere is afraid he will lose control and be ruled by his feelings (40). Here we see that the Cavaliere's social fiction of separateness—his ability to remain unmoved by those around him—relies on a controlling of his environment. In London, the windows of the Cavaliere's carriage are sealed to keep the city air from befouling his space; in Naples, he is breathing in the dangerous fumes of Vesuvius. The Cavaliere justifies his own fantasies of threat by fanning the flames of his fears about what circulates in the city's atmosphere, what "mists and vapors" of feeling he might catch, as if transmittable like a disease (51).

While this description of affective circulation recalls Silvan S. Tompkins' model of "emotional contagion," emphasizing that feeling moves between bodies, or Sara Ahmed's description of emotion as "sticky," it is important to notice that the Cavaliere's understanding of feeling *is* fundamentally relational, despite his belief in his detachment: for him, feeling is shareable and shared. While affect theorists have troubled an "outside-in" understanding of how

emotion circulates, the Cavaliere is clearly using it to produce rather than describe his surroundings as separate from himself: "emotionality [is] a claim about a subject" based on "relations of power," a power that produces some bodies—or places—as "being emotional" (Ahmed "Cultural Politics" 4). The Cavaliere, in perceiving the atmosphere of Naples *as* an atmosphere, creates it as something he must conquer and subdue. "Go[ing] native," as the Cavaliere imagines it, involves being influenced by a "collective affective atmosphere"—a *mood*, as Jonathan Flatley describes it—that he associates with the feminine primitive (67).

Thinking of mood as a kind of weather front, an idea that Flatley takes from Heidegger, is especially provocative in the context of *The Volcano Lover*, since Vesuvius' eruption is quite literally a weather event—it rains ash and brings rivers of lava. The volcano is the very picture of moodiness. For instance, when the Cavaliere's nephew Charles Greville visits in 1779—arguably, the novel's inciting event, since he will later bring Emma Hart as a gift to his uncle—there's a "nervous atmosphere" plaguing the city (86). The narrator explains that's it's because of "a hot wind, one of the great winds of Southern Europe, that are used, like the days leading up to menstruation, to explain restlessness, neurasthenia, emotional fragility: a collective PMS that comes on seasonally" (86). Mood here is feminized and pathologized, as atmospheric change, associated with republican sentiment, is figured as female caprice and quickly converted into moodiness. As Clare Hemmings has argued, though we tend to understand moods as liberating, "registering an openness or receptivity to the world around us that's hard to pinpoint," categories of gender and race differentiate what kind of cultural work mood does (259). Though the Cavaliere obsessively awaits the red lava flow of his volcano, wanting to be caught up in its frenzy, he uses his very desire for abandon to justify control over his surroundings.

This paternalistic urge becomes even more obvious when Emma Hart enters the novel as the Cavaliere's next object of desire and an addition to his collection. Beautiful, lively, sentimental, and eager to please, Emma is the Cavaliere's emotional foil; excelling at the qualities of her sex, she has a gift for empathy and listening—a kind of emotional intelligence. Unlike her husband, she's a natural sympathizer and a "champion intervener"—the narrator explains, "her sphere of activity is the one usually claimed by women; paying attention to feelings, to ailments" (164). Emma's effusive emotional life stimulates the Cavaliere, who observes his "beloved" the same way he does the volcano, taking inventory of her every move, "never tir[ing] of cataloguing the play of her moods, the flow of one appearance into another, the variety, the inclusiveness of her appearance" (131). Aware of being watched, and thrilled by this attention, Emma has an actress' talent for performance. Like the volcano, she puts on a show, aware of her effect on her adoring spectators and the precarity of her position if she does not please.

Though the Cavaliere admires his wife's sensitivity and the power of her affections, the Cavaliere also desires a world that is immobile, pinned down like his specimens. After the Cavaliere "collects" Emma as his wife, he begins her education, which includes disciplining her behavior, correcting her speech, and moderating her emotions. These lessons had been begun by her former lover and the Cavaliere's nephew, Charles, who had given Emma "books of the self-improving sort"—a nod, in a romance novel, to fears about female reading and instruction (123). By giving her the tools to teach herself, he convinces her that she is spearheading her own "sentimental education": "She read him aloud passages from a manual of self-control for women which Charles had given her, *The Triumphs of Temper*...I am triumphing over my temper, she said to the Cavaliere. I have become reasonable" (134). Janice Radway, in her work on the

romance, found that women's husbands, in addition to fearing the harmful influence of romance reading on their wives, often also resented the time they spent away from them, reading alone (91). The fact that, here, Emma is reading this passage aloud to her husband, although admittedly a common reading practice at the time, highlights the Cavaliere's need for her to share his feelings, to affirm his influence not just by indulging in his book selections but by doing so in his very presence. Emma soon becomes not only a specimen in his collection but a piece of art: a living statue, a "limited being" (46). The Cavaliere is even pleased to see that Emma is "taking his impress as clay does a sculptor's thumb," a description that recalls David Hume's use of the word "impress" on his work in emotions, as well as Sara Ahmed's admonition to "remember the '*press*' in "impression" ("Cultural Politics" 6). A "Pygmalion with a round-trip ticket," the Cavaliere has molded a goddess who does not move without his permission (144).

Yet Emma develops her own art of living statues, performing her expressive "Attitudes"—what are essentially "frozen illustrations of emotion"—at the Cavaliere's assemblies to great acclaim: "To do this one must have a gift for euphoria" (147). "A simulated theatre of ancient emotions," Lady Hamilton's Attitudes consisted of her, in antique costume, assuming the pose and expression of a classical figure, summoning in the audience's mind a key moment, emotion, and scene from myth or literature (146). Emma's performance is a *vivant tableau*—"Illustrate the passion. But don't move. Don't…move," the narrator intones, as if channeling the atmosphere in the room (146). The Cavaliere enjoys watching his wife's seemingly effortless emotional volatility and control: "Change without transition. From sorrow to joy, joy to terror…It seems the ultimate feminine gift, to be able to pass effortlessly, instantly, from one emotion to another" (147). Described as "a living slideshow," these performances are an embodiment of properly disciplined, and therefore properly enjoyable, passion (148). In fact,

inspired by her Attitudes, the Cavaliere orders notes and drawings of the mountain's "poses and performance," which intriguingly recalls *The Volcano Lover*'s inside jacket cover, a series of marked diagrams of the volcano mid-eruption (152).

In mocking the Cavaliere's paternalism and portraying his aesthetic detachment ironically, Sontag condemns his politics and affective ethics, questioning whether this artful emotional control and discipline on display has anything to do with good living or even good art, and she is doing so in a specifically feminist tenor. But if the Cavaliere's preference for immobile pictures of feeling is dismissed as aristocratic nonsense, it is also not the case that the republican revolution, in rejecting the Cavaliere's elitist politics, offers an ethical way forward. As the novel continues along the grooves of history, emotions play a similarly misogynistic role in republican politics, as powerful leaders figure monarchy as a family "misruled" by women (299). Those gaining power anew are portrayed as violently unfeeling, torturing their former lovers and betraying their families in crude excesses of republican sentiment, "immovable" to real suffering. In a narratorial aside characteristic of Sontagian intervention and narratorial summary, we hear an explanation: "The combination of emotions with power creates…power. The combination of emotions with powerlessness creates powerlessness" (314). Power, rather than emotion, then, is the key thing to be harnessed. Yet even while this bleak affective reality is acknowledged—even while feeling is a particularly fraught site of social and political control—by the novel's end, powerful feeling itself becomes a possible mode of addressing a power imbalance and maybe even changing a mood.

Counter Movements and Moods

Though the majority of *The Volcano Lover* follows the Cavaliere, focalizing his thoughts and feelings, the novel does not end when he breathes his last. The final section of *The Volcano Lover* consists of four female monologues, each spoken from the grave. In these final chapters, the passionate voices of women in the novel—the Cavaliere's first wife, Catherine; his second wife, Lady Hamilton; Lady Hamilton's mother; and the revolutionary poet Eleanora de Fonseca Pimentel—emerge to comment on and revise their own stories, finally free to speak for themselves. As these women join voices to protest their mistreatment, the section recalls both political oratory and a musical movement: it is perhaps even Sontag's coded, formal reflection on the "women's movement." This section of the book is structured after Hindemith's composition *The Four Temperaments*, which moves through four sections corresponding to the medieval humors—Melancholic, Sanguinic, Phlegmatic, and Choleric, figuring these monologues as formal meditations on temperament and mood (Hirsch). Tapping into seventeenth-century metaphors of music, which Susanne Langer describes as a "tonal analogue of emotive life"—and registering Heidegger's description of mood as a kind of "melody"—in an interview, Sontag herself describes these monologues as vehicles for expressing what she saw as "operatic emotions" (Hirsch, Flatley "Reading" 145)—big, moving, yet stylized expressions of inner feeling.

As such, they are explicitly in conversation with the novel's epigraph, from Mozart's opera *Cosi fan tutte*:"Thus Do All Women," as Sontag translates the title. Here, the epigraph "I have a Vesuvius in my breast" figures passion's explosion as a voice-driven musical overflow of feeling. If, in the rest of the novel, women "triumph" over their tempers, in these final pages they

are temperamental themselves: it is their passion, and overall disposition, that triumphs as it channels their critiques of patriarchy and the social order (416).

The little criticism that has been written on *The Volcano Lover* has tended to focus on these final monologues, with reviewers sensing a tonal shift and energy in this section of the book that seems to surpass or overwhelm what came before it. Cary Nelson, for instance, writes approvingly that here Sontag "finds a successful voice" (720-1). R.Z. Sheppard, on the other hand, expresses his dissatisfaction at this moment when "Sontag, like Vesuvius, simply blew her top." While opinions vary, reviewers suggest that they find this part of the novel *moving,* even provocative. The voices of these women are direct and immediate, somehow both public and intimate at the same time. If Sontag achieved her vision, these monologues act as the "equivalent of the unmediated, acutely rueful directness of an operatic aria" (Hirsch). An aria's directness, however, is not confessional so much as it is stylized and overheard; a spectacle itself, it is also a moment for an actress to display her virtuosity.

Admittedly, praise for the immediacy and directness of this section does sometimes emerge from a critique of the rest of the book's obtuseness, with reviewers such as John Banville and Evelyn Toynton faulting Sontag's recurring and intrusive commentary—"her string of verdicts and summations," to use Toynton's words—for slowing down the action and imposing readerly distance.[57] Sontag's fiction is often faulted for its turgid, essayistic quality, in fact—her prose often peppered with narratorial, essayistic asides, theorizing, and other Brechtian distancing effects. But I also think this boredom is, for better or worse, part of Sontag's plan, a way of imposing distance in order to provoke critical thought. Yet here, in contrast,

[57] See also reviews by Rhoda Koenig, "Past Imperfect, Future Wacked Out" and Jonathan Keates, "The Antique Collector's Guide." For a more thorough list of reviews of *The Volcano Lover*, see chapter five of Carl Rollyson's *Understanding Susan Sontag* (2016).

unencumbered by Sontag's heavy-handedness, these utterances leap off the page and reach out to us themselves. The expressions of those who did not get to tell their own stories—whose feelings were marginalized and carefully managed by the Cavaliere and by Sontag the narrator—break into the narrative control room and offer judgment on how their stories have been told.

As each speaker reflects on the compromises they made as women—whether as wives, mothers, mistresses, or revolutionaries, or all of the above—they participate in a task of increasing political consciousness. They are not only speaking emotionally; they are speaking up about emotion and power. The Cavaliere's first wife Catherine admits to "bottling up" her feelings to appear agreeable and feminine, suggesting that her husband's feelings weren't as "tender" as they seemed (379-80). Defending the love between a mother and a child as "pure," Emma's mother offers a more blunt take on the Cavaliere and his kind: "men are bad there I said it" (400). The emotion with which these characters describe the disciplining and managing of their feelings is, understandably, affecting; mounting an angry protest about the injustice of their position, they prompt us to respond not disinterestedly. Theatrical and operatic as these wrenching performances are, in other words, they are also forms of address: decidedly rhetorical, they are meant to be overheard, to influence and move their listeners.

These literary arias, while they do function as sentimental appeals, also emphasize its performative and public nature. These monologues are not "just" private feelings of emotion; they are oratory that can change a collective affective atmosphere: they are mood work. As Jonathan Flatley explains, "we cannot just *decide* to be in a different mood; the only way to exert agency in relation to our moods is by awakening or making counter-moods" ("What Is a Revolutionary Setting?"). To do this, one must know the "possibilities of moods, how people might be guided into them," a skill that, Sontag suggests, women are more likely to possess

(Flatley "How a Revolutionary" 508). These monologues, taken together, are acts and expressions of protest that incubate a "counter-mood"—they create an oppositional "we" that comes together in solidarity as these women stage rebellion against "the ruling passions" of the Cavaliere. Just as the narrator in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* "does work of speaking to, for, and with the crowd to create revolutionary consciousness" when happening upon an African-American family evicted from their flat, so these ending monologues summon a shift in political consciousness that stems from a recognition of collectivity, of shared dispossession (Flatley "What is a Revolutionary Setting?"). It is as if these women have "organized themselves" and "talked to each other" to transform their political consciousness, as Sontag wrote in her 1973 essay "The Third World of Women" (787).

However, while these women seem to be speaking to each other as a collective, unlike in Ellison's novel the "crowd" or the "audience" these women are directly speaking to is the reader, not their contemporaries who have already betrayed them. The appeals of these women—who are all dead—are directed toward the future rather than the present; as the revolutionary poet Pimentel says, "I was not nostalgic about the past. I believed in the future" (418). Though mood cannot be "located" cleanly either within the text or outside it, Sontag seems to be attempting some kind of mood work on us. It is not simply that anger is represented in this final section of the novel but rather that these monologues whip up a mood of protest and aim to sweep us along with it through direct address. As Michaela Bronstein explains, novelistic form and even the politics of literature may be "less about how individuals are represented, and more about how those representations move an audience: not what the work means, but what it does" (34). Bronstein suggests that an author's craft, can, like protest, "be a tool for moving readers," for influencing them affectively and edging them toward action (33). Keeping in mind Sianne Ngai's

caution that a text's "organizing affect" or "its general disposition or orientation towards its audience"—what she calls "tone"—is "never entirely reducible to a reader's emotional response to a text or reducible to a text's internal representations of feeling (though it can amplify and be amplified by both)" (29-30), we might see Sontag's final arias as fusing a vision of radical collective action with expressive vocal performances that appear more transpersonal than personal.

If Sontag's prose is designed to move readers—both to influence their mood and invite them to identify with this new collectivity—Sontag sets an example of response towards the novel's end, explicitly including herself as a participant in this shared feminist feeling. This occurs during the final monologue, which belongs to Pimentel, an upper-class revolutionary writer who started the republican newspaper. After Pimentel chronicles her revolutionary sympathies, her disdain for members of her class such as the Cavaliere who did nothing to address injustice and violence, Pimentel admits that she "would lie to herself about how complicated it is to be a woman"; in the next sentence, Sontag writes, "Thus do all women, including the author of this book"—another reference to the title of Mozart's opera (419). Breaking the fourth wall, Sontag counts herself among this crowd of feminist dissidents, emerging from behind an authorial curtain of impersonality to affirm a shared feeling of anger. This is not simply polyphony-as-usual; it's an alliance, an act of affiliation. Though Sontag's moral vision pervades the novel, this is a concrete vote of solidarity, a kind of #MeToo moment. Recalling the ending of Sontag's essay "Trip to Hanoi," Sontag's "I" collapses here into a revolutionary "we."

To endorse her unique brand of anti-misogynistic political vision, Sontag aligns herself specifically with Eleanora Pimentel, the revolutionary dissident who ends the novel with an

angry condemnation of the Cavaliere's passivity. This fact has not gone unnoticed, leading some critics to focus on her monologue over others. Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, for instance, suggests that Pimentel's "feminist rage" is ultimately is what Sontag wishes to "speak for"—an "active partisanship not simply with aesthetic ideals (like the Cavaliere) but also with actively political, and indeed, utopian ones" (86). But this is not quite right. Pimentel does condemn the Cavaliere and his friends in a rousing manner, indicting her fellow women on this ground: "I cannot forgive those who did not care about more than their own glory or well-being. They thought they were civilized. They were despicable. Damn them all" (419). Yet while Pimentel's monologue may seem a rejection of female solidarity, a puncturing of shared feeling, I want to offer instead that it is Sontag's reflection on conflict within the feminist movement, an invitation to reconsider our cultural fascination with "cat fights" and women turning on one another. (Sontag herself was certainly cast in this role time and again, as her disagreements with Mary McCarthy and Adrienne Rich were taken up in these lurid terms.) As Sianne Ngai points out, although "women's feelings" are thought able to "turn ugly" fast (as any conflict is read as a failure of solidarity), antagonism has affective and political value for feminists (33). In Pimentel's monologue, Sontag makes clear that identifying with a shared plight—that of women—does not erase very real socio-economic difference or immediately usher anyone into a utopia of total agreement. For instance, in an interview for the *Paris Review*, after Edward Hirsch commented that these final monologues provide a "woman's point of view," Sontag responded, "Your question reminds me that whatever their numbers, women are always regarded, are culturally constructed, as a minority. It's to minorities that we impute having a unitary point of view" (Hirsch). In insisting on both shared experience and difference within a movement, Sontag rejects the idea that conflict among women invalidates a feminist project: "these women are as

different from each other as any of four men characters in the novel I might have chosen" but what they have in common is the knowledge that "the world is run by men" (ibid).

Unlike Sontag's early fiction, which many, including Wagner-Lawlor, fault for their solipsistic burrowing into a single character's consciousness—this novel includes multiple voices and perspectives; Sontag's sequencing and movement through them is another kind of ethics: "a romance of community," but a community that does not have only one spokesperson. If, as Wagner-Lawlor writes, Sontag's later novels are "specifically utopian narratives…designed to lure us into a community of readers bound by a new kind of social contract: a commitment to sympathy, plurality, and what Sontag refers to as an exercise of freedom," plurality—and dissent—cannot be comprised (80).

With this novel, then, Sontag asks, "what is a revolution"—or a romance?—"if it does not change hearts and minds"? (417). By celebrating a powerful, shared feeling that is fueled by a desire for "justice" as much as "love," Sontag's novel is ultimately is working to change a mood, to move and influence readers into a new kind of political and affective consciousness. Perhaps, by involving us in *what protest feels like*, Sontag is stirring us from passivity to passion, from alienation and into shared, revolutionary feeling. That this occurs in the form of a novel—rather than through direct political action or even a theatrical experience—is likely frustrating to some readers, but, at the same time, Sontag's formal achievement here shows important a new imagining of aesthetic experience and its transformative potential can be.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to tease out and trace a few key, entangling threads in Sontag's work surrounding detachment, impersonal aesthetics, gender, queerness, fiction writing,

and political participation, approaching Sontag's varied engagement with these topics within the historical and cultural context of post-1960s American imperialism and confessional culture, with its gendered norms of expressivity. As a portrait of Sontag, my account of her is only partial and not meant to be exhaustive—I have chosen to privilege and prioritize certain texts and moments in her career as they relate to my interest in her reworking of an impersonal mode, especially in her creative endeavors. I do hope to have shown, though, how the complexity and ever-changing coordinates of her engagement with the aesthetics and politics of feeling necessitates moving beyond the framework of unsentimentality or celebrity glamour to explain her impersonal styling.

Moving beyond reductive narratives of Sontag's coolness, in fact, can allow for more illuminating and more local accounts of the contradictions and struggles that she contends with—and never fully resolves—across her career in both her creative and critical work. We can see how these illuminate each other more than some critics have allowed: the late novels are not merely poorly written critical essays, for instance, despite their real flaws; they do draw on and flesh out important ideas that Sontag had been considering in other forms. Her shift in focus from criticism to novel-writing, in fact, is fascinating precisely because of literary fiction's unique possibilities for playing with detached poses, with the status of narratorial objectivity, with the political stakes of romance, and with spectacles of emotional display in ways that a non-fictional first-person essay didn't quite allow.

Thus, although some readers have understandably been frustrated by Sontag's seemingly-evasive penchant for the impersonal—this, placed alongside proliferating accounts of her real-life emotional tyranny and mistreatment of others, which Terry Castle and Sigrid Nunez, among others, have shared in telling detail—there *is* something important at stake in Sontag's theorizing

of detachment across the years. Crucially, in the work, Sontag's version of detachment is not indifference or disengagement. It is, instead, and ideally, a form of involvement that allows for both separateness and solidarity.

Chapter 2:

Feeling Nothing but Shock: Ottessa Moshfegh's Spectacles of Female Unfeelingness

Ottessa Moshfegh's unfeelingness is provocative, and meant to be. As one reviewer glibly puts it, "Ottessa Moshfegh is comfortable with discomfort—especially yours" (Sekaras). Over the past decade—publishing short stories, a novella, and several novels—the now forty-year-old writer has developed her own fictional brand: grotesque, outrageous chic. Moshfegh's stories are bizarre affective cocktails that mix together lyricism, disgust, adoration, abjection, boredom, and snark. This specialty drink is served cold, with lots of ice: there is little warmth to be found in Moshfegh's fictional worlds or in her characters' hearts. Reviewers have tended to fixate on this preference of hers for the pathological, the bizarre, the chilling. Dwight Garner describes her prose as "cool, strange, aloof and disciplined," claiming that the protagonist of her most recent novel, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* has "rolled a condom onto her heart." This unsettling image captures something of the synthetic slickness and perverse intensity of Moshfegh's prose, as well as highlighting her protagonists' seeming inability to feel any kind of human warmth.

In suggesting that Moshfegh's characters protect themselves from a certain kind of human connection and emotional vulnerability, Garner gets at what has been key to both criticisms and celebrations of her work: that it's cold, cruel, emotionally distant, and unfeeling. He is also suggesting that Moshfegh's fiction is driven by an anti-social energy, populated by "unlikeable" female characters who opt out of sympathy or usual affective circuits, putting up barriers between themselves and others. In *Eileen*, for example, Moshfegh's titular protagonist composes her face into a "death mask" so as not to be "read" by others, expressing only a cultivated nonchalance and an unassailable imperturbability in her "deadpan stare" (174).

Moshfegh's characters are not just emotionally-unavailable, however; their flat affect and depressive vibe is frequently punctured and punctuated by an intense contempt for and disgust with the world around them. Impassivity coupled with flashes of cruelty is her signature affective style.

This prickly pose and ironic aesthetic have earned Moshfegh more praise than criticism, on the whole, and she has certainly attracted her share of attention and literary gossip. At times, her stylized unfeelingness—and her blunt, antagonistic authorial persona—comes across as carefully cultivated and brilliantly tactical, a sly catering to the disaffected moods of our current literary moment.[58] We want scandal, and she is happy to oblige: she bragged about writing her Booker-nominated novel *Eileen* using Alan Watt's *The 90-Day Novel* guide to get noticed by commercial publishers.[59] But it is too simple to celebrate her work as shockingly subversive, to say that Moshfegh's allure comes from her refusal to prettify her female characters, as some reviewers have.[60] She isn't just a rebel. In fact, rather than seeming countercultural, Moshfegh's writing has been associated with a very "in" emotional sensibility: a "cool" minimalist, millennial aesthetic. Josephine Livingstone, in *The New Republic,* chalked up Moshfegh's "alienated, toneless style" to the "emotional influence of the Internet," grouping her with a sweep of young writers known and lauded for their flat affect; Jia Tolentino has similarly associated

[58] Unfeelingness is a hot topic in American literary studies, as is our fixation on "cool characters" and "impersonal feelings." See Lee Konstantinou's *Cool Characters* (2016); Rachel Greenwald Smith's *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (2015); and Deborah Nelson's *Tough Enough* (2017).
[59] See Paul Laity, "Ottessa Moshfegh Interview: 'Eileen Started out as a Joke – Also I'm Broke, Also I Want to Be Famous.'"
[60] One example of this is Lincoln Michel, "The Pleasures of Hating in 'My Year of Rest and Relaxation.'"

Moshfegh's unique brand of impassive selfhood with the experience of social media scrolling.[61] Don't we all feel impersonal and detached now, in this age of self-commodification and online scrolling?

Yet in characterizing Moshfegh as an unfeeling writer of our hyper-digital and desensitized present, we hazard missing the stranger and more chaotic tonalities that make up her work and its avant-garde-like provocations. In this chapter, I argue that Moshfegh's literary poses of female unfeelingness—and her career-long fascination with failed or failing emotional improvement projects—do more than simply express the impersonalizing force of the Internet and the avatars of ourselves that exist on it. Instead, Moshfegh's novels dramatize the effortful and embodied task of affective self-fashioning itself, figuring the body and the voice as sites of impersonal aesthetic virtuosity. Moshfegh's deadpan narratives figure impersonal numbness as both a gendered spectacle and a disturbing postmodern beauty standard, even as they refuse interpretive closure and mock readers' desires for literary fiction to be therapeutic.

In what follows, I read Moshfegh's first novel, *Eileen* (2015), as reworking the affective clichés of film noir to orient us in a pessimistic 1960s world of emotional extremes, one of both existential malaise and the distinctly contemporary desperation streaked through American popular culture. Although critics have tended to read *Eileen* as a dysphoric chronicle of the titular protagonist's bad feelings, I examine the novel's fiercely scripted, generic treatment of gloom to argue that affective prescriptions and emotional conformity are the real drivers of the narrative, recasting Eileen's bad feelings as, paradoxically, more than individual. The second half of this chapter reads Moshfegh's perverse illness narrative *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

[61] Be this as it may, for herself Moshfegh has given up Twitter and Facebook: "If I could unplug my internet completely I would … I value my brain," she told *The Guardian*'s Paul Laity.

(2018) as an ironic commentary on the persistently powerful therapeutic impulse that dominates contemporary American culture and on postmodern masculinist tropes of economic alienation and sentimentality surrounding 9/11. A fiercely ironic novel of emotional convalescence that blurs the boundaries between avant-garde and kitsch, *My Year* refuses diagnostic clarity and is skeptical of our impulses to manage discomfort, satirizing the elite whiteness of U.S. wellness culture while putting the gender politics of the contemporary New York art world on full display.

Midcentury Emotional Style: Feeling Noirish in *Eileen*

Moshfegh's first novel, *Eileen*, takes up imperatives to follow affective scripts in several ways, turning as it does on emotional clichés, the genre of the noir, and the emotional maturation or even emancipation of a young, misanthropic woman, Eileen. As the story of a disaffected, brooding girl in a dark New England town plagued by "beautiful turbulence," the novel deals in psychic, and symbolic, extremes. Rather than impersonality, it dwells in negative feelings of spite, as self-erasing as these are. The novel is narrated by a much older Eileen reflecting on her younger self and the crime her sordid circumstances necessitate that she commit. Eileen Dunlop, as we are introduced to her around Christmas 1964, is a bleak sight: a twenty-four-year-old college graduate living with her alcoholic, cop father in a dirty, cold house, our narrator spitefully hates everyone around her. She is unhappy and angry all the time. She obsessively thinks about her body, ashamed of its hideousness, though she relishes descriptions of her disordered eating and her bowel movements. Her day job as a secretary at a nearby boys' correctional facility, Moorehead, gives her a chance to fantasize about her crush, a security guard named Randy, but also to meet a redhead who will change her life. Now, as an older woman looking back on her life, the narrator describes her own alienation from this old self: "These days

I'm afraid I am too outspoken, too loving. I'm a sap, too passionate, effusive, too much. Back then I was just an odd young woman. An awkward youngster. Angst wasn't quite so mainstream back then. My old deadpan stare would terrify me if I saw it in the mirror today" (174). The struggle of the novel is Eileen's struggle to shed her life in X-ville, to rid herself of its atmospheric malaise and step into light. But her current emotional extreme of her newfound sentimentality, too, calls into question just how reliable this stark self-portrait of a changed self really is.

Eileen is a misanthropic and narcissistic ride, and the novel could be seen as an exercise in expressing how it feels to be an outsider, even to oneself. *Eileen* quite explicitly calls out the social imperatives of conformity and the consequences of not fitting in, drawing on the historical backdrop of a cultural moment when theories of normativity and statistical studies were on the rise. Noir, as Varmazi points out, is centered on a self-destructive protagonist, and generally seen to reflect the pessimistic "postwar climate" of US (185). Eileen's insistence that she now fits in—and is thus telling her story—is suspect and curious.[62] Interestingly, the book rose to infamy in response to Moshfegh's own comments about writing it to be noticed by the literary community. After being nominated for the Man-Booker Prize, Moshfegh mentioned to a reporter that she wrote this novel—her first full novel, after many short stories and a novella—quite literally following a script: her guide to writing a bestseller was Alan Watt's *The 90-Day Novel*.[63]

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[62] It's surprising to me that critics have praised this loosely "frame narrative" structure as offering a redemptive, or more ethical, angle on the events of the novel. I find the so-called emotional maturity of the now-old Eileen less than cheering and less than mature. I'm not convinced she got out of the black-and-white, noir binaries of feeling that were presented to us as options during her life in X-ville.

[63] Moshfegh said, "[I] went out and bought a book called *The 90-Day Novel*, by Alan Watt. It's ridiculous, claiming that anybody can write a great book, and quickly too. And I thought if *I* were to do this, what would happen, would my head explode? So I followed it for 60 days – it was so *boring*. But it ended up as an Oulipian thing, struggling with a limitation, and it was

That this stunt worked attests to the "genre turn" in contemporary fiction, which Günter Leypoldt has described as a way for established authors to appropriate certain elements of popular fiction yet still retain their "literary feel." *Eileen* did not win the prize, but the attention had already moved Moshfegh into the literary spotlight, figuring her as a provocative antagonist and literary outsider, much like her titular protagonist.

In engaging the generic exaggerations of feeling that the noir knowingly operates though and with, Moshfegh piles on the emotional clichés and normative social scripts that her impish sensibility relies on styling itself against. In *Noir Affect* (2020), Christopher Breu and Elizabeth Hatmaker urge us to see noir not as a set of films or novels associated with a particular time period but as an affective disposition of negativity. The noir, they argue, consists of "narratives centered on loss, sadness, rage, shame, guilt, regret, anxiety, humiliation, resentment, resistance, and refusal" (7). These scholars see radical redemptive potential in this reclaiming of bad feelings: "Moreover, noir often asks us to identify with those on the losing end of cultural narratives, especially the criminal, the lost, the compromised, the haunted, the unlucky, the cast aside, and the erotically "perverse'" (7). Moshfegh's protagonist Eileen seems to inhabit each of these identities in different ways, inviting us to revel in her social antagonism and outsider status, and to put on her emotional goggles (which are decidedly not rose-colored). In doing so, Eileen also forces us to merge with her own moods: to feel her antipathy alongside her, to become accomplices in her decades-old crime.

Though readers have noted—even fixated—on Eileen's bad feelings and the bad feelings in *Eileen,* too many critical conversations have tended to reduce the complex emotional

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actually interesting to conform to the rules. So … it started out as a fuck-you joke, also I'm broke, also I want to be famous. It was that kind of a gesture" (Laity).

dynamics of Moshfegh's novel to the gendered question of likeability. Reviewers have tended to celebrate the grotesque and decidedly "unladylike" behavior of Moshfegh's protagonist, relishing her refusal to conform to the unspoken rules of femininity: i.e. kindness, gentleness, cleanliness, lack of murderous thoughts, etc. (Cook, Michel). In this bucking of normative gender roles and the politics of politeness, Moshfegh is figured as a cultural rebel and a feminist icon, her work blasting open the gritty grossness of misogyny and its contorting effects on women's bodies and minds.[64] Moshfegh herself is wary of this redemptive and, in some ways, reductive impulse, insisting that her books aren't "about" issues or even about "freaks": this is what life is like, she insists, in all its squalor (Sekaras). Her frustration no doubt stems from a writer's struggle to reclaim her novel from its moralizing critics eager for a message, but there's more at stake here in these debates over likeability: in viewing Moshfegh's writing merely as a sociological commentary on the female misfit in a patriarchal society, we miss the much murkier emotional puddles the novel splashes in.

In fact, as a noir, *Eileen* seems more preoccupied with gloom than with justice. Its sordid mixture of sex and violence does not add up to a clean social critique. If "noir is an effort to conceptualize climates or environments—including political, social, conceptual, or affective climates or environments—and hence necessarily to conceptualize relationality and entanglement," the messiness of these interactions refuses any straightforward understanding of individual emotional agency (Hollister 1017). The novel doesn't offer the clarity of an emotional morality tale, in other words; it immerses us in the struggle of "getting out" of a certain place—

[64] Moshfegh's aestheticizing representations of eating disorders, such as bulimia and anorexia, have also been the source of feminist debate and concern, as her protagonists' relationships to their bodies and eating habits are anything but healthy and well-adjusted. See Joanna Novak's essay "On the Literature of Eating Disorders" for a discussion of this.

both emotionally and geographically. As Carl Sekaras has observed of this protagonist: "she's deep in her feelings and looking for a way out." Throughout the novel, though, it's unclear whether her disaffection is a form of fitting in or a way of opting out. For instance, while putting up the artificial Christmas tree at Moorehead, Eileen describes how she

> had hard feelings around the holidays, the one time of year I couldn't help but fall prey to the canned self-pity Christmas prescribes. I'd mourn the lack of love and warmth in my life, wish upon stars for angels to come and pluck me from my misery and plunk me down into a whole new life, like in the movies. I was a sucker for the spirit of Christmas, as it was called. (14)

Ironically, what she's drawn to about this holiday is its invitation for brooding selfishness, for blaming those around her for her misery and hoping for divine deliverance. Rather than a time for hope or peace or joy, Christmas for Eileen is a carnivalesque occasion: a publicly sanctioned indulgence of her usual negativity. This is when she feels she finally fits in, when she can conform to the expressivity allowed. If she is a "sucker" for this mood, it is because she has been fed it "by the movies," a sly nod to our own complicity with the emotional caricature of herself Eileen is advancing.

Curiously, then, Eileen's misanthropy is both a kind of social conformity and a form of protest. She seeks out places where she can indulge her bile because, in general, Eileen has to subvert or dodge—tellingly, this is the model of her car and escape vehicle!—imperatives to feel happy and to compose herself adequately. There is a social pressure that envelops her; this is why she works at the prison, to avoid these usual social rules even while, arguably, participating in their punitive enforcement. But the atmospheric pressure of the novel also seems regional, articulated as it is in terms of New England norms and mores, which offer a paradox. Moshfegh told an interviewer, for example, that "Eileen was born, as I was, in New England. Her character and her obsessions are familiar to me although my family is nothing like hers. She suffers from

existential dissonance, the idea you should be happy because you are an American" (Kellaway). But at the same time, New England is this dark, isolated place: both the mythic "source" of American history and the strange, unfeeling void at the center of a national narrative that we can't get ourselves out of.

Eileen presents herself as the product of her environment, perhaps even an extension of it. On the very first page of the novel, Eileen introduces us to her past image of herself, the terrain of her face like "that cold and deadly New England exterior" (1). She compares herself to Hamlet, perhaps the moodiest punk in all of literature, presumably to emphasize how unhappy, angry, and awkward she was, though without so many spectators at court (2). She describes her home, which she calls "X-ville," as "the brutal cold town where I was born and raised" (2). Her father's gun is a crucial part of her environment or the "setting": Eileen says conspiratorially, "I tell you this simply to put the gun into the scenery. It was there, from childhood until the end" (53). Alluding to a household item as a kind of Chekhov's gun acknowledges the inherent theatricality of her descriptions, the spectatorial dynamics at play. By not naming the town itself, Eileen generalizes her small, New England town into a kind of representative geography of human darkness. As she observes, the light in X-ville is eerie in a way that you can only understand if one has seen the white glow of England towns near dusk in the winter.

That a cultural outsider—the alluring prison psychologist Rebecca, a sophisticate from California—happens on the scene causes Eileen to reconsider her default relation to her surroundings. Rebecca had moved to Cambridge to attend Harvard and gives her take on the region, a description that is weary rather than illuminating: "She praised the foliage, the history, mocked the intellectuals—'the stiffs'—said she was in a 'strange love affair with New England'…'Things feel very real out here, don't they? There's simply no fantasy. And no

sentimentality. That's what fascinates me. There is history and pride, but very little imagination here'" (145). Eileen contradicts this in her head immediately, calling Rebecca "dead wrong" and citing her own imagination as evidence: "We New Englanders are uptight for sure, but we have strong minds. We use our imaginations effectively. We don't waste our brains on magical notions or frills, but we do have the ability to fantasize. I could name countless thinkers and writers and artists as examples. And there was me, after all" (146). This is a rare moment when Eileen defends her home. It is also interesting because thinking and feeling are elided together in Rebecca's formulation of the relationship between fantasy and sentimentality: yet this conflation is exactly what the fantasy *is*, which Eileen soon confirms for us. The emotional barrenness of New England is itself a shared dream or cultural image.

Playing with these clichés, the crime—or trauma—at the heart of the novel is similarly in line with what we might expect: at the prison, the teenager Leonard Polk is in for his father's murder, though it later comes out that his act of violence was a form of self-defense, since his father repeatedly raped him with his mother's willed ignorance or tacit consent. Rebecca persuades Eileen to exact a very inexact revenge on the mother, convincing Eileen to kidnap her, tie her up in a basement, and eventually abandon her to the poisonous fumes of Eileen's Dodge, though it isn't clear whether the mother is at fault. These final events of the novel, when Eileen finally takes action, come off as anti-climactic: Eileen's crime, the one that the novel culminates in, seems almost flimsy, a mere plot device—certainly in contrast to the sexual trauma at the heart of the revenge and the intense foreboding and suspense her story conjures up as she tells it. As one reviewer puts it, "The bad thing that is eventually revealed, and the bad thing that happens as a consequence, don't quite live up to the atmospheric badness with which the novel draws along the reader" (Kiesling). In other words, the climatic action of the book—the

kidnapping and murder of a woman—feels unsatisfying, somehow imposed or manufactured, perhaps because it hasn't quite plumbed this environment of Puritan dark. This idea, as my colleague Samantha Wallace has pointed out, relates to Sara Ahmed's concept of snap: "If a snap is a moment with a history, that history is the accumulated effect of what you have come up against" (*Living*).[65] Though this moment of breakage may look like an abrupt change, it is a response to everything that has built up.

Emotional inconsistency, in fact, is part of what the novel is exploring—against the backdrop of enduring emotional or tonal realities and the broad strokes of noir setting. What causes a switch, or in Ahmed's terms, a break, when so often, things are reliably secure? In some ways, this is asking a question about narrative itself and feeling's role within it. Eileen's crush on Randy, the security guard at the prison, abruptly shifts in the novel after Rebecca's arrival, distracting Eileen from her old crush and utterly shifting her fantasies onto a new "love" object. Commenting on this, Eileen shrugs it off, figuring romance as inherently capricious: "The heart is a moody greedy thing, I suppose" (175). Yet what's so odd is that feelings so intensely linger, too, until they don't anymore. The framing of the novel as a story of maturation and "getting out" of a bad place, however, underscores the connection between physical and psychic geography. Eileen is stuck where she is until she isn't, caught in her malicious, deadpan performances of her own unfeeling character.

Moshfegh's novel, in many ways, is an outlier to the others in this project: its first-person prose indulges in spite and negative feelings rather than channeling an impersonal response or flat affect; however, at the same time, Moshfegh's book, in so devotedly connecting individual

[65] Samantha Wallace described Sara Ahmed's theory of "snap" in relation to *Eileen* in an abstract for an ASAP panel proposal.

and atmospheric malaise, also undermines the assumption that Eileen merely has a problem with her own personal feelings.

Remaking the Emotional Self: My Year's Anti-Therapeutic American Dreaming

If *Eileen* relies on and ultimately exploits our cultural scripts surrounding emotional extremes in order to stage not just our entrapment within them but our reliance on their logic, Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) chronicles an even more extreme self-improvement project: a quest to completely dodge consciousness, and all the irritable, unwelcome feelings that come with it, for an entire year. The book is set in New York City at the hedonistic turn of the millennium leading up to the 9/11 attacks and is narrated by a rich, young, well-educated white woman who lives on the Upper East Side and won't stop reminding us she looks like a model. Despite her privilege, she is miserable, tormented by her feelings and exasperatingly misanthropic: she hates everything and everybody, so she decides to opt out of feeling entirely, embarking on a personal quest to "improve" herself by "hibernating" (this is what she calls it) in her Manhattan apartment in a drug-induced slumber for an entire year. She explains, "I can't point to any one event that resulted in my decision to go into hibernation. Initially, I just wanted some downers to drown out my thoughts and judgments, since the constant barrage made it hard not to hate everyone and everything" (17). Untroubled by money, she quits her assistant job at a hip art gallery in Chelsea, living off her dead parents' estate and relegating herself to her bed. Ostensibly, her quest is for a "new spirit"—an entirely new way of relating to the world, a cure for her "septic" attitude (153). This is an impersonal pose taken to the extreme, an obliteration of the self.

The unnamed narrator's prickly aloofness comes across as both an irreverent representation of depression and a deadpan theatrical performance—that is, a public display of disaffection meant to annoy, amuse, and offend. As Ed Simon puts it, "*My Year of Rest and Relaxation's* protagonist reads like an Aubrey Plaza character scripted by Albert Camus." Moshfegh's unfeeling protagonist is also a prime contemporary example of what Wendy Anne Lee has called a "figure of insensibility"—a character who, being both unmoved and unmoving, combines unfeelingness with inaction and whom Lee believes to be at the (cold) heart of the novel form. Melville's impassive scrivener, Bartleby, is Lee's literary banner boy of insensibility: a Wall Street employee who would "prefer not to," his provocative passivity incites others to feel and act out against him.[66] Moshfegh's own tale of Wall Street—and her protagonist's preference not to feel anything—seems similarly designed to provoke offense, to court outrage. That *My Year*'s antics are staged not only against the backdrop of Wall Street but also that of the New York art world—an aggressively unfeeling and "cool" scene that thrives on cycles of outrage provoked by avant-garde shock—prompts us to consider how art and the novel itself are working to regulate or deregulate our own feelings and response.

Deemed the "feel-bad book of the year," *My Year* is a satire of modern feeling management as well (Timberg). The novel unsettles the assumption that managing feelings or regulating mood is simply a matter of brain chemistry or of lifestyle adjustment—that our self-prescribed treatments are working. Parodying the "side effects" of modernity on our affective lives, the novel spins its weird energy from the contradictory ideas mainstream American culture

[66] Lee reads Melville's tale not simply as a screed against capitalism but as a "philosophical riddle about the mysteries of emotion" (13). In her view, *Bartleby* is not merely a social critique of an emerging office economy that has co-opted human relations but a meditation on the social causes and effects of being moved or unmoved by others.

peddles about happiness and emotional health, positioning itself within a thriving industry of self-help manuals to both mock and draw aesthetic energy from our constant need to better ourselves. Moshfegh positions herself within a lineage, too, of literary fiction engaging its self-help others, such as Walker Percy's *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983).[67] At the same time, Moshfegh remixes the 9/11 novel and the drug novel into her own blasphemous concoction, casting an unfeeling white woman at the center of these typically male-oriented genres.

Moshfegh does not do this, however, to thoughtfully diagnose cultural problems and to offer a cure, as one might expect. Though there's plenty of critique, *My Year* offers no gift of closure or payoff at its end. Instead, the novel inserts itself into the barrage of messages about health and wellness that bombard us, adding to the chaos rather than dispelling it. If anything, *My Year* shows impersonality's enduring commercial—as well as high literary—appeal, figuring white female unfeelingness as a recognizable pose that both provokes sales and stimulates critical controversy.

I. Swallowing Affective Prescriptions and Improving Ourselves

At first glance, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* appears a portrait of individual emotional exhaustion—a bizarre one. The cover jacket intriguingly fuses an American contemporary, neoliberal rhetoric of self-care with one of aimless, aristocratic leisure, collapsing the two in postmodern freefall and attuning the reader to the novel's manic-depressive contents even before the first page. The cover is of a gloomy portrait of a woman in white, overlaid with the bright

[67] See Beth Blum's *The Self-Help Compulsion* (2020) for a fascinating discussions of literature's long imbrication with self-help and genres of advice.

pink lettering of the title and Moshfegh's name (Haggar; Figure 2).[68] In the portrait, an anonymous, disheveled white woman reposes on a wooden chair, looking listlessly off to one side, an eighteenth-century depiction of depression. She appears somehow both sickly and healthy at the same time; her breasts are full, her cheeks rosy, but there's a hollowness to her, a ghostly pallor. She's brushing against a dark red fabric, perhaps a tablecloth; its lushness might have framed a plate of fruit, but here the fabric is swaddling this woman, figuring her as a kind of still life—ripe, but rotting. The hot pink words of the title that sear the top of this image conjure a ghostly femininity, suggesting that the breezy phrase "R&R" has a meaningful relation to this aristocratic portrait of stasis and *ennui*. This cover image sits oddly with itself: it is not clear "whose" year this is (let alone *what* year it is) or whether the woman in the portrait can be, by anyone's standards, thought to be relaxing. In addition to this mismatch between word and image, the pink font of the title imposes another kind of shock, the visual dissonance of the wildly contemporary: hot pink lettering inscribes an exaggerated and modern femininity that has been superimposed on the dark, green-grey tones of the French painting—as if the imperative to be perky overwrites the atmospheric gloom of the domestic room.

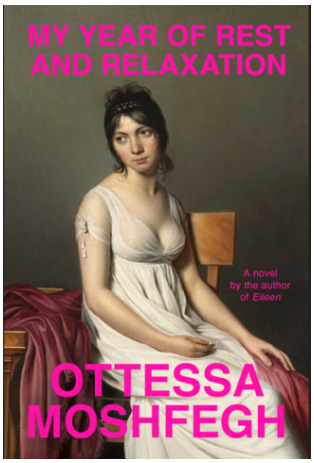

Figure 2. Cover image. Jacket design by Darren Haggar

[68] Though the provenance and history of this painting is unknown, the National Gallery believes it originated from the circle of Jacques Louis-David around the turn of the eighteenth century (c. 1798) and in the wake of the French Revolution. Moshfegh's protagonist alludes to this group of artists, and to the cover art of Moshfegh's own novel, when she reveals in the middle of the book that she had dropped the course "Feminist Theories and Art Practices, 1960s-1990s" and replaced it with "Jacques-Louis David: Art, Virtue, and Revolution" (190).

Moshfegh's unnamed protagonist views herself as a misfit, but her malaise seems part of the zeitgeist from the start. The emotional state of the nation is a public health crisis in Moshfegh's pre-9/11 New York, the rampant consumer materialism of New York pathological and alienating. People are distracted, distant, and unresponsive to each other, even when in close proximity, with any existing bonds of community or connection severed. Our narrator is hopelessly isolated *before* she goes into hibernation: "By summer 2000, I still hadn't had a single conversation with any of my neighbors—almost four years of complete silence in the elevator, each awkward ride a performance of hypnotized spaceout" (27). These "well-groomed," "forty-something" business professionals, with their camel-hair coats and teacup poodles, their black brief-cases, shuffle through her world like actors on a set, zoned out and oblivious. She describes this lifestyle as a disease: "Living uptown had infected me with its own virus when I first moved there. I'd tried being one of those blond women speed walking up and down the Esplanade in spandex, Bluetooth in my ear like some self-important asshole, talking to whom?" (28). Plugged in, but completely disconnected, New Yorkers are "out of it," drifting about like pretty zombies.

This state of things is good for business: emotional toning is as much a part of any health regimen as colonics or the gym. A booming wellness industry profits off unhappiness and depression, peddling cures and offering conceptual framework through which one might diagnose, understand, and obliterate unwanted feelings. Reva, our protagonist's only friend, is deeply influenced by the emotional culture industry: though she is just as depressed as the narrator, Reva "feels [the] need to be cheerful" and is thus working on herself constantly—"making an effort to change and go after what [she] wants" (16). Reva is our narrator's foil: a yuppie obsessed with Kate Spade, her own anorexic weight, and her friend's perfect body, she is sentimental, sloppily expressive, and chatty about her struggles. Her mother is dying from

cancer, her boss-boyfriend is married and causing troubles for her at the office, and Reva drowns it all out drinking wine on the sofa in her work clothes. But she too is on a mission to fix her attitude. Her idea of rest is neoliberal self-care and "retail therapy": she buys a "confidence-boosting CD set," indulging in commodity fetishism masquerading as self-improvement and is "partial to self-help books and workshops that usually combine some new dieting technique with professional development and relationship skills, under the guise of teaching young women 'how to live up to their full potential" (14-5). *Get The Most Out of Your Day, Ladies*, suggests, for example, that women preplan their work outfits for the business week on Sunday nights. Reva tries to be a good influence, advising our narrator to watch cheerful movies, saying that our narrator reminds her too much of Winona Ryder in *Girl, Interrupted*, even though she looks more like Angelina Jolie.

Reva's farcical tactics of self-improvement and her pathetic attempts to rid herself of despair throw our narrator's cruel misanthropy into clear relief while also drawing attention to the cheapened, commercial discourse of emotional health in the novel. In exchanges between these two characters, we begin to glimpse flickers of serious thinking about the nature of emotion and the emotional imperatives of contemporary American life. Reva focuses on being cheerful, for instance, because it is expected from her: hers is not an individualistic pursuit of happiness but an attempt to manage a bad situation. The literature of happiness is scattered throughout the novel—on Reva's own coffee table, the Dalai Lama's "Arts of Happiness" sits, most likely unread—but happiness looms as an unobtainable and perhaps even undesirable goal: it has been depleted, overused, as a concept. This deflation is clear even at the beginning of the novel, when Reva is introduced. As she compares her amount of bodyfat to an actress on the television, our narrator asks, "Does it make you happy that Julie Delpy has arm flab?" She replies, "Happiness

isn't what I'd call it. More like satisfaction" (10). Of course, this satisfaction is anything but satisfying.

Moshfegh's novel satirizes this corporate, contemporary world where true recovery or happiness is simply too much to ask, as even our narrator's psychiatrist, Dr. Tuttle, makes it clear that what she can provide for her patients is not wellness but a managing of their pain. Her own affect (and aura) is bizarre. The professional, scientific descendent of Freud, Tuttle doesn't busy herself with analysis: she has a fainting couch but she tends to bypass the "talking cure" and go straight to the meds (she has not a writing pad but a "prescription pad") (21). Our narrator has told Dr. Tuttle that she suffers from insomnia and cannot sleep, so at the consultation, Dr. Tuttle rattles off a litany of zany reasons she may be staying awake, asking questions but not even waiting for her client's answers before she chalks up her dysfunction to the ill effects of modern living: "Sleep is key," she explains, "most people needs upwards of fourteen hours or so. The modern age has forced us to live unnatural lives. Busy, busy, busy. Go, go, go. You probably work too much" (22). This is, of course, not true. Dr. Tuttle continues, scribbling frantically, embodying the frenetic hurrying she is condemning: '"*Mirth'*…I like it better than *joy*. *Happiness* isn't a word I like to use in here. It's very arresting, happiness. You should know I'm someone who appreciates the subtleties of human experience. Do you know what *mirth* means?" (22). Our protagonist says yes, mentioning Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905)—an intriguing allusion that reveals more than simply that she is educated: like Lily Bart, Moshfegh's protagonist is trying to break free from the influence of New York society.[69]

[69] Moshfegh's narrator is very much like Wharton's upper-class "Gilded Age" heroine Lily Bart, a woman who, upon approaching her twenty-ninth birthday, tragically falls from social graces of the "nineties" New York intelligentsia.

Though much of what Dr. Tuttle says is nonsense, the distinction she makes between feeling-states isn't empty: identifying the search for "happiness" as imprisoning, paralyzing ("arresting"), she replaces it with lower-hanging emotional fruit, a more manageable goal. The *OED* defines "mirth"—as Moshfegh never does—primarily as a "pleasurable feeling; enjoyment, gratification; joy, happiness" but also as "a thing affording pleasure or amusement; a diversion or entertainment" (*OED*). Surely, Dr. Tuttle's antics afford us—and our narrator—the smirk of mirth, amusing distractions from the depressive contents of the rest of the book. Yet because Tuttle's prescriptions—which she writes strategically, telling our narrator to stagger filling them while bragging about her ability to play insurance companies' "little games"—only ward off the symptoms of disease, our narrator must keep returning to her. Withdrawal, not addiction, is what is to be avoided. Tuttle says: "You're probably addicted to caffeine, too, am I right?" "You better keep drinking it. If you quit now, you'll just get crazy" (19). She demands that her client not miss any appointments, advising her to write down their meetings (and her dreams) on Post-It notes—advice that, if taken, will make her look mad but will help ensure Tuttle gets paid.

This bizarre depiction of psychiatry—as quack psychotherapy armed with prescription pills—figures it as yet another arm of the emotional culture industry, an unhappy institution of late capitalism. But our narrator, a savvy consumer, is under no delusions about her psychiatrist's reliability or motivations: she just wants pills that bring her sleep. Because Dr. Tuttle readily provides these, immediately and with ease, she worships her doctor as a "pharmaceutical shaman, a magus, a sorcerer, a sage" (25). Figuring Tuttle this way—as a magical wish-fulfiller, a spirit guide, even an absent-minded witch—downplays the transactional, mediated nature of their relationship. The narrator does not want to see her feelings merely as psychobiological phenomena—instead, she wants to believe they are wild, primitive things, her experience of

them singular and meaningful. To avoid being disabused of her fantasy, she refuses to read the warnings on her medications, even though she knows this is risky, declining consultations at the Rite-Aid: "Reading up on a drug sapped its magic. It made the sleep seem trite, just another mechanical function of the body, like sneezing or shitting or bending at the joint" (25). It is curious that, in a novel detailing such a careful psychopharmaceutical quest, there's a clear discomfort with medicating mood: Moshfegh's narrator is happy to harness the power of the pills to blot out her consciousness, but she doesn't want to be aware of how the prescription bottle's sorcery operates on her body.

In figuring Dr. Tuttle's approach to emotional management as both necessary and disenchanting for our narrator, *My Year* associates feeling with the neurological activity of the brain only restlessly, fitfully. This complicates a purely clinical or pathological reading of our narrator's depression. She wants her emotional improvement project to be original, mysterious—her affective state an elusive *something else*, beyond medical science or predictability. This orientation toward her own feelings is not something she grew up with. Her similarly unfeeling parents made it quite clear that their daughter shouldn't get excited about her own feelings, emptying out meaningful experiences before she even has a chance to taste them. Love is a trick of the brain, they told her; intimacy a neurological joke. As she's about to head off to college, for example, her mother and father debunk love and sex (what they refer to as "copulation"), explaining away feelings of closeness with biology. That "warm *fuzzy* feeling" is just "*oxytocin*," the feel-good hormone released during sex, they insist (67). What seems most real and personal and true, in this formulation, is simply our wiring: predictable, repeatable responses to stimuli.

This impulse to see feelings as raw, authentic experiences rather than as biologically-predetermined or socially-conditioned responses ("trite") is somewhat taboo not only in the

world of novel but outside it, in the landscape of contemporary fiction. Marco Roth, writing in *n+1*, diagnoses contemporary American literature with a syndrome: the tendency to medicalize feelings and the experience of consciousness. Roth suggests that our growing cultural obsession with medical explanation has influenced how we tell stories: "What has been variously referred to as the novel of consciousness or the psychological or confessional novel—the novel, at any rate, about the workings of a mind—has transformed itself into the neurological novel, wherein the mind becomes the brain."[70] Reading what he dubs "the neuro-novel" is like reading a medical detective story: any problems or abnormalities will, in the end, be explained by the neurological condition we end up identifying as the culprit responsible for the abnormal mindset of a character. Elif Batuman, discussing Roth's thesis, quips, "It's as if, having devoured too many books about evolutionary psychobiology and hard-wired behaviors, Anglo-American culture fell asleep and dreamed a giant dream that Mrs. Dalloway had Gerstmann's syndrome" ("Why Criticism"). Michael Bérubé, writing from a disability studies perspective, similarly questions the politics and usefulness of reading to guess whether "Character X has disability Y."

Moshfegh's novel relentlessly excoriates this cultural tendency to look for medical or scientific explanations of pain, emotional or otherwise, flirting with our protocols of diagnosis while consistently refusing any analytical payoff or interpretive comfort. Symptomatic or diagnostic reading, in her hands, is fodder for farce, another kind of mechanistic thinking just asking to be tinkered with. The narrator's "dream journal"—which Tuttle asks her to write, calling it her "night-vision log" and a "book of nightmares"—is a prime example of this, a

[70] This is not simply a trend in fiction. Nikki Skillman has also investigated how neurological understandings of the experiences of consciousness inflect poetry in *The Lyric in the Age of the Brain* (2016), arguing that, as a result, poets attribute less agency to the self and more to the imagination.

Freudian joke presented to her doctor (and us readers) for analysis (60, 73). Because she knows the interpretive code so well, the narrator editorializes, peppering her dreams with "terrifying details" that she hopes will win her more sedation. When she dreams of attending a party on a cruise ship and glimpses "a lone dolphin circling in the distance," for instance, she ramps up the symbolism and literary allusions, reporting that she was "actually on the *Titanic* and the dolphin was a shark that was also Moby Dick and also Dick Tracy and also a hard, inflamed penis, and the penis was giving a speech to a crowd of women and waving his gun around" (60). A series of absurd, embellished dreams follow this one (she runs over joggers by the East River in her Mercedes; she cuts off her ear and mails it to Natasha, her old boss at the Ducat, billing her a million dollars)—her dreams are rhetorical in their flair, pulsating with analyzable meaning yet false.

Moshfegh's protagonist is mocking her doctor, who never quite registers the inanity of this exercise, but Moshfegh is also mocking us, playing her own little game. Throughout the novel, seemingly-pregnant analytical moments simply pile up, like the tissues Reva uses at her mother's funeral: these are "stained with mascara like crushed inkblot tests [piling] up on her lap" (164). This litany of silliness refuses depth but invites us to look for it. And it is not simply her dream journal that flirts with our diagnostic processes: the entire conceit of the book riffs off clichés about the unfeelingness of hedonistic Wall Street, as if a cultural symptomatology. But diagnostic insight and clarity is refused. As Carl Sekaras points out, this knowing play with readerly expectations operates through a bait-and-switch: her work sends up "all sorts of writing workshop red flags…and then makes the precise amount of left turns that indicate idiosyncratic talent." The narrator's dreams, clichéd as they are, gain a new, perverse energy and an odd meaningfulness in their triteness. Regurgitated in this way, so aggressively, they seem somehow

new, these details broken free of their usual meaningfulness, dangling before us provocatively. The novel itself operates similarly: in treading on such well-trodden ground—that is, diagnosing and indexing the emotional inanities of late capitalism—it remixes the genre and reconfigures our usual methods of responding to it.

II. Wilderness Therapy, or What Would You Do for a Klondike Bar?

If *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* satirizes too-familiar modes of diagnosing and understanding emotional distress, playing with our knee-jerk desire to "read" the symptoms of illness in order to manage our discomfort, how do we understand the novel's simultaneous rejection of and reverence for cliché? It is a core irony of the book that seeking a "new spirit" looks more like searching for an elusive old one: the narrator's mockery of the emotional culture industry around her hinges on its formulaic, prepackaged nature—its "trite" familiarity, which makes it more easily dismissible. Another irony, though, a sharper one, is her desire to be different, to opt out of such tired old clichés. In figuring herself as separate and pure—seeking a higher spiritual state of being—she herself is following an even more deeply embedded cultural script: an American desire to remake the self, to rediscover lost innocence. Her hibernation project, in fact, is shocking because it's so basic, an echo of other "anti-social" social experiments. One audience member at a reading of the novel shared with Moshfegh in the Q&A that he saw her protagonist as a Rip Van Winkle figure. Moshfegh's book had got him thinking, since Trump got elected, about "wanting to just sleep it off" and temporarily opting out of citizenship.[71] In the context not of the revolutionary war but the war in Vietnam, our narrator's

[71] "Ottessa Moshfegh." Reading at Politics and Prose, Washington, D.C. July 2018, accessed Feb 6, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=If63KUUMKD0.

hibernation project also recalls, albeit with quite different politics, Yoko Ono and John Lennon's 1969 "Bed-In" for peace, an activist spectacle of withdrawal that figured staying in bed as transformative (perhaps not of the inner self but of the body politic) and which was also a publicity stunt, a kind of performance art.

But in her rejection of the presumed mechanistic existence and unthinking conformity of the masses, Moshfegh's protagonist is perhaps most like Henry David Thoreau. Our protagonist's year-long quest to reset her mind and emotions resembles the self-fashioning project of *Walden* not only because of her self-imposed isolation (and the fact that someone still comes in to do her laundry!) but because she shares Thoreau's conviction that only by withdrawing from the civilized world can one avoid the harm of modern life. As Caleb Smith points out, Thoreau's year-long withdrawal into the woods to live deliberately is a kind of therapeutic practice—a secular, spiritual cultivation of his own attention and way of being in the world. Thoreau condemned his fellow men for sleepwalking through their lives, distracted and alienated, stylizing himself as a philosopher of the "arts of the self": to "wake up" himself and others up was his ultimate goal (Smith 901).

Moshfegh's protagonist similarly stages an imaginative escape from the city, turning to the wilderness and to extremely cold climates as the antidote to civilization's corrupting influence, a move the novel codes as therapeutic. Our narrator is, like Thoreau, a "partisan of wildness," drawn to whatever she perceives as outside civilization (902). As if to find a corresponding image or landscape for her own emotionless world, she gazes longingly at cold places and frozen geographies: freezers, snowy vistas, and otherworldly, alien locales like the moon seem to exist for her to metaphorically extract from these places some elemental purity—perhaps intensity itself. In a medicated haze on her birthday, for example, she sits on the toilet

reading *Architectural Digest*, circling with an eyeliner pencil "the blank corners of rooms, the sharp glass crystals hanging from a chandelier"—the things that appeal to her (78). A threat of violence lurks beneath these benign surfaces: the chandelier is dangerously like an icicle, its dripping, sparkling projectiles spikes that might well pierce your heart with their coldness. Similarly, our narrator remembers her mother's bed fondly as a place of solace exactly because it was so alien: in it, she felt "very far away from the world, like I was in a spaceship or on the moon" (128). Now, she misses "the stiff blankness" of her mother's "eggshell sheets"—a description of a whiteness so aggressive that it's almost threatening in its fragility, the bed an image of the domestic sublime turned uncanny.

The fact that Moshfegh's narrator encounters these images of wilderness in the most domesticated spaces possible only adds to their desirability, their allure. A strangely arresting and lyrical moment in the novel occurs at the neighborhood bodega, as our protagonist stares into a freezer in a prescription drug haze and "spaces out," losing all sense of her urban surroundings as she considers purchasing ice cream for her friend, Reva:

> I looked down through the sliding glass cover of the freezer where all the ice cream and popsicles were kept. There was stuff frozen solid at the bottom that had been there for years, embedded in the white fuzz of ice. A glacial world. I stared at the mountains of crystals and spaced out for a minute imagining that I was down there, climbing the ice, surrounded by the whiteness of the smoky air, an Arctic landscape. There was a row of old Haagen-Dazs down there, from before they changed the packaging. There were boxes of Klondike bars down there. Maybe that's where I should go, I thought—Klondike, Yukon. I could move to Canada. (105)

That this freezer box in the bodega is so captivating that our protagonist "spaces out" for a moment while looking at it does not just dramatize the alienating effects of commodity fetishism; she isn't simply mesmerized by the brands and the packaging. The freezer is a snapshot of our protagonist's ideal world: a frozen Arctic landscape, an ice-cold wilderness of pure emotional suspension and white, undefiled space. She is, as Allen Ginsberg described his own supermarket

stupor, shopping for images.[72] She seizes upon the Klondike bars and their cartoonish image of polar bears to imagine herself an Arctic explorer, scaling the crystal mountains of ice. The freezer offers escape: suddenly, she can see herself "down there," in an uncharted world preserved for her exploration, awaiting her touch. There's almost an imperialistic impulse in this fantasy of total freeze-out (elsewhere, she declares, "let me be the ice queen")—the freezer offers the tempting illusion of virgin land, a climate-controlled environment where death held off at low temperatures, where she is the only one there. Her "hibernation" project is something she describes as "self-preservational," as if only by completing stilling her thoughts and feelings can she restore or reset her psyche. Later in the novel, as her hibernation becomes more and more total and her consciousness dips, the narrative itself begins to resemble an explorer's log—diaristic jottings looking like unintelligible dispatches from a brave new world, narrative itself fragmenting and being threatened into non-existence, much as in Moshfegh's novella, *McGlue* (2014).

She's tripping here, her vision blurred by the many drugs in her system, but the trip she's on is a recognizably American one. Our narrator wants to think of herself as an explorer or a pioneer, boldly pushing against the boundaries of consciousness, breaking new ground, even though or perhaps precisely because her "frontier" is so completely domesticated: her Manhattan apartment is a safe haven—a fortress, not an outpost. The only polar bear she encounters is the bobble-head doll on Reva's car dash: it nods its head emphatically—to what?—as they drive to her mother's funeral. Thoreau went to the woods to live deliberately, but Moshfegh's protagonist

[72] In "A Supermarket in California," Ginsberg imagines glimpsing Walt Whitman in a supermarket: "In my hungry fatigue and shopping for images / I went into the neon fruit supermarket, / dreaming of your enumerations!" He too feels alienated by consumer culture but goes looking for connection in a grocery store.

has to rely on *National Geographic* and her television to bring "nature" to her door. Perhaps that's why she identifies as a wild animal herself: she wants to live in an unmediated, primal world. Several times, she is described as wolf-like: her mother conspiratorially whispers to her that they're both "stone wolves," and the novel's epigraph comes from a Joni Mitchell song, "The Wolf That Lives in Lindsay," suggesting that no one can "beat the outer laws of nature" or the "inner laws of spirit." (I also hear a ghostly allusion to *The Wolf of Wall Street*.) It is not until she watches a nature show on the BBC, though, and is shown a pretty image of an Arctic fox, what seems almost an advertisement for the species—"a small white fox burrowed down into the snow on a blinding sunny day"—that she identifies with the animal as a kind of avatar (198). A voiceover explains, "While many mammals hibernate during the winter, the arctic fox does not. With special fur and fat covering her stocky body, low temperatures are not going to slow down this little fox!" (198).

This image of the primitive is stimulating: it grabs hold of her imagination in a way that little else does, perhaps because she recognizes it. She has a white fur coat, which she's already worn in disarray—it figures her, in fact, as a wolf in fox's clothing, dangerous but cloaking herself in innocence. Her gaze soon wanders to other coats as she surveys her surroundings and begins to count the furs in the room, as if they were sheep. Glimpsing Reva's coat, she begins to fantasize about an icy frontier and a man fighting off against the elements: "it had a boxy cut and made me think of a gunslinging outlaw hiding out in a snow-filled forest, then taking off west along the train tracks by moonlight, his beaver fur keeping him warm against the biting wind." She is pleased with this generated scenario, congratulating herself on her originality: "This image impressed me. It was unusual. I was being creative," she tells herself before drifting off (198).

The joke here, of course, is that this idealized and stock frontier image her brain has supplied is anything but original: it's a cliché. It's enough of a cliché, in fact, to provoke her reaction and recognition. What she's latching onto is a kind of kitsch—an object or image that, according to Robert Solomon, contains "particularly provocative emotional content" (3-4). Kitsch is often described as bringing about "false" or manipulated emotion, and for this reason it, like sentimentality, is often attacked on both ethical and aesthetic grounds. Clement Greenberg, for instance, complained in 1939 that "kitsch is mechanistic and operated by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations." Interestingly, this frontier image that our protagonist is so delighted by recalls what the avant-garde theatre director Richard Foreman wrote of the Marlboro man: "The image of the Marlboro man riding his horse and smoking his cigarette has stuck with me for many years—and so what? It's garbage. It's kitsch. All it means is that the image has seduced me, that it pushed a button that was ready to be pushed and I responded" (23). For Foreman, having such a straightforward emotional response—an almost preprogrammed feeling, initiated as if by the push of a button—distinguishes it as sentimental, somehow false. This image impresses her because it has been impressed upon her—it's been stamped on her mind, as if by a cookie cutter. In this particularly *Moviegoer* moment, we get a kind of reverse "certification": unlike Walker Percy's protagonist, she does not see her own experiences validated, or "certified," by glimpsing them on screen; instead, her own ability to generate the images but find them shocking and effective—not in spite of but, on some level, *because* they are recognizable and cliché—is what delights her.

But why might our protagonist, who has so viciously repudiated mechanistic thinking, be drawn in by this image? Dr. Tuttle did warn her that side effects of her medication could include "paralysis of the imagination" (117). And here our narrator's attempts to "remake" herself seem

very much a Hollywood remake—or a Saturday morning cartoon. Later on, glimpsing the two coats on the couch, marking where she and Reva had been sitting before, she returns to her self-manufactured scene of natural harmony: "I pictured the fox and the beaver, cozied up together in a little cave next to a waterfall, the beaver's buckteeth, its raspy snore, the perfect animal avatar for Reva. And me, the little white fox splayed out on its back, a bubble-gum pink tongue lolling out of its pristine, furry snout, impervious to the cold" (201-2). This vision—this absurd fantasy of warm intimacy the narrator has as Reva is gone from the room—transforms the dull tableau of the unpeopled fur coats before her into a woodsy scene of domestic bliss, playfully restful, warm with togetherness and safety. The fusion of stately regality ("impervious to the cold") and middlebrow comfort ("raspy snore," "bubble-gum tongue") suggests a happy marriage of opposites, a world without competition and strife. It is in this moment that feeling "cuddly" and feeling "cool" are united: the narrator's usual aloofness is replaced, at least for an instant, by this vision of warm companionship.

Our narrator, then, is neither as unsentimental or as original as she might think. This needn't be invalidating. However, even if one takes issue with the usual demonizing of kitsch wanting to recover its aesthetic and ethical potency, the novel's overall ironizing of this moment—its existence as just another warped fantasy of hers, the imagistic sputterings of her almost unconscious mind on pills—undermines the redemptive power or potential of this vision, figuring it instead as just as flawed an emotional position as her unfeeling and crass cruelty. But how should that make us feel?

III. Painting the Blues, Reading Novels

My Year of Rest and Relaxation is a controversial book: in its dogged dismissal of all that is holy, its paradoxical fetishizing of a certain idea of nature and purity, its refusal to offer moral comfort or intelligible social critique, it's gained its fair share of criticism, eliciting begrudging admiration *and* moral queasiness from readers.[73] As a dark comedy and a brutally unfeeling 9/11 novel—a genre often looked to for its engagement with ethical questions of sympathy and spectatorship[74]—the novel plays touristically with history and the destructive spectacle of the 9/11 attacks rather than probing the broader geopolitical meaning of the event or the US's response to it (Rothberg). (This is in addition to all the other cruelties it puts us through.) Ismail Muhammad, writing for *The Nation*, faults it for its "myopic vision," its failure—or refusal—to illuminate recent history and our political present. While he does see a critique of American capitalism and our consumerist desire to purge ourselves of discomfort in what he reads as the novel's parody of American historical amnesia, he rightfully worries about the effects of our laughter: "In moments, the narrator's judgments seem like a howl against America sleepwalking through history…[but] the success of parody requires that an author maintain a stable ironic

[73] For a good example of a reviewer with mixed feelings about the book, see Joyce Carol Oates, "Sleeping Beauty."

[74] See Richard Gray, "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis," *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 128-151; Michael Rothberg, "A Failure of Imagination: Diagnosing the Post 9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray," *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (Fall 2009); Elizabeth Anker, "Allegories of Falling and the 9/11 Novel," *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2011), 463-84. Richard Gray lamented in 2008 (just when the subgenre was beginning to become recognizable) that most 9/11 novels offer their political allegories through a tight focus on domestic plots and the "emotional entanglements" of individual characters, figuring the attacks as private, personal traumas rather the complex and public political realities. This "domestication" of the 9/11 novel, according to Gray, privileges the "sentimental" and "depoliticized" discourse of the personal, trapping readers in familiar depictions of trauma and its paralyzing effects on white, middle-class New Yorkers. As if to spite the critical establishment, Moshfegh gives us doors that are not only closed but bolted shut.

distance from her target…the space between authorial and narrative voice is so narrow here that Moshfegh's critique reproduces the protagonist's egocentrism." The problem with the novel, in other words, is that it aligns us too closely with this morally perverted environment.

I understand Muhammad's disappointment: this novel romanticizes passivity, withdraws into the domestic safety and bourgeois space of the bedroom, and locks the door. Ostensibly a novel concerned with recovery—and a recuperation of proper feelings and attitude, nonetheless—it offers us disease rather than emotional health, a sentimental miseducation rather than a recalibrating of our aesthetic and ethical responses. *My Year* is not comforting, nor does it figure therapy, literature, or literary criticism as an antidote to capitalist despair. But if Moshfegh's novel refuses to cater to our therapeutic and critical impulses—if it rebuffs our moves to wrangle redemptive meaning from it while explicitly acknowledging and even instigating our desire to do so—it's fair to ask why. In fact, I'd say we are provoked to ask why precisely *because the novel instructs us not to*, questioning our critical impulses and their moral payoff. Towards the end of *My Year*, we may not get proper critical distance from our narrator, but we do join her in reflecting on the purpose of art and how might one engage with it, given the relentless capitalistic cycle of visual and textual consumption that is the art and lit world.

Moshfegh mocks the empathetic reader who cannot recognize herself, for instance, in Reva's response to a *New Yorker* story, undermining the seductive idea that recognition or identification on its own produces ethical change.[75] A few months before the 9/11 attacks, Reva comes over to the narrator's apartment and reads the story aloud to our unwilling protagonist—presumably to pass the time without having to speak with her friend. The story is about a

[75] See Namwali Serpell's essay "The Banality of Empathy" for a thoughtful discussion of this topic.

Chinese student who jumps off a building to avoid taking the SATs, breaking both his legs; in group therapy, his family finally breaks down and embraces him. Reva comments, oblivious to her own cultural hypocrisy and racism: "It's heartbreaking, isn't it, how certain cultures can be so cold?" (282). There's a critique of American exceptionalism here, especially given the novel's ending image of a woman falling that parallels this fictional one: the New York art-critical world, this story might suggest, is the cold place, the cultural freezer that warps our responses to others' suffering and distorts our own gaze. Reva sees in this *New Yorker* piece only a confirmation of her own good feeling and her cultural biases: her moral response seemingly ties the right kind of bow around her reading experience but gives us pause.

But perhaps the most explicit directions or prohibitions on textual engagement come from our narrator's interactions with the star artist Ping Xi, a critical darling from her former gallery, during the most intense phase of her hibernation. His edgy, "cerebral" art, as introduced early in the novel, has already been dismissed by our narrator as superficial pandering, "all just canned counterculture crap," without substance: people read into it, but they shouldn't (36). The joke is that the Ducat show featuring his work and that of other up-and-coming avant-garde artists is called "Body of Substance": "He titled the abstract paintings as though they each had some deep, dark political meaning. *Blood-Dimmed Tide,* and *Wintertime in Ho Chi Minh City* and *Sunset over Sniper Alley. Decapitated Palestinian Child. Bombs Away, Nairobi*."[76] Presumably, these pieces do not deliver on their biting critique. The narrator sneeringly dismisses the successful popularity of these works, indicting the artworld and its critics caught in a cycle of outrage and bland praise for their predictable, self-congratulatory response.

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[76] It's also worth pointing out that Moshfegh's Ping Xi character seems a thinly-veiled critique of the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, whose political performance art has also both enraged and impressed critics.

The star artist has struck a deal with our narrator to keep her alive by tending to her apartment during her extreme sedation—taking out the trash, marking off days on the calendar, bringing in food, and responding to any scribbled directions she writes to him, as needed—in exchange for full license to film her and do with her as he pleases during her bouts of unconsciousness. Interestingly, this moment is one of the few in the novel when our protagonist stops to think about someone else's motivations: "His interest in me was like his interest in those dogs…he wasn't interested in understanding himself or evolving. He just wanted to shock people" (262-3). His desire is for her to burn her birth certificate on tape, which she refuses, prompting another request:

> "What about just burning your passport or cutting up your driver's license," he suggested. I knew what he was thinking. He was imagining how the critics would describe the video. He needed fodder for analysis. But the project was beyond issues of "identity" and "society" and "institutions." Mine was a quest for a new spirit. I wasn't going to explain that to Ping Xi. He would think he understood me. And anyway, I needed my birth certificate and my passport and my driver's license. (264)

Her refusal to cater to the art-world fetish for political art here is couched in cold, hard pragmatism and selfishness, a reluctance to manipulate her own transformation for the sake of others. She insists that the impact of her project is "personal": "It's not about ID cards. It's an inside job," she says, seemingly implying that selfhood transcends identity (262). "An inside job"—this description idiomatically figures the covert operations she's played on herself as a kind of clever heist, though, of course, her "inside job" relied on careful control of both her brain chemistry and her outside environment. She continues dismissing Ping Xi's suggestion, layering on the irony even thicker, by immediately articulating the way in which her project echoed his vision and had a distinctly outside imaginary: "What do you want me to do?" she asks Ping Xi, "Walk out in the woods, hunt squirrels?" (265). This is, essentially, the imaginative terrain our

narrator has been treading over throughout the book. Returning to wildness, to primitive life outside of walls and away from mattresses has been her metaphor of choice in her quest for a new feeling self.

Her resistance to critical interpretation—this assertion that this quest is for herself and herself alone—is provocative. She's protesting too much: her seeming boredom with "reading into" details of all kinds, her deadpan disinterest in interpretation, makes her explanation all the more suspect. Sacvan Bercovitch, in describing Mark Twain's prohibitions against interpretation in *Huckleberry Finn* (there's a paratextual "Notice" right at the novel's start that orders the reader not to interpret anything), surmises that "there's something funny about this emphasis on interpretation—it's a deadpan artist's emphasis" (99) A deadpan mode—in its ridiculousness, its lack of moral clarity, its comic humor—implicates its listener, drawing attention to her own response while upping the stakes of it. This "vernacular humor of extremes," as Henry Wonham called it (93), is closely related to the frontier genres of the tall tale and the con game, an intriguing resonance for a novel fascinated with pushing boundaries and imaging those boundaries as geographical and metaphorical at once:

> Deadpan…denies all claims of the normative, and so refuses to indicate how the listener is supposed to receive the story (except as funny in some way). No signals are given—no winks or smiles, as in the tall tale; no changes of attitude, bearing, or expression, as (for example) in Melville's *Confidence-Man*. In deadpan, all clues are repressed, strategically concealed in the flow of humor. Thus the narrative centers on the listening or reading audience rather than on the gull in the tale. (99)

The reader is provoked, in other words, by the *lack* of response from the deadpan storyteller: she must respond herself because no one else will. *My Year* will not allow any explanation, totalizing or not, that is not our narrator's own, and so I'd suggest that readers are prompted to consider our reactions carefully. Our laughter—nervous, unsure, complicit, uncomfortable—has been solicited by this very impassivity, recalling Wendy Anne Lee's point that insensibility

paradoxically drives and incites narrative by withholding it. We, as Moshfegh's readers, are the objects of humor; the joke is ultimately on us.

If Mark Twain's "Notice" at the beginning of *Huckleberry Finn*—a prohibition against looking for not only an interpretation in the story but even for a plot—is not only part of the game but actually initiates the game by calling attention to it, as Bercovitch suggests, this "against interpretation" moment could be seen as Moshfegh's "Notice." It's the most explicit analytical signposting an artist can give: "I'll tell you how to interpret this; don't interpret this." In fact, the epigraph that frames the novel, from Joni Mitchell's "The Wolf That Lives in Lindsey," could even be read as a hermeneutical throwing up of the hands. It reads: "If you're smart or rich or lucky / Maybe you'll beat the laws of man / But the inner laws of spirit / And the outer laws of nature / No man can / No, no man can…" Give up now, it nihilistically cautions; you can't win. Accept it.

This is the aesthetic challenge and the ethical provocation of the novel, if it has one—admittedly, a big "if." It prompts us to recognize both our tired positions and our continued capacity for responding to what no quite longer shocks us, bombarding us with familiar images we've encountered many times before but forcing us to re-see them, to register them differently. *My Year*, in other words, counts on our knee-jerk and tired recognition of all these tropes *and* all these interpretive moves to continue a cycle of textual consumption but also to unsettle it. It's the old Russian formalist move of *ostrenenie*, a "making strange" of the familiar, an impulse that the gothic mode shares. Viktor Shklovsky turned this maxim into a proverb: art should "make the stone stony"; it should reawaken us to life's textures, objects, and experiences. Art, Shklovsky insists, allows one to recuperate, to "recover the sensation of life…[art] exists to make one feel things."

Our protagonist, after she has woken up reborn and able to feel again, makes her way not to the Ducat but to the Met one afternoon in early September, ostensibly just a week or so before 9/11: "I guess I wanted to see what other people had done with their lives, people who had made art alone, who had stared long and hard at bowls of fruit":

> I wondered if they'd watched the grapes wither and shrivel up, if they'd had to go to market to replace them, and if, before they threw the shriveled strand of grapes away, they'd eaten a few. I hoped that they'd had some respect for the stuff they were immortalizing. Maybe, I thought, once the light had faded for the day, they dropped the rotted fruit out an open window, hoping it would save the life of a starving beggar passing below on the street…Picasso was right to start painting the dreary and the dejected. The blues. He looked out the window of his own misery. I could respect that…But those painters of fruit thought only of their own mortality, as though the beauty of their work would somehow soothe their fear of death. (284-5)

Moshfegh aligns herself here with Picasso, an artist of distortion. He paints from "the window of his own misery," from his own dour outlook, looking for grotesque suffering to capture in his art. This method, Moshfegh suggests, is just as socially useful as painting fruit: it's not all that useful. One would do better to throw the fruit out the window to someone who can eat it.

She transgresses the norms of the museum space further when she disobeys the guards who tell her to step back, placing her palm on the painting "simply to prove to myself there was no God stalking my soul" (285). This Nietzschean moment, this triumph of her will, this transgression, is made all the more impish by the explanation she offers to the guards, coopting stereotypes of female frailty: "I got dizzy" (287). This epiphany—that all is changed and changeable—is the climax of the book, but it's an ironic one. Our narrator walks outside and sees the world anew but even this image is recognizable, almost psychedelic: Central Park is aflame in yellows and greens, as if Moshfegh is rewriting the ending of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) with its dusky pinks, as a young child asks his mother to teach him new words. Our

narrator decides to sell her parents' house, to let go of the past, to be reborn rather than to self-destruct.

This image of rebirth is so clichéd as to be perplexing—can one awaken when one is still drawing images from a collective unconscious, the stuff of dreams?—and the narrator's self-diagnosis in this moment sits uncomfortably with the exhilarated tenor of her hard-won epiphany. She still sounds like she's sleepwalking when she proclaims, "My sleep had worked. I was soft and calm and felt things" (289). Her development is suspect here, and made all the more suspect in the final pages of the novel, when the narrator watches taped footage from 9/11 of a woman falling, a woman who reminds her of Reva, and finds the spectacle exhilarating.

Ultimately, Moshfegh's novel forces us to look elsewhere for moral comfort and emotional regulation, batting away the assumption that reading fiction—and feeling things in response to our reading—will recuperate us or solve pressing problems, no matter how politically-engaged the art might be. *My Year* too often seems to have the barely-there pulse of postmodern parody—its narrator empties out meaning wherever she sniffs it, embracing nihilism, but, perhaps, even if the novel does nothing more than play with the simulacra of an emotional culture industry and contemporary American malaise for laughs, its effect on us may be different. Moshfegh's fiction, in forcing its readers to wade through a mess of emotional clichés and affective advice—something like the Hollywood "dream dump" Nathanael West referred to as the "Sargasso of the imagination" in his postmodern satire *The Day of the Locust*—invites us to sit with the bad feelings we are stuck in rather than simply explaining them away or neatly synthesizing them into a critical narrative that can redeem them.

In this way, the discomfort Moshfegh offers us is of the Bartlebyan variety—provocative, illegible, but eerily meaningful. In *The Art of Cruelty*, Maggie Nelson writes that uneasiness—

those uncomfortable feelings that stem from an inability to easily digest a novel or a theatrical performance—signals that art is doing some important, original, work. In her view, compelling art often leaves you not with closure or understanding but "with something far more amorphous—a kind of vibrating memory of the unnerving psychic state the work induced, or captured, or invented" (50). Perhaps this "unnerving psychic state" is what Moshfegh leaves us with, her cruel gift.

Chapter 3:

When Feeling Less is More: Lydia Davis's Stories of Affective Self-Consciousness

In an essay titled "Thirty Recommendations for Good Writing Habits," Lydia Davis gives this somewhat cryptic advice to aspiring writers: "Observe your own feelings (but not at tiresome length)" (*Essays* 227). As a comment on craft, this sounds easy enough, but questions quickly emerge. How much is too much affective self-reflection and self-monitoring? When does observation become tiresome? Davis goes on to provide two illustrative examples of what useful emotional observation for a writer might look like.[77] These exercises in sensibility, it seems to fair to conjecture, train a writer to notice and harness her own feelings to improve her art but to do so in the appropriate way, not dwelling on the experience but transmuting it into something more.

It would be fair to guess that, for Davis, tiresome length could be no more than a few sentences or paragraphs. Her pared-down, ultra-short stories sometimes consist only of a single sentence, but at other times are more discursive. Here's an example, titled "Tropical Storm": "Like a tropical storm, / I, too, may one day become 'better organized'" (520). Davis's prose is sharp and often deadpan: unburdened by syntactical excess and lean enough to metabolize any lurking sentimentality or excess feeling. The winner of numerous literary awards, the *New Yorker* has referred to her as "a writer's writer's writer" for her attention to craft and to diction. Richard Locke puts it this way: "Lydia Davis, whose protean stories—ranging in size from a few words or a line or two to nearly fifty pages—exhibit super-abundant formal ingenuity in the

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[77] The first is a note that comes from the German writer Peter Handke's notebook: "At the sight of a woman with enormously protuberant eyes, my irritation vanished." The next example, from her own notebook, describes the affective impact of her own reading and its influence on her emotional responsiveness: "Peter Bichsel's stories—they are *loving* stories. They awaken in me a feeling (love) that I am then quicker to feel in response to other things" (227).

service of emotional, moral, and semantic precision." These varieties of precision are in fact inseparable from each other, as Davis herself associates an "unstinting regard for language and sedulous habits of self-revision" with developing "character"[1]—as if choosing the right word is akin to summoning the right response.

Davis's artful brevity and precision is assumed to be in short supply these days. Ali Smith, writing in the *Guardian*, believes that Davis "reminds you, in a world that likes to bandy its words about, what words such as economy, precision and originality really mean." If Lydia Davis's work seems a corrective to contemporary cultural excesses and perhaps even to the gushy, expressive conventions of first-person confessional writing, as Smith seems to imply, it is because Davis's narratorial poses of even-tempered neutrality tend to bracket the personal and decry the expressive impulse, declining to provide context or a character's motivation. The result are stories that bend what we expect of a fictional narrative: they resemble journalistic reports, parables, or even primer riddles, with archetypical or anonymous characters displaced from a social world. Davis is loath herself to describe her work as "fiction," preferring the term "philosophical meditations" or, more simply, "stories" (Skidelsky).[78]

As reviewers praise her artfulness and technical skill, admiration for Davis's analytical style sometimes veers into celebrating its emotional obtuseness, as if there's a willful neglect of the realm of human feeling. In a review of *Varieties of Disturbance* titled "Analyze This," Ben Marcus describes Davis's "emotionless" style in seemingly negative terms, figuring her fiction as excessively cerebral and not sufficiently sensitive to either her readers' or her characters' feelings:

[78] In this chapter, all story citations are from Davis's *Collected Stories* (2009) if possible. When citing stories that are not in this collection, such as those published elsewhere, or from the later collection *Can't and Won't* (2014), I signal the appropriate collection location in the in-text citation.

> Through [her] calculating intelligence, Davis avoids the narrative dressing that typically assists the reader's feelings. Furthermore, there's a nearly autistic failure to acknowledge the emotional heart of the matter, and a curious lack of interest in narrative scenes between characters. The diction is cold and delivered in an anthropological monotone, which throbs like a bass note, suggesting that human beings are no more significant than a glass of water (indeed, Davis would make far more hay with the choice between a glass of water and cup of water).

Here, Marcus is suggesting that Davis cares more about word choice and grammar than about people, including her readers. Moreover, in pathologizing Davis's objective narration as an "autistic failure," Marcus equates Davis's studied neutrality with a neurological inability to properly recognize, represent, or respond to human feeling. This sounds like a pretty heartless comment, but Marcus has insisted it is a compliment. Other critics describe Davis's work as deeply engaged in cataloguing and understanding the vicissitudes of the human heart, just in an indirect way: "at heart, Davis's stories are emotionally closer to Chekhov's, though they can look and sound like cousins of the *nouveau roman*," Richard Locke says.

In this chapter, I focus on problems of feeling—and properly observing one's own feeling—as one of Davis's philosophical and stylistic preoccupations across her career. One way Davis does this is by reworking a minimalist mode, theorizing absence and negativity and focusing attention on what is not there rather than what is (drawing, too, on the poetics of negativity of French writers such as Blanchot.)[79] Taking a cue from Maggie Doherty, I see Davis as working within a specifically feminist minimalist tradition, positioning her prose as similar to that of Ann Beattie, Mary Gaitskill, and Lorrie Moore ("Cool Confessions"); their stories feature disaffected or alienated female characters who refuse confessional modes of expressivity and instead adopt

[79] Davis has translated much of Blanchot's work from the French, and her own writing is heavily influenced by the French tradition. See Claire Lyu's "Blank Space and Affect: Reading Mallarmé through Balzac and Blanchot" for a discussion of Mallarmé's negative poetics as richly meaningful and open rather than evacuated of meaning.

poses of tonal neutrality or clinical detachment.[80] Doherty describes Davis's debut on the literary scene as marking out this territory of personal emotion "named yet disclaimed" as part of a literary response to the insights of second-wave feminism: "Davis's main innovation in *Break It Down* was to use a cool, analytical style in her most personal stories, a show-don't-tell neutrality that simultaneously named and disclaimed emotional experience with a palpable origin in the author's life." These early stories, Doherty suggests, stage "a cool confession, in which the rigor of form controls unruly feeling, and, in straining to do so, shows just how much is felt."

I agree that Davis's rigorous formalism augments, rather than decreases, the emotional impact of her stories. This is one of the main tenets of modernism, after all, that proper channeling of intense feeling in art will harness and transform its power rather than dilute it.[81] But our focus on *how much* feeling a story does or doesn't contain has prevented us from understanding how Davis's stories self-consciously thematize and perform the problem of the individual mind managing, understanding, and responding to feelings appropriately: it is not that feelings aren't a matter of concern in Davis's work but, rather, that they *are*. In this largely descriptive chapter, I discuss how Davis's stories present us with a phenomenology of a feeling self in the process of thought, and often the object of thought is feeling itself, or feeling's role in thought. For Davis, detachment is not so much the absence of feeling as it is a stylistic commitment to minimizing the self in order to interrogate emotional difficulty and disturbance.

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[80] Maggie Doherty characterizes this group of writers this way: "Beattie, who described her work as "hands-off narrative," was both celebrated as clinical and condemned as cold. Gaitskill presented disastrous couplings antiseptically, with the bluntness of an autopsy report. Even Moore, the most expressive of the bunch, instructed readers how not to feel sadness at the loss of a boyfriend or a mother, or anxiety about one's own health."

[81] In a connection to Sontag's operatic register, Randall Jarrell wrote of Marianne Moore that "her forms, tricks and all, are like the aria of the *Queen of the Night*: the intricate and artificial elaboration not only does not conflict with the emotion but is its vehicle" (*Poetry and the Age*).

To do this, first I detail literary minimalism as a style and mode, building on Robert C. Clark's recent characterization of Davis as a "psychological minimalist" to reconsider how and why affective discipline is an important focus of her work within a feminist literary tradition. I then examine how Davis's intensely "heady" stories satirize but also draw on contemporary mindfulness practices, revolving as they do around the mental act of contemplating contradictory, painful, or confusing feelings. Along the way, I note that Davis's stories push back against the explanatory power of certain therapeutic practices, such as psychotherapy, playfully figuring their methods of dream translation and self-interrogation overdetermined and absurd. Both scientific and surrealist in her tastes, Davis nimbly analyzes feelings as facts but also looks beyond them, to the puzzling situation of embodied existence, to capture and consider what it feels like to be alive and peskily self-aware.

Minimal(ist) Feeling

Literary minimalism is a mode often associated with discipline and careful aesthetic control; its practitioners are praised for their artful economy and restraint. John Barth, writing in the *New York Times* in December 1986, took pains to delineate the characteristics of what was becoming a very popular North American literary approach to the short story in the 1970s and 80s. Minimalist fiction, a form of "artistic austerity," operates by subtraction, not addition, thriving on implication and the aesthetic effect of radical economy. Its motto could be "less is more." Barth links a contemporary proliferation of terse, oblique, hyperrealistic, and extrospective cool-surfaced fiction from writers such as Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, and Mary Robinson to a transhistorical tradition of aphorism and haiku, but he also senses a modern predicament and response, a post-Vietnam weariness with talking about

painful feeling and an energy-crisis-related contempt for wasteful excess. He also muses that perhaps this very short story thrives because American youth no longer read much. Yet he notes a contradiction: though minimalism may seem to be a uniquely accessible, democratic form for busy American readers short on time, it actually circulates as high art. The writers most associated with the movement are published not in *Collier's* or the *Saturday Evening Post* but in small-circulation literary magazines such as the *New Yorker* or *Esquire*.

Minimalist fiction can be minimalist in different ways: Barth identifies minimalisms of unit, form, and scale ("short words, short sentences and paragraphs, super-short stories"); of style ("a stripped-down vocabulary"; "a stripped-down syntax"; "a stripped-down rhetoric"; "a stripped-down, non-emotive tone"), and of material ("minimal characters; minimal exposition; minimal plot"). Although Barth does not mention Lydia Davis in this article, perhaps because her first collection, *Break It Down* (1986), had come out only that year at the time of his writing it, her work straddles all these categories—her matter-of-fact style, sparse characterization, and "Dick and Jane" prose earned her inclusion in the group.[82] Davis's work hinges on the allusive intensity of a single word, and though as a translator Davis has tackled the long sentences and tomes of Proust, her stories are often tiny and carefully manicured. As Richard Locke points out, in her creative work, Davis opts for bonsai trees rather than forest management. Davis herself has connected her work to minimalist art, describing her stories architecturally as "buildings that don't have any weak points, nothing that could start to crumble. They are, like skyscrapers, imposing in a physical sense, though less for the building itself and more for the expanse of sky left surrounding it" (Lydia). Davis's description suggests that absence can be a kind of presence,

[82] Robert C. Clark names Davis one of the most important American literary minimalists and an innovator in the form in his article "Lydia Davis's Psychological Minimalism."

a bigness felt rather than seen, and her stories likewise theorize negativity both affectively and spatially. Robert C. Clarke observes something quite suggestive in Davis's case: "Minimalistic works often achieve a level of profundity generally associated with verse. Both forms necessarily omit relevant information as a means to create a heightened sense of implication" (*American* 2).

Minimalist fiction is seen as having an ethos of subtraction, its methods of suggestion and implication paradoxically leaving it up to the reader to "add things up." Ernest Hemingway, American literary minimalism's patron saint, explicitly linked a "less-is-more" method with an increase in emotional effect, provided the author knew what he was doing and the reader could pick up on it. In *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway explains his "iceberg theory": "You could omit anything if you knew that you omitted, and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood."[83] What's at stake in literary craft, Hemingway suggests, is that how a writer represents a certain situation will affect how and how much a reader responds to it. Giving too much away will dampen affective response; some things must be left unexamined, opaque, or unnamed. One might say repressed (and certainly, trauma studies has tackled minimalist writing to interesting ends). Hemingway's statement positions the reader as a detective, psychologist, and doctor all at once: someone who must "read in" to a story or "read between the lines," to get at the emotional intensity of what isn't said to diagnose just what is going on.

The gender politics of this style are clear in Hemingway's writing: his preference for stoicism, and his conflation of artful feeling management with a masculinist pose of impassivity and self-mastery, posits unfeeling "coolness" as a masculine property. Though discussions of

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[83] David Wyatt discusses in *Hemingway, Style, Hemingway, and the Art of Emotion* how Hemingway is here fleshing out an earlier articulation of this theory in *Death in the Afternoon* (106-7).

gender and Hemingway's work are ongoing and varied, feminist scholars have observed that, often, was unspeakable for Hemingway—what he wanted to keep off to a story's sidelines—was often female pain and sexuality.[84] Think of "Indian Camp," the story of a woman in labor with a baby of mysterious paternity, or the silent abortion discussion in "Hills Like White Elephants." Perhaps emotion was heightened by the indirectness of the literary treatment there. At the same time, though, avoiding direct discussion of the problem kept it taboo and out of the limelight. In Hemingway's wake, the focus of great minimalist literature is not on the gut-wrenching experiences or emotions of those in pain but the intense stoicism of the man observing all of it without flinching. What style he has!

If Hemingway's brand of literary minimalism glamourized male stoicism and revered a kind of emotional repression—equating indirection and obliqueness with modernist formal control and the veneer of objective clarity—the distinctly feminist literary minimalism of the 1980s was engaged in a different project**.** As I mentioned earlier, Doherty groups Davis among writers such as Ann Beatie, Mary Robison, and Lorrie Moore, highlighting their interest in synthesizing the *impersonal* and the political: "What their fiction did was combine the formal and tonal edicts of 1980s minimalism—brevity, irony, and opacity—with the subject matter of 1960s confessional poetry and the insights of 1970s radical writings." Davis's method may be like Hemingway's, in other words, but it's applied in the service of different ends.[85] Though

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[84] I'm taking a bit of a hard line here, admittedly. See Verna Kale's *Teaching Hemingway and Gender* (2016) for a more nuanced overview of the state of the field and how generations of critics in feminist and queer theory have read Hemingway's work and its complex engagement with gender, sexuality, and women. See also David Wyatt's *Hemingway, Style, and the Art of Emotion* (2016) for a sympathetic discussion of emotional vulnerability across Hemingway's oeuvre.

[85] In *Essays One*, Davis writes, "I don't remember thinking of Hemingway as one of my influences but I see now the resemblances: the simple language, the repetition, the concrete descriptions" (35).

marked by a careful neutrality, her stories fixate on the constant, careful analysis of hard facts and hard feelings, not the evasion of them or of female pain. Her "plain Jane" prose is the record of the careful and obsessively analytical musings of mostly female speakers, many of whom are thinly-disguised proxies of Davis herself (middle-aged, remarried translators living in rural New York). Thinking intensely about difficult, unsettling, or puzzling situations—the end of an affair, the loss of a sister, awkward encounters with strangers on a train or at an academic conference—is what Davis's stories methodically inquire into.[86]

Understanding Lydia Davis as a minimalist writer thus comes with an important caveat: unlike others, she's all in her head. As Robert C. Clark describes, Davis is one of the most interesting North American literary minimalists precisely because she remixes the mode, alertly describing not only "the facts" of outwardly observable behaviors and actions but the felt experience of consciousness. Clark writes that Davis's stories operate through an "aesthetic of suggestion" as many other minimalist ones do, but in focusing her attention directly on the psychological condition—on "rumination" and repetition, rather than merely on external events—her fiction explores psychological distress more "openly" than Hemingway ever did (38). In her stories, we are faced with a mind at work—frantically, yet methodically analytical—and a feeling body housing it. In this way, Davis more closely resembles Poe than Hemingway: for her, the object of observation is the protagonist's own complex and ongoing mental and physical experiences, the ever-shifting disturbances of existence.

Davis's loosely autobiographical story "The Professor" (published in *Harper's* in 1992, then collected in *Almost No Memory* in 1997) dramatizes this minimalist romance of

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[86] Davis's only published novel, *The End of the Story* (1995), is a postmodern and metafictional reflection on the authorial process of remembering and crafting together a love story. Maggie Doherty has described its impersonal impulses and frustrations in "Cool Confessions."

uncomplicated feeling and thinking, reworking the conventions of the mode to sketch a portrait of an impassive female observer writing in a "plain style" and seeking to quiet her mind by busying her body. In this highly speculative story, Davis's narrator reflects on the kind of person she is ("a professor") and wants to be, thinking of the life of a cowboy wife's as one possessing the same stylistic virtues we tend to associate with Davis's writing: a life that is "clean," "simple," "straightforward," and most of all "clear." Like Mitski's channeling of stoicism in *Be the Cowboy*, this story registers this romance of the Western frontier, associating plain style and straightforwardness with a rugged, cowboy masculinity and contrasting it with the stuffy Northeastern intellectualism of professor types—professors like Davis herself and her father before her.

The story begins with Davis's narrator stating that she used to tell herself that she wanted to marry a cowboy, because cowboys, unlike English professors, are not people who tend to overthink things. Ironically, she goes on to overthink this thought for the rest of the story, indulging in a fantasy of simplicity that is all in her head:

> I thought that when my mind—always so busy, always going around in circles, always having an idea and then an idea about an idea—reached out to his mind, it would meet something quieter, that there would be more blanks, more open spaces; that some of what he had in his mind might be the sky, clouds, hilltops
> …More important than the clothes a cowboy wore, and the way he wore them, was the fact that a cowboy probably wouldn't know much more than he had to. He would think about his work, and about his family if he had one, and about having a good time, and not much else. I was tired of so much thinking, which was what I did most in those days. I did other things, but I went on thinking when I did them. I might feel something, but I would think about what I was feeling at the same time…When I had the idea of marrying a cowboy, I imagined that maybe a cowboy would help me stop thinking so much. (158)

Associating the cowboy's mind with the wide, expansive Western landscape he tends, Davis's narrator sees his simple, uncomplicated lifestyle as offering her a respite from her own overthinking. Wryly commenting on her own literary reputation for cerebral analysis, Davis

presents us here with an educated woman stuck in her overactive mind and wanting to get out of it, exhausted with her constant mental processing of everything that happens to her. Her persistent thoughts block her from experiencing things immediately, including her own feelings ("I might feel something, but then I would think about what I was feeling"), presumably diluting them. Before this, Davis's narrator had briefly admired the cowboy's style and way of dressing, how his "comfortable" and "practical" clothes made him fit for the tasks at hand, contrasting his ease with her own discomfort over her professional wardrobe, her glasses, her briefcase (an unnecessary fashion accessory that the narrator carries out of obligation, though younger male processors carry them "like trophies") (157). This imaginary cowboy's style extends to an entire manner of moving through the world, with a kind of intentionality and straightforwardness—with confidence, not self-doubt or internal misgivings—that goes beyond mere clothing. His is a match between inside and outside, his body in harmony with the universe and its rhythms rather than straining against them.

His is a role that the narrator wants to join him in playing, a style she seems to be aiming for but with some difficulty. The narrator is uncomfortable in her academic, professional world, carrying a briefcase awkwardly through university halls. She dreams of a simpler, freer life, the life of "a woman who does not wear glasses" (157). Marrying the cowboy would realize another version of herself and unlock a life of immediacy, one not divorced from reading and thinking but also not beholden to it:

> As for what I would do in my life with this cowboy, I sometimes imagined myself quietly in clean clothes in a nice study, but at other times I imagined myself oiling tack or cooking large quantities of plain food or helping out in the barn in the early morning while the cowboy had both his arms inside a cow to turn a calf so it would present properly. Problems and chores like these would be clear and I would be able to handle them in a clear way. (158-9)

This description of simple, concrete tasks and necessary, life-sustaining household chores sounds a lot like the content of most minimalist fiction, which tends to focus cinematically on what can be observed. Davis, reworking this tradition, is stuck observing the vacillations of her own mind, bound up in the volatility of her own conscious experience, and desiring a break. In this narrator's fantasy of the good life, a running commentary on actions—an overactive mind "breaking them down," so to speak—would not accompany everyday activities. One would still be able to read and think, but the activity would be quieter, not only because her own mind would settle down but because her husband, the cowboy, would give her a kind of intellectual "privacy": "though so close to me all the time, he wouldn't try to understand but would leave me alone with it" (159). She would not be so watched, so overanalyzed, by others eager to "read" her, even as her own mind would go quiet, being uncomplicated and at peace.

Of course, this is not how the narrator's life turned out, a fact she tells us in the very first sentence of the story, deflating any romantic possibility and figuring the tale as a riddle about her personality, her style, and her imagination. She is married to another English professor, one who has absolutely none of the "wildness" or "rudeness" of the cowboy, but whom she likes very much. "The Professor" is ultimately a character study or type sketch not of cowboys but of English professors such as Davis herself, who so desperately need the romance of escaping university halls, with its burdens of surveillance and professional performance, but who wouldn't know what to do on a ranch if they managed to find one. The success of this story, I think—its pathos and its insight—is the actual marriage of two opposing impulses: the musings of the heady narrator and her persistent romantic desire for a simple, country life lived in a "clear way." It's an ironic story, a longing for simplicity that is consequently overanalyzed and overexplained for several pages—quite a long time, actually, for Davis. The mythos she dips into is anything

but original: the narrator admits that she may have gotten the idea of marrying a cowboy from a movie that she saw with another professor. And she fully knows it's a fantasy—that's what makes it so simple.

Davis's story is a romance with a twist or, rather, a bait and switch: the actual object of desire, what the narrator wants, is to be a certain kind of person herself, to be able to achieve and perform a certain kind of easy affective and mental discipline. "The Professor" is a story about what kind of observer she wants to be—not just *whose* she wants to be, though in this case, that is closely related. It's important that Davis's narrator doesn't want to be the cowboy but to be the cowboy's wife, flipping the script of heady husbands wanting quiet, uncomplicated wives.[87] Davis doesn't try to reclaim the role of the cowboy for herself (that would accept the association of a "plain style" with athletic masculinity); instead, the narrator of this story draws on well-known imaginative terrain to tentatively identify with the quiet steadiness of the female frontier figure, finding in the domestic space as well as the barn a place for the plain style she wants to have.

Davis thoroughly deflates this imaginary by the story's end, minimizing any potential epiphany and undercutting the romance by imagining the very mundane reality of taking her actual husband to a ranch house out West and neither of them knowing what to do with it. Her life is nothing like this; perhaps no one's life is like this. To be trapped in the mediated realm of thought and language, Davis suggests, is the curse of the intellectual, of the woman who wears glasses—her curse. But it's also the curse of us all. In fact, because things are not so simple is why a mind must approach them "in a clear way." The task before her, and which Davis

[87] Thanks to Madeline Zehnder for this insight.

continually puts before her readers, is both to figure things out and to not overthink them too much.

"Head Is All Heart Has…"

With characteristic irony, then, Davis presents us with a curious paradox: in her stories, there's an exhaustion with thinking and analyzing one's thoughts all the time, but her narrators tend to do just that: excessively dwelling on what bothers them, unpacking it and unraveling it, magnifying rather than minimalizing the feelings such disruption or confusion incur. The result is that Davis's intensely cerebral fiction is so often focused on problems of feeling, her solitary narrators' minds bent to the task of cataloguing and untangling what's interesting, frustrating, or irksome to them. In these stories, the brain is a feeling organ as much as the heart, and affect is often mental and mentalized. By that, I mean that feeling is thought through and thought about, combed through by consciousness. D. H. Lawrence famously insulted James Joyce's *Ulysses* as too cerebral, as "all sex in the head"; I am suggesting that Davis's work might be thought of as all "feeling in the head."[88] Like Ottessa Moshfegh's, Lydia Davis's fiction puts the volatility of consciousness center-stage, as the interior monologues of mostly female narrators propel her fiction, serving up the constant and sometimes upsetting analysis of situations and certain affective responses to them.

The story "Head, Heart," collected in the aptly titled collection, *Varieties of Disturbance*, is a bit of an outlier in Davis's oeuvre—it's more sentimental and heavy than Davis usually goes for—but it's worth starting with here because it stages a crude, almost fairytale caricature about

[88] Thanks to Michael Levenson for this point.

the relationship between thoughts and feelings. The story (or as Davis refers to it, the poem) consists of a ten-line dialogue between these two anatomic symbols, a haunting nursery rhyme:

> Heart weeps.
> Head tries to help heart.
> Head tells heart how it is, again:
> You will lose the ones you love. They will all go. But even the earth will go, someday.
> Heart feels better, then.
> But the words of head do not remain long in the ears of heart.
> Heart is so new to this.
> I want them back, says heart.
> Head is all heart has.
> Help, head. Help heart. (705)

This genre-bending work could be seen as a self-help prose poem, one that figures the mind as the guardian of the heart or the emotions. "Head, Heart" has a decidedly different emotional tenor than Davis's early work, which often pokes fun at sentimental writing and narrative conventions. Here, the sentimental is repurposed, giving the sappy heaviness of a head and heart dialoging about grief a melodramatic air, a seriousness that isn't undercut by breezy understatement. If "The Professor" dramatizes a weariness with an overthinking that dilutes feeling and immediate experience, this short poem suggests that thinking about how one feels—that the head responding to the heart—can be a comfort rather than an annoyance, inverting the usual antagonism between the two.

Davis's earliest work has been read, in fact, as putting the analytical head in the service of the heart, though the results of doing so are not necessarily as comforting or clear as one might think. Her first major collection, *Break It Down* (1986), was praised for its unsentimental and analytical approach to the heavy subjects of love and loss, its fresh treatment of personal, domestic experiences were new and exciting for critics weary with confessional paradigms. But

there's also a frenetic, obsessive energy to these stories, as powerful feelings lurk behind every careful word of a narrator's neutral description or even belie a dangerously unstable mental state.

The titular story in this collection, for instance, shows how emotional and non-objective analysis is: it's a transcription of an anonymous man's meticulous accounting for love after the end of an affair, as he tries to measure how much he had invested in a relationship, what the time was worth, how much love cost him.[89] In "breaking down" the moments spent with his ex-lover, this speaker grapples with how to value or come to terms with what can't be easily quantified, trying to measure love in the cold, objective tones of an accountant but slurring anguished sentences together in his monologue of memories. He is "breaking down," too, emotionally distraught while trying to understand his reaction, initially relying on the orderliness of math or numbers to shield him from himself: "I'm breaking it all down. The ticket was $600 and then after that there was more for the hotel room and food and so on…we made love, say, once a day on the average. That's $100 a shot…" (17). This careful accounting, farcical as it is, is quickly abandoned in the next paragraph, as other aspects of the relationship are not so easily measured.

This story is interesting for its attention not only to analysis and accounting but also its scrutinizing of *how much* feeling is or isn't there in a particular situation and where that feeling might be located or how it might be felt. This story isn't properly minimalist; it's more maximalist, as the sentences expand and accumulate. The speaker realizes that this is how relationships work, that their impact just seems to keep on expanding: "You're with each other all day long, and it keeps happening, the touches and the smiles, and it adds up, it builds up, and

[89] Ben Marcus observes that, as in Davis's autobiographical novel, *The End of the Story* (1995), this characteristic approach "turns love into a logic problem, and if subjecting matters of the heart to logic is one way to trample the nuances of feeling, in Davis's hands the narrator's poker-faced methods excavate something new from a very old story" ("Analyze This").

you know where you'll be that night, you're talking every now and then you think about it, no, you don't think, you just feel it as a kind of destination, what's coming up after you leave wherever you are all evening" (17-18). The speaker also suggests that his thoughts, while important, are not the only source of his experience or even the most important. Like in "The Professor," this speaker worries that mentalizing experience lessens its potency, or signals a lack of bodily impact and immediate experience. He explains, as if realizing it for the first time, that his head is only part of the equation: "you're planning it all, not in your head, really, somewhere inside your body, or all through your body." Having only a mental experience worries him, as he realizes the memories become more and more cerebral with the passing of time, and less deeply felt: "it's all inside you, at least for a while after, then you begin to lose it, and I'm beginning to lose it…the whole thing is going out of your body and it's more in your mind than your body, the pictures come to you one by one" (20). Davis's speaker is trying to hold onto a particular feeling, one that's receding as time passes, using his thoughts to preserve and conjure feelings that are diminishing with each day. His task is one of careful addition, but the math just doesn't add up.

Not adding up was what Davis's fiction was known for dramatizing at the start of her career, as critics such as Marjorie Perloff read Davis's interest in language and indeterminacy across *Break it Down* as evidence of a postmodern, deconstructive sensibility. Perloff spoke of Davis's unique blend of analysis-ridden yet inscrutable short stories as courting yet denying readerly interpretation, offering mental and affective puzzles that please only so much as they do not offer closure. Perloff describes the first story of *Break It Down*—titled simply "Story"—as dramatizing this situation of wanting to be "not able to account for" each thought the narrator has. "Story" is the obsessive account of a female narrator who has phoned someone who seems to be her ex-boyfriend and who spends the night overanalyzing the situation of her call, trying to

reconstruct what happened that night: if and when his "old girlfriend" left, if she was in the garage when she called him earlier, if he really went out for beer, if he simply listened to the phone ringing and didn't pick up, etc. She thinks about these possible chains of events logically, sequentially, but she does not figure out exactly what happened or determine whether his "story" is true. Perloff sees this story's true subject as interpretation itself, its narrator not asking for identification or sympathy from us but us feeling the need to analyze her story anyway: we are both trying to solve a "puzzle," to find a chain of events of that will quiet this frenzied thinking or provide some relief.

This inscrutability recalls Ben Marcus' description of Davis's "autistic failure" to name or recognize feelings, her dodging of the "emotional heart" of the matter. But rather than coldness, I see a playful energy here, coupled with philosophical seriousness about the elusiveness of stability—interpretive, emotional, or otherwise. "Story" plays out a gendered script that is all too familiar: it's the focused, yet frenzied monologue of a woman who could be seen as hysterical obsessed with a man and with whether he is telling her the truth. The story begins with her agitation and restlessness, her emotional state both the inciting event and the main conflict: after receiving a message that her lover is busy and cannot come that night, she snaps into action, driving to his place and seeking to discover what he is doing and whether or not he is really busy. The protagonist is methodical and calculating but also a little unhinged in her zealous pursuit of what actually happened, leading to a bizarre performance of analytical prowess that also comes off as bit pathetic. Importantly, though, her feelings are not the focus of her investigation—rather than sitting at home and writing about her anger, which she begins to do but quickly abandons at the beginning of the story ("I write in my notebook that when he calls me either he will come to me, or he will not, and I will be angry, and so I will have either him or my anger"), the narrator's

analysis is of the situation rather than her own response to it (3). In "Story," the analytical gaze is not turned inward, on the protagonists' own feelings, but outward, on what can be observed in the world, and on how to read or piece together the meaning of events. Presumably, this is what is more likely to bring her relief, and also to distract her, since she flatly states early on, almost as soon as she writes it, that "it no longer seems true that anger is a source of any great comfort." The narrator's self-appointed task is to "figure out" how she should feel and respond to her lover based on whether she is being deceived. After failing to come to a clear conclusion about this after great effort, however, she acknowledges that "Maybe the truth does not matter, but I want to know it only so that I can come to some conclusions about questions as: whether he is angry at me or not; if he is, then how angry; whether he still loves her or not; if he does, how much; whether he loves me or not; how much; how capable he is of deceiving me in the act and after the act in the telling" (6). This is, essentially, the emotional heart of the matter, named only in the final sentences of this story. The tale of analysis that precedes it is an attempt to both apprehend and respond to a situation properly, and in the proper, methodical way. In Davis's hands, this is tragicomic: the head can only help the heart so much, and indeed, sometimes trying to "figure out" an affective situation only intensifies feelings of distress and uncertainty.

Davis's stories, then, tend to decenter individual feeling not only by turning attention to the empirical world outside the self but also by calling into question whether a protagonist's feelings are meaningful—that is, whether they are appropriate, accurate, or simply mistaken given the situation at hand. In "Examples of Confusion," a story that chronicles how feelings and impressions become dislocated in the narrator's mind or attached to the wrong objects, we're confronted with emotional confusion rather than clarity. Perceptions and feelings seem arbitrary or downright accidental, weird firings of a strange brain or the effects of an inexplicable mood.

The story consists of fifteen odd episodes narrated by an anonymous protagonist who feels disconnected from her body and "remote from herself"—she does not recognize her own feet as belonging to her when she sits on the bathroom floor, for example, or her white jacket fluttering in the wind when she catches a glimpse of it in a shop window. The line between herself and other objects is blurred further when a brief power outage makes the narrator equate her body with the electricity in the house, feeling as if her own self has been drained of energy ("I feel my own electricity has been cut off and I will not be able to think"). In the fifth section, the narrator realizes her pity and sadness have been mistakenly attached to the wrong object:

> Driving in the rain, I see a crumpled brown thing ahead in the middle of the road. I think it is an animal. I feel sadness for it and for all the animals I have been seeing in the road and by the edge of the road. When I come closer, I find it is not an animal but a paper bag. Then there is a moment when my sadness from before is still there along with the paper bag, so that I appear to feel sadness for the paper bag. (301-2)

This deadpan anecdote accentuates the absurdity of her heartfelt response: things are not as they seemed, and the narrator has actually felt pity for a brown paper bag. As an "example of confusion," the lines read as a joke, one where, presumably, the narrator's embarrassment replaces the sadness. But the fact that she was mistaken in her feelings (because she was mistaken about the situation at hand) calls attention to the potential inaccuracy of feelings themselves. If emotions are usually figured as a kind of authentic truth, here, sympathy and concern are merely misguided, inaccurate responses. Like other examples of confusion in this story—mistaking the dream world for the waking one, looking to a clock at a party not for the time but for the name of a title to a book, thinking one friend is another friend on the street—a character's ever-shifting perception of reality questions the existence of stable, emotional truth. Accident and chance, as well as mistakes, play a much larger role in our perception of reality and of ourselves than we usually assume.

How, then, can the head reliably help the heart? Analyzing how one feels is the fraught subject of "Thyroid Diary," originally published in the *New Yorker* in 2000. If anything is clear in the story, it's that accurate self-analysis or self-assessment is a fool's errand: a body or mind "breaking down" may not be aware of its own entropy, and objective analysis is impossible. "Thyroid Diary" is an extended, loosely autobiographical meditation on not knowing whether one feels strange or not—feeling *that*, however, leaves Davis's protagonist feeling estranged from herself, unable to trust her own thoughts or feelings because of the body's trickery, its chemical imbalances and neurological misfires. In this story, Davis seems to satirize her own obsession with clear, precise thinking while poking mild fun at the impossibility and absurdity of ever having observational clarity when one's object of attention is the ever-shifting self. The story focuses on a Davis-like figure, a middle-aged translator living in upstate New York, who is becoming confused about certain things due to a recent diagnosis of Hashimoto's disease, or an underactive thyroid. At first, this diagnosis isn't shared with the reader: the narrator simply reports her confusion about whose party she and her husband are attending that summer night: the dentist's wife's graduation or the faculty secretary's nephew's sea voyage party (admittedly, a confusing, complicated social situation). She slowly reveals to us that, perhaps, she is confused "due to her underactive thyroid," a phrase that is repeated throughout the story as a kind of punchline, giving the story the echoes of a villanelle. Written as a blend between a loosely autobiographical, reflective diary and a medical journal of a patient's symptoms, "Thyroid Diary" humorously highlights the difficulty and even absurdity of exposing the self to public or professional scrutiny, comparing the problem of the translator who struggles to find the right word or expression with the problem of the unreliable patient with a chemical imbalance, unable to know whether her perception is correct or merely seems correct to her.

Throughout the story, the narrator reflects on the unreliability of her own perception, filtered as it is through her body:

> Slow thinking is one symptom of an underactive thyroid, but I can't tell if I'm thinking more slowly than I used to. Since my brain is the only thing I have for observing how I am thinking, I can't be truly objective. If it is slow, it will not necessarily know that it's slow, since it will be moving at a rate that seems appropriate to it. (384)

This situation of being unable to adequately observe and judge whether one's own impressions, feelings, and experiences are accurate or wildly distorted is an excruciating one, especially for a careful, analytical observer of self-consciousness such as Davis. Even as her narrator's mind becomes untrustworthy, her body is made strange to her, as her medical condition forces her to confront previously-held beliefs about its self-sufficiency and healing capacity ("now that I have learned more about what is wrong with me…I do not think the body can always cure itself of whatever is wrong with it"):

> My physician's assistant told me that the thyroid gland controls every part of the body—not only the brain but also the heart, the digestion, the metabolism, the circulation, and other things I may be forgetting. In the case of a significantly underactive thyroid, everything slows down. I have a slow heartbeat, slow digestion, possibly slow thinking, a low temperature, cold hands and feet. Sometimes my heart rate goes down to fifty or below. I never knew what a thyroid gland did. Now I find out it is so important that if it were allowed to continue functioning poorly like this, I would eventually die—die early, I mean. (385-6)

On one hand, the narrator here offers a disclaimer for what she says, explaining that even though people tend not to think about their thyroids, her condition is so serious that it has completely changed the functioning of her whole body. At the same time, though, she ends her summary of her medical condition and symptoms with a wry observation that shows her wit and attention to language and accuracy to be intact: that is, she catches herself saying that her condition will cause her to die, since of course, that is inevitable—she will instead "die early" (386).

Medical knowledge and a clinical gaze also become things the narrator struggles against, as it threatens to misapprehend her, to confuse her body with her mind. She is perplexed by this turn of events and has a bit of an identity crisis: "I have never associated myself with such an unexpected part of the body as the thyroid, so it feels as though my body is suddenly strange to me, or I am strange to myself" (386). When, after visits with her doctor, she sees herself as an object of professional scrutiny, she becomes defensive of her habits, resistant to certain actions of hers being read as symptomatic of her disease rather than her own eccentricities. For example, her careful note-taking at doctor's appointments becomes a point of contention when her doctor says that this is likely a result of her brain working abnormally, more slowly than usual. The narrator is offended: "This made me a little angry but I did not try to defend myself. I did not answer her that for one thing, the self-help medical books always tell you to take notes during a meeting with a doctor, and for another, I have a habit of taking notes anyway, especially when I am on the telephone…" (384). She is miffed, in other words, that merely by doing what is recommended by popular literature and is therefore normal—and is, perhaps, part of her writerly personality—is misinterpreted as a sign of her illness.

She realizes, though, at this point in the narrative, that her distrust of medical professionals predated her thyroid condition and has been growing in recent years. Reflecting on her experience with an oral surgeon, she notes that she began to no longer "deal in a straightforward, courteous way with him, but had to make some kind of joke" (389). She further reflects on this change in herself: "That surprised me because all my life I had been so respectful of health-care professionals, or have at least behaved with respect, whatever I thought of them privately. The jokes just popped out as if someone else had taken over for a moment…I slightly antagonized my present doctor, or physician's assistant, by saying I did not like taking my

medicine because I did not like being dependent on any drug" (390). This experience of being treated for a thyroid condition is self-estranging: her personality is undergoing a shift that she notices but seems to not have full control over. Unlike Moshfegh's protagonist, for Davis, this is not a desirable situation.

Davis's narrator poses questions to herself to make sense of this situation, this different "attitude" that she has had lately:

> Another question I had recently was this: is the rather pessimistic turn that my thoughts have taken these days due to the state of the world, which is bad and which gets worse more quickly than one can hope to save it, so that I become quite scared? Or is it due simply to the low level of my thyroid hormone which would mean that maybe the world is not really in such a frightening state and seems that way only to me? So that I could say to myself: remember your low thyroid hormone level and have faith that the world will be all right?
>
> What an insult to the mind, I think then, that the chemicals of the body and nothing else are causing my thoughts, which I take so seriously, to move in a certain direction. What an insult to the amazing brain that such a simple thing as a level of chemicals should point it in a certain direction. Then I think, No, it's not an insult, I can think of it not as an insult, but as part of another fascinating system. I can say, I would prefer to see it as part of a single, interesting system. After all, it is this amazing brain that, in thinking this, is being so magnanimous to the dumb body. Though of course maybe it is chemicals of the dumb body that are permitting the amazing brain to be magnanimous. (392-3)

This is a poignant passage because the narrator's frank self-analysis and running commentary on her state of mind seems a doomed project that she then redeems, if only for a moment, through her thoughts. How can she know if she is adequately or accurately responding to stimuli in the world or if, instead, her body is inflecting her perception in a particular way, putting her in a "pessimistic" mood? How can she pursue truth in this state? Though Davis does not use the language of mood disorders here, the rhetoric her narrator draws on at the end of the first paragraph of this passage recalls the cadence of a self-help mantra that might be used to treat depression ("remember your low thyroid hormone level"), a phrase that, to me, also has rhythmic resonances of "remember that though art dust." There's both pathos and playful irony in this intense, yet unreliable scrutiny of

one's own impressions and thoughts, which we all "take so seriously." What emerges from this narrator's reflection on self-consciousness and mood is that these two concepts—the "dumb body" and the "amazing brain," two characters in the circus of our conscious experience—interact and are intertwined in ways that can't be easily separated.

As a strange twist on autobiography—a detached, yet deeply subjective description of Davis's own mental state and reflections on her diagnosis—"Thyroid Diary" is a reminder that the experience of self-consciousness is not so easily explained by neurology or even by ourselves: how we feel is inevitably influenced by how we *think* about how we feel, too, and this can easily go wrong.

"Trying to be…a little less…"

If the analytical mind, in Davis's stories, is as much a pesky and unreliable presence as a reassuring companion, as in "The Professor," a desire for relief from too much thinking often looks like a desire to dodge consciousness, lose the ego, and find a kind of nirvana—a state of peace or tranquility in which the self is undisturbed. Davis's stories both probe and mock a desire to minimize the self and think and feel less in the process. Davis often plays with concepts of postmodern emptiness and linguistic indeterminacy throughout her career, chipping away at stable meanings and ideas of a fixed self through language games that reveal an empty center (Perloff), but what hasn't yet been discussed is how Davis draws on popular Americanized therapeutic and mindfulness practices in her stories to theorize and comment on the massive mental task of managing one's feelings and psychic state in a contemporary, hyperactive world.

Davis's stories have a strange kind of energy in that they fuse obsessive, nervous dwelling on minor irritations with a strict commitment to rigorous self-analysis and self-

discipline—there's both an exhaustion with the hyperactive, fast pace of modern life and a sort of spastic glow that radiates from all the frenzied minds churning across Davis's work. Yet sometimes, her Beckettian impulse toward silence can look like an impulse toward annihilation or a gendered, anorexic tendency toward self-erasure. Davis's serious yet also playful engagement with the popular and available American ideas and tools for mind and feeling management—an Americanized, secular version of Zen Buddhism, self-help books, and even the language and ritualistic formality of talk therapy—shows both the importance of quieting the mind and the potential pitfalls of trying to do so in the wrong ways.

We don't tend to think of Davis as a writer investigating our contemporary obsession with emotional health and wellness, but she does, and always on her own terms. Like Susan Sontag, Lydia Davis is skeptical of American therapeutic culture generally and is suspicious of popular models of feeling that posit emotion as the private domain of an expressive individual. Much of popular discourse around feelings is grist for her satirical mill—the story "Therapists," for instance, dryly chronicles a family's descent into domestic chaos as a result of the father sharing his feelings with a therapist (the ending image is of a crying child wishing to share his feelings with his mother, the default therapist now). As we've already seen in "Examples of Confusion," Davis's stories tend to undermine the usually-assumed epistemic value of feelings—emphasizing their contingency and de-valuing them as reliable indicators of truth—in direct contrast to contemporary American culture's focus on personal feelings as deeply meaningful yet often blocked or opaque ciphers that one has to articulate, decode, and analyze to realize one's full potential. Yet even while this focus on individual feeling is mocked and reworked, authentic self-improvement and careful philosophical self-investigation is a worthy goal and pressing ethical dilemma for Davis's alert, analytically-eager narrators. In exploring and resisting popular

emotional imperatives associated with regulating or digging deep into one's feelings, in multiple senses, Davis opts for negative rather than positive thinking—that is, in a minimalist mode, she often explores negativity and lack, centering what isn't there and what one doesn't feel rather than what is or one does, at times both minimizing and measuring the feelings that one is pressured to feel alongside those that one actually does.

Davis's characteristic penchant for grammar play and her tendency to fixate on absence over presence finds a striking fusion in "A Double Negative," a story that consists of a single, powerful sentence engaging a famously-gendered emotional imperative: "At a certain point in her life, she realizes it is not so much that she wants to have a child as that she does not want not to have a child, or not to have had a child" (373). The careful, impersonal, third-person reporting of this intimate emotional fact gives the story its seeming lightness, but there's a heaviness underneath it too. Here, Davis reframes the reproductive double-bind in doubly negative terms, speculatively looking into a projected past from an imagined future: the woman described does *not* want *not* to *have had* children. "To want," in Davis's hands, has a doubleness, too, signaling both desire and lack, an ambivalent mix of imagined presence and absence. Grammatically, a double negative would create an implied positive, but the math doesn't quite add up in this story again, either: instead, impulses collide and almost cancel one another out, but without a clear result or conclusion.

I see this story as commenting on minimalism's masculine legacy, too. Compare it to Hemingway's famous six-word flash fiction: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." In that story, the absence of a child is sentimental, tragic. But Davis's story gives no gut punch; it asks for no tears. Its success lies, instead, in its impersonal accounting for feelings that are not there and that still somehow accumulate and have weight. In one sentence, Davis turns what is often figured as

the most personal and important choice a woman can make into an impersonal equation—a kind of emotional calculus, with all negative numbers.

In a different tonal register, Davis's "What I Feel" (*ANM*, 1997) similarly thematizes how to downplay personal feelings and make them less weighty, giving them less prominence by refusing to let them take center-stage. The story ironically and playfully encapsulates a speaker's ambivalence about the centrality of emotion and the usefulness of monitoring and managing feeling. It also reads as a statement on Davis's craft:

> These days, I try to tell myself that what I feel is not very important. I've read this in several books now: what I feel is important but not the center of everything. Maybe I do see this, but I do not believe it deeply enough to act on it. I would like to believe it more deeply.
>
> What a relief that would be. I wouldn't have to think about what I felt all the time, and try to control it, with all its complications and all its consequences. I wouldn't have to try to feel better all the time. In fact, if I didn't believe what I felt was so important, I probably wouldn't even feel so bad, and it wouldn't be so hard for me to feel better. (273)

The narrator's attention here is to the interior drama of affective discipline and the perennial task of controlling her own feelings—a move that apparently often backfires, creating "complications" and "consequences" that disturb rather than secure her equanimity. The narrator's plaintive and measured reflection on a cultural tendency to place a premium on emotional experience and managing it ("I've read this in several books now") highlights her awareness of her own perceived inability to follow advice that will supposedly make her feel better and which she agrees with, intellectually. But why can't she do what she wants? It's a classic problem, one that can be summed up by a Bible verse Davis reflects on in yet another story in this collection, "Pastor Elaine's Newsletter": "I do not understand what I do; for I don't do what I would like to do, but instead, I do what I hate" (249, 354). Struggling against this

mental trap, in this first paragraph, however, the narrator sets an intention: to believe more deeply that what she feels is not the center of everything.

This intensely heady story is the interior monologue of a woman intent on her own perceived problem of managing her feelings properly, and in it, the story's title and its accompanying thought ("what I feel is important but not the center of everything") operates as a kind of mantra, repeated in the clipped cadences of minimalist prose that almost veers into a pop form of meditation. This story explicitly places itself within the ecosystem of therapeutic self-management, with its protagonist an avid reader of self-improving books. Yet these, in fact, seem to spur at least some of her problem: they set up a challenging task for her, challenging because it is negative: she is supposed to *not* fixate on her feelings, to realize they are *not* the center of everything. The narrator claims to believe this, and in doing so, draws attention to what's really hard about emotional self-improvement: one must turn thought into action, or, rather, one must make the right kind of thought an action, a habit. Controlling feeling must also involve controlling the mind. "What I Feel" is a commentary on emotional discipline: how one thinks about, prioritizes, and analyzes one's own feelings is an act that is often the hardest to change but one that does truly shape reality and affective responses to it.

As the speaker turns her mind to *this* problem—not to her feelings *per se* but to her tendency to fixate on her feelings and thus give them outsized importance—she demonstrates, seemingly without even trying, how one might think oneself through an affective conundrum and come out the other side with some relief. She ruminates and speculates, turning her analytical attention to what wouldn't be there if she could manage to stop thinking about her feelings so much: "If I didn't believe what I felt was so important…I wouldn't have to say, Oh, I feel so awful, this is like the end for me here, in this dark living room late at night, with the dark street

outside under the streetlights, I am so very alone…there is no comfort anywhere…I can't possibly go on" (273). As if acting out or co-opting the theatrics that may come with focusing on feeling too much, the narrator indulges in one cliché after another, as each negative observation spirals into another one of deeper despair. On one hand, this moment reads as a mocking ventriloquizing of a script—a woman in emotional distress. But on the other hand, there's a glimmer of truth in this exaggerated monologue, since centering bad feelings and peering into them too deeply often upsets rather than calms. The narrator wants to avoid all this pain and suffering: "if I believe that what I felt was important but not the center of everything, then it wouldn't be, but just one of many things, off to the side, and I would be able to see and pay attention to other things that were equally important" (274).

The interesting psychological question that this story asks and thinks through is this: what if personal, negative feelings were simply ignored, or minimized, by the mind of the person feeling them? Would that be putting them in their proper place? And would that not lead to more comfort? The narrator pursues this line of thought in a logical way, her stream-of-consciousness anything but messy, with one sentence carefully extending the inquiry of another. The final thought opens out into a quietness that perhaps signals success, as it is in this process of thinking about the problem of thinking about feeling—not the offending feelings themselves—that the narrator finds purpose and hope:

> What is different, now, is that I have this idea: I have the idea that soon I will no longer believe my feelings are the center of everything. This is a real comfort to me, because if you despair of going on, but at the same time tell yourself that your despair may not be very important, then either you stop despairing or you still despair but at the same time begin to see how your despair, too, might move off to the side, one of many things. (274)

Here, Davis's narrator registers the pressure to analyze and center feeling while also reasoning her way into a new idea of emotional health: pushing feeling off to the side, not taking it too

seriously, and not allowing one's emotional state to be "the center of everything," is how to actually feel better. She feels better, already, in fact, because this thought that she will be able to do this soon has provided her some relief. "What I Feel," then, is equal parts playful, absurd, and sincere, arriving at its end where it began: someone thinking to herself about how she feels and how she ought to think about how she feels according to popular advice. This is Lydia Davis creating her own Zen—finding peacefulness in conscious thought rather than outside of it.

A similarly absurd and contradictory analysis of how to feel unfolds in "New Year's Resolution" (*SJII,* 2001), a funny first-person reflection on self-diminishment as emotional self-improvement. As this story's anonymous female narrator ages, she begins to learn that all things amount to nothing and decides that she herself should strive to be less and closer to nothing as well. Given this focus, the story is a philosophical twist on minimalist credos and on gendered expectations about losing weight, in addition to a commentary on the popular American reception of Buddhist philosophy. The story begins with the narrator's friend, Bob, telling her with a shrug that his resolution is to drink less and lose weight, as if, obviously, that is what anyone would strive for. At first, the narrator is not sure how to answer him or what her goal should be. Then she decides: "After a few days of consideration, I think the most truthful answer to my friend Bob would be: My New Year's Resolution is to learn to see myself as nothing." Her goal is more extreme than his is, and she explains that the idea is inspired by Buddhism, which she's turned to recently in an attempt to quiet some bad feelings: "I have been studying my Zen again, in a mild way, out of desperation over the holidays, though mild desperation. A medal or a rotten tomato, it's all the same, says the book." Following this philosophy, the narrator hopes to live a life undisturbed by any flickers of selfishness.

But it's not so easy, and the remaining sentences of the story's single paragraph registers the paradox at the heart of her self-chosen pursuit of self-erasure: immediately, she begins to question her motivation and fixate on the contradictions implicit in her project. For instance: if she is going to try to become nothing, is this a competitiveness towards Bob and consequently a form of selfishness—that is, a state of becoming more full of herself, not less, more of something rather than more of nothing? The narrator's deadpan analysis of the situation accentuates and magnifies this holding back of the self, as she dryly notes, for example, that "to be competitive is not in keeping with any Buddhism philosophy." Another complication stems from the very abrupt philosophical shift this requires in her: "how does a person learn to see herself as nothing when she has already had so much trouble learning to see herself as something in the first place? It's so confusing."

In an interview with the *Paris Review*, Davis said of this story, "I had fun with that one because, you know, "nothing," according to that discipline, is a good thing, but according to my upbringing and Freud and family dynamics, "nothing" is a big problem. So that story is about two disciplines colliding and the poor head caught in the middle saying, Uh, wait a minute…" It's true that, in this story, the narrator, after supplying one thought, immediately unravels it, turning something into nothing and then finding something in the nothing to spur thought again. The tone of the piece gets lighter and lighter, as the absurdity of the situation—of a woman "trying to see herself as nothing"—struggles with the day-to-day. She chirpily reports, as if writing in a health log or journal, "I'm pretty close to nothing all morning, but by late afternoon what is in me that is something starts throwing its weight around. This happens many days. By evening, I'm full of something and the something is nasty and pushy." One pictures yeasted dough rising in a bowl, frothing and spitting, perhaps, an ego expanding. The story ends with the

narrator deciding she is being too ambitious: it doesn't have to be all or nothing, actually. The final line offers a more modest, but thoroughly ironic, goal: "Maybe for now I should try, each day, to be a little less than I usually am."

In "New Year's Resolution," Davis pokes fun at self-help theories that advertise ways to quiet the mind and erase or minimize the peskiness of the self, undermining any easy assurance of progress or Enlightenment. This woman's impossible New Year's Resolution is all the more funny for it being a cyclical ambition, the usual thing to do in January, when everyone is trying to become thin again, after the "desperation" of the holidays. But the contradiction or deeper, self-cutting irony here is that this anecdote recalls the self-annihilating ambitions of "The Professor": often, Davis's narrators do genuinely need to quiet their minds, to practice a mindfulness or find a kind of temporary peace that neutralizes their amped-up self-awareness. Think of the woman in "Story," investigating her boyfriend's story about his movements that night, or Davis's proxy narrator in "Thyroid Diary" trying to account for her own perception. In playing with thoughts of erasing or minimizing the self, with all its minor irritations—and the absurdity of it even being possible to consciously eliminate consciousness—Davis not only remixes her own brand of postmodern deconstruction but also indulges in levity and release. She is "full of something," certainly—one laughs at the complicated mental gymnastics involved in this woman trying to become "less than" she "usually is." She's full of *it*.

This wry, light, and ironic approach to the importance of individual feelings is sprinkled throughout Davis's stories, but it can be seen especially in *Samuel Johnson is Indignant* (2001), the title of which seems at first to contradict the claim I have been making about feeling being kept off to the side in Davis's work since it refers to a famous individual's affective state and associates this feeling of frustration with a moral pose. The titular story itself consists of only

one line aside from the title, making it read "Samuel Johnson is indignant / that Scotland has so few trees." Yet, even as the focus of this story rests entirely on this frustration, the deadpan irony of this one-liner makes Johnson's feelings absurd and laughable. Davis here is riffing off of Johnson's reflections in *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775), turning his indignation into a kind of punchline and figuring to his journey as a joke in itself. During this trip, which he took with Boswell, Johnson frequently complained about the landscape, despite much more serious colonial devastation and the violence of slavery surrounding him.[90] Davis's story seems a succinct dismissal of Johnson's minor discomfort and frustration: making his response ridiculous by exaggerating its smallness, in more ways than one, Davis's story suggests that Johnson's feelings are primarily a source of amusement.

But if there's comedy in these stories of doomed or thwarted emotional self-improvement, there's also real pain. One jokes about what is, at core, serious, and improving how one feels can be a laughable task, especially with our contemporary abundance of healing balms and self-help books to show us the way, but it can also be no laughing matter. In Davis's earlier stories, especially, depression appears as a problem of not feeling enough, of not responding to stimuli that warrant it—a state of surviving on less or "being less than" one "usually is." What is interesting in these stories is that, even in these tales of extreme emotional pain and dysfunction, Davis's female characters tend to avoid focusing on or talking about their feelings. (In "Jury Duty," for instance, a woman finds relief in the bureaucratic formality of jury duty, relishing her time in the courtroom as a "relief" from expressivity.) Characters also resent doctors and psychologists for "reading in" to their symptoms, as if rejecting the triumphant narratives and knowingness of therapeutic industries. In "Five Signs of Disturbance" and

[90] Thanks to Neal Curtis for consulting on this point.

"Therapy," both collected in *Break It Down*, Davis depicts depressive experience as one of intensified, if somewhat altered, consciousness, painful precisely because it causes one to focus so centrally on her own feelings and mood. Like in Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, a depressive emotional state is also the perfect conduit for deadpan humor and bitter critique of therapeutic business as usual.

"Five Signs of Disturbance"—a story whose title alludes to Lacan and also foreshadows the later *Varieties of Disturbance*—is a wry, yet subdued spoof of psychoanalytic theory and popular Eastern philosophy, as it catalogues and indexes a woman's depressive episode and her trying to get through it. Told in the third person, this story follows a woman who is living alone in the city and looking for an apartment, feeling distant from herself as she waits for a shift in her living situation and general outlook. Yet rather than feeling "nothing," in her aloneness, she begins to see signs of disturbance all around her apartment and to compile a list of them, as if this might help her make sense of it all. Her mental and emotional state forces on her a kind of prickling precision, an awareness of each moment in its excruciating detail and presence: "She looks at the clock often and is aware of exactly what time it is now; and then ten minutes from now, even though she has no need to know what time it is" (134). This watchfulness also extends to her mood, to the incremental shifts of feeling she experiences or does not experience moment to moment: "She also knows exactly how she is feeling, uneasy now, angry ten minutes from now. She is sick to death of knowing what she is feeling, but she can't stop, as though if she stops watching for longer than a moment, she will disappear (wander off)" (134). There's an exhaustion with monitoring the self here but also a need to keep watch: this mental vigilance, she hopes, will allow her to recognize herself again, to get her bearings.

Like other Davis stories engaging these topics, serious as they may be, this story also has an element of farce: this woman waits around her apartment, being disturbed by so many things she can't even keep a proper list of them. (She cuts it down to just five signs, to be economical, and because she can't be sure about all the others actually being signs.) She cries over what she sees on the television—the TV accounts for two of the five signs of her disturbance. She reads a book about Zen and makes notes of the eightfold path to nirvana, drolly observing that "it mainly involves doing everything right" (139). She gets up from bed to eat cereal and marshmallows. She is not, in general, being all that healthy, though, and elsewhere, she acknowledges that is "forgetting the idea she had about moderation" (136). As the disturbances pile up, she goes to make an omelet, and in an echo of magical realism, it almost seems to speak to her: "As the omelet forms, it bubbles and chatters, making its own violent kind of noise, and she suddenly thinks it's going to speak to her. Bright yellow, glistening, spotted with oil, it is heaving gently and subsiding in the pan" (140). But it does not communicate anything, and instead, when the omelet doesn't "articulate something," the woman is surprised and feels somehow assaulted: "the muteness of the omelet emanated from it in a large balloon and pressed against her eardrums" (140). (For some reason, this image has always reminded me of the sibyl hanging in her jar in a tree, wanting to die.) This inarticulate breakfast is a curious image: it riffs off Lacan's description of the self as an egg-like mess, but it also seems meaningful in another way, as an image of objectified emotion—runny, bubbling, sizzling, yet outside human speech. Throughout the story, the woman thinks that perhaps she is so disturbed because she is exhausted and that that is why she cannot make decisions ("all day long there were such decisions to make, as whether to go in this room or that room, to walk down the street this direction or the other"), and

it is almost as if this omelet expresses her confusion and paralysis— her bubbling mind and sizzling spirit (142).

"Five Signs of Disturbance" plays with a kind of self-diagnosis and self-treatment, but in "Therapy," an ambivalence about doctors and popular therapeutic industries is even more explicit. This story—which reads as loosely autobiographical, narrated by a woman who separates from her husband and moves to the city from the country—has the antagonistic energy of a reluctant therapy patient. She is depressed, though she doesn't say so in so many words, describing instead her frantic energy ("my brain spun like a fly") and a paralysis reminiscent of the woman in "Five Signs" ("I offered myself reasons for leaving the garage, but no reason was good enough") (98). She hopes to hide her difficulty from her husband, so she begins to see a doctor: "Right away, I was not happy," she explains, and tries to switch doctors, though this fails and she continues with the first one (98).

In describing her experience with this doctor, she criticizes many of his practices but also admits that she begins to feel a bit better during their time together. She does not like that he does not take notes, for instance, which she finds unserious—she thinks he should be studying them and studying her, not bounding down the stairs after their session ends to gulp coffee. This observational negligence contrasts with the narrator's alertness and attentive precision even during a depressive episode. He is too impersonal, unable to see her in her particularity: "My doctor saw me and looked past me. He heard my words and at the same time he heard other words. He took me apart and put me together in another pattern and showed me this. This was what I did, and there was why he thought I did it. The truth was not clear anymore" (101). In this formulation, the narrator's true experience is a puzzle to be solved, and the doctor's interpretation of her situation relies not on studying her or her words but in "looking past" her

and substituting one thing for another in a quest for meaning. His analysis—his "breaking it down"—is disordered. He is "reading" her, but he is skimming.

In one sense, Davis seems to be winking at her readers here: literary minimalism is often seen as coolly clinical, and Davis's own style foregrounds impersonal observation—exactly what the narrator is complaining her doctor subjects her to. As Sophie A. Jones argues, around the time Davis published her first major collection, minimalist fiction began to swap interiority and depth for observable surface, a move that intriguingly corresponded with "the psychiatric profession shift[ing] its allegiance from psychoanalysis to descriptive psychiatry." This "new paradigm" was impersonal in the sense that patients were "diagnosed and treated according to a standardized list of observable symptoms, rather than analyzed by an individual expert" (303). This shift away from personalized attention undermined the insight and authority of the clinician and also the uniqueness of the patient and her situation. In an "era of standardized classification," psychiatric diagnosis became more mechanistic, and Jones sees minimalist fiction as resisting "the project of literary hermeneutics itself" by offering "descriptive surface that yielded no hidden depths for expert excavation" (303).

Josh Cohen notes something similar: "Davis's work simultaneously solicits and refuses a psychoanalytic approach," inviting a reader's "desire to interpret and explain its pervasive enigmas" even while relegating that desire "to end up in the unknown" (507-8). Cohen contrasts this with the reflexivity of much postmodern American fiction, arguing that Davis's work is marked by a depressive rather than paranoiac mode, drawing on the distinction between the two concepts in the work of Melanie Klein: basically, that it leads not to epiphany and insight but back to ignorance. He suggests that Davis's stories resist yet also bait us with the kind of symptomatic reading the doctor is employing. Indeed, "Therapy" is a story of what it feels like to

not only have depression but for those feelings to be misread by a health professional intent on explanatory insight. The supposedly therapeutic interaction estranges the narrator from her own feelings and from herself: "Because of him, I did not know what my feelings were. A swarm of reasons flew around my head, buzzing. They deafened me, and I was always confused" (101). Cohen concludes that true "[t]herapy, the story suggests, is a means of listening to, rather than eliminating, the patient's experience of incomprehension—the very experience that conditions Davis's writing" (507). Yet at the same time, it is not so simple. This protagonist does give her doctor credit for her sudden shift of mood in the spring: "Because of my doctor, things began to change for me. I was more unassailable…I started laughing at funny things again. I would laugh and then I would stop and think: True, all winter I did not laugh…Now people I knew seemed less unhappy to hear my voice on the telephone" (101-2).

This story ends with relief, but it's relief that comes mysteriously—not necessarily as the effect of talking through problems but, possibly, of simply waiting them out. At the end of "Therapy," the narrator feels better and wishes to end her sessions:

> I thought that since I was better, my therapy should end soon. I was impatient, and I wondered: How did therapy come to an end? I had other questions too: for instance, How much longer would I continue to need all my strength just to take myself form one day to the next? There was no answer to that one. There would be no end of therapy, either, or I would not be the one who chose to end it.

This ironic twist or subtle inversion at the end of this story is characteristic of Davis—at the beginning of "Therapy," the narrator wanted to switch doctors, but by the story's end, it is her doctor who will have to get rid of her.

“she has caused in me feelings of disturbance also”

Even as Davis writes about isolated, self-conscious selves, her stories continually highlight the sociality of affect—the interconnected nature of being affected—which is inseparable, also, from the social life of language and the ways it shapes, circulates, and intensifies affective experience. (The fact that Davis’s stories are now available in a collected edition underscores this, prompting habits of reading that look for recurring motifs.) In this final section, I reflect on how Davis’s stories highlight how easily thoughts and feelings are passed on, how they spiral out of control, how they move in unpredictable and unintended ways, how feelings pile up and accumulate even when one is trying to minimize them. The comedy of this state of things—the absurdity of it—is never far from hand, and the theatricality of these overheard interior monologues positions readers not only as spectators to these emotional displays but also as participants in them. Rather than a fiction of solipsism and logical abstraction—with that hyperactive, self-absorbed narrator immersed only in the world of her own mind—what we encounter in Davis’s later stories are much more porous boundaries between the self and others. If the discipline that Davis’s protagonists seek to achieve—their pursuit of emptiness, peace, or simply less disturbance—at times seems to conceive of feeling management as an individual task, as it is so often framed by self-help books and commercial industries, the ironic missteps and futility of ever meaningfully controlling feeling in these stories unravels this secular belief and points instead to our interconnected emotional lives and fates.

Davis’s story collection *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007) emphasizes this interconnectedness not only by its title, which calls back to Davis’s previous work (“Five Signs of Disturbance,” etc.), but its cover, which features a shockingly realistic image of a fly perched

above the word "Varieties." In "Collaboration With Fly," a one-sentence story, Davis alludes to her book's cover and its accidental composition: "I put that word on the page, / but he added the apostrophe," it reads (508). Davis draws attention here to the composite, material nature of her stories—which feature phrases, images, and words from others, which she amends or cuts back, and even translated dreams. The fly—which itself is a motif that has buzzed around her previous collections[91]—both makes us think about the world in her books and the world outside it, to our experience of reading, to the happenstance of encounter and creation. It is a bit disturbing at first to glance at the book and think a fly is there, only to realize you've been tricked, but this is how Davis orients us to the many little disturbances that prod and prick us each day. (We might imagine Davis herself is disturbed too, though she doesn't let on: with her fastidious attention to grammatical accuracy and precision, no doubt this misplaced apostrophe irks.)

In fact, the dry humor of the titular story, "Varieties of Disturbance," turns on the astounding reproducibility and reverberation of small disturbances, indexing, as it does, the seemingly unstoppable domino effect one single, minor irritation can bring to various members of a family. This story is a tale of feeling mismanagement, a comedy of errors, and a modern parable about our affective interconnectedness. "Varieties of Disturbance" is narrated by an adult daughter, who has just spoken to her mother on the telephone about her brother's offer to take vacation time from his jobs and come help out the mother after a hospitalization that has left her on crutches. The mother declined this offer, setting off a ripple effect of bad feelings, and now her son isn't answering his phone, leading the mother to worry and complain to her daughter, the narrator, who sums this all up this way:

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[91] In "Therapy," for example, the narrator's mind "spun like a fly." A fly also features in "Kafka Cooks Dinner" and, naturally, in the story "The Fly," both in *Varieties of Disturbance*.

> [My mother] hurt my brother's feelings as she was protecting my father from certain feelings of disturbance anticipated by him if my brother were to come, by claiming to my brother certain feelings of disturbance of her own, slightly different. Now my brother, by not answering his phone, has caused new feelings of disturbance in my mother and father both, feelings that are the same or close to the same in them but different from the feelings of disturbance anticipated by my father and those falsely claimed by my mother to my brother. Now in her disturbance my mother has called to tell me of her and my father's feelings of disturbance over my brother, and in doing so, she has caused in me feelings of disturbance also, though fainter than and different from the feelings experienced now by her and my father who those anticipated by my father and falsely claimed by my mother. (84)

The cascading effects of one single action—saying "no" to a son's request to come help out his mother—reverberate and spiral out of control in this story, upsetting everyone in different ways. Even the narrator, who is something like a bystander in this situation or the closest thing to a neutral observer or diplomat, is roped in to the domestic chaos as she listens to the story and attempts to methodically catalogue the various disturbance that are set loose here. In fact, in trying to parse out and taxonomize varieties of disturbance—garden varieties they must be, for this kind of family drama is so relatable and ordinary—the narrator contributes to the family confusion rather than dispelling it, sowing the seeds of discord even further as she herself becomes upset by the drama.

Affect's volatility and transmissibility, which Theresa Brennan has discussed, is so clear in this story, the mechanism of its humor: as the narrator analyzes, repeats, and therefore reproduces the disturbance, she "catches" it like a disease. Like a joke, she passes the episode on by sharing it with someone close to her: "When I describe this conversation to my husband, I cause in him feelings of disturbance also, stronger than mine and different in kind from those of my mother, in my father, and respectively claimed and anticipated by them" (84). Although the tenor of her husband's displeasure is not the same as that of her mother, father, or brother, or even her own, his "outside" perspective offers a slightly different assessment of the effects of

this family drama on his wife: “My husband is disturbed by my mother’s refusing my brother’s help and thus causing disturbance in him, and by her telling me of her disturbance and thus causing disturbance in me greater, he says, than I realize” (84). His pointing this out, of course, is not helpful either: it causes even greater feelings of disturbance in the narrator. The story ends soon after this revelation, which is merciful: simply stopping and moving on is what’s needed for disturbance to stop spreading and for some kind of peace to return.

This story echoes the comic absurdity of Davis’s earlier stories’ focus on self-help and self-improvement, demonstrating how the very act of dwelling on disturbance—rehashing and analyzing even an “overheard” interaction—tends to intensify, rather than quell, its affective impact. Yet this story also mocks the idea that anyone might be able to be unaffected themselves, immune to the feelings in the air. Each character in this story either implicitly or explicitly blames another member of the family for his or her failure to properly anticipate and maneuver around someone’s potentially hurt feelings, but it is actually the warped game of phone tag—the act of discussing this situation and lingering on it, in an attempt to recover from it—that causes the real disturbance. Talking about bad feelings, as Davis’s stories so often illustrate, does not lead to cathartic acceptance; instead, feeling spirals out of control, bursting out of the coils of Davis’s well-ordered sentences, not in spite of but because someone is so concerned with calming things down. In figuring affect this way—as a force of nature or jolt of energy that travels through and around people—Davis rejects the idea that individuals are solely responsible for their own feelings even while dramatizing our investment in fantasies of control.

What’s so interesting about this broader focus—on the sociality of affect and on networks of affiliation more generally—is that Davis comes to it only in her later story collections. Several reviewers of her later work, in fact, including Maggie Doherty in “Cool Confessions,” have noted

a shift from her early focus on elliptical parables and impersonal situations to a more grounded, humorous interest in collective and circulating feelings.[92] William Skidelsky puts it this way, reviewing *Can't and Won't* for *The Guardian*:

> Davis's fiction has always depended on a balance between feeling and detachment. Emotions are hinted at, but mostly remain concealed beneath a carapace of wry pedantry. In [*Can't and Won't*], the feelings are more to the fore. Another way of saying this is that Davis – or at least her narrators – appear less guarded than normal.

While I'd push against a simplifying narrative that traces an arc from impersonal detachment to interpersonal investment in Davis's writing, I do think her later work seizes on affective situations and the various roles individuals play within them in a new tonal key. There's an increased interest, in other words, in the feeling, thinking individual's imbrication with the social world—and a more unyielding, personality-laden, even crankier voice behind the stories. Davis's later stories scrutinize, especially, how feelings circulate within institutional settings and through language that is passed on and through people.

"Negative Emotions," for example, published in *Can't and Won't* (2014), pokes fun at the circulating affects in an office—specifically, the modern irritation of email forwards. The story consists of only a few paragraphs and hinges on a classic Davisian reversal: the sender of a chain email about managing one's negative feelings becomes the target of some very annoyed replies by his coworkers, who resent the implication that they do not know how to manage their bad feelings and want to be told how to by him. The email itself seems innocuous enough and was not meant to stir the pot, but it has unintended consequences:

> A well-meaning teacher, inspired by a text he had been reading, once sent all the other teachers in his school a message about negative emotions. The message consisted entirely of advice quoted from a Vietnamese Buddhist monk:

[92] Doherty writes, "With *Can't and Won't*, Davis brings back the confessional style and adds a note of desperation. The older we get, the harder it is to hold feeling at bay" ("Cool").

> ‘Emotion, said the monk, is like a storm: it stays for a while and then it goes. Upon perceiving the emotion (like a coming storm), one should put oneself in a stable position. One should sit or lie down. One should focus on one’s abdomen. One should focus, specifically, on the area just below one’s navel, and practice mindful breathing. If one can identify the emotion as an emotion, it may then be easier to handle.’

This is relatively innocuous, if uninvited, advice on how to “ride out” feelings physiologically—taking a breath, positioning the body in a certain way, recognizing the situation *as* a situation that can be responded to. This email draws on popular versions of Eastern philosophy and mindfulness practices that figure self-control and emotional discipline as a matter not only of the mind but the body—here, properly responding to emotions requires both mental effort and physical skill. Yet the ideal of tranquility is rejected.

Much like the family’s disturbed responses to minor, unintended provocations from each other in “Varieties of Disturbance,” this email’s overt attempts to calm only create more trouble: its seemingly-helpful “message” is not welcome and not calming. The response to this email is something like the storm the monk warns of, creating unexpected backlash and unleashing a torrent of negative emotions. The story reads almost as a parable, as Davis’s anonymous narrator, in the neutral tone of an office memo, dispassionately observes that the sender’s coworkers “resented the message, and they resented their colleague. They thought he was accusing them of having negative emotions and needing advice about how to handle them. Some of them were, in fact, angry.” Davis’s sentences here trace the slow escalation of the problem—resentment turns to anger. As if antagonized, recipients of this email react with a wave of spite and sarcasm, presumably each in emails of their own, though this detail is not provided:

> They told him that it would take a lot of practice for them to get over the negative emotions caused by his message. But, they went on, they did not intend to do this practice. Far from being troubled by their negative emotions, they said, they in fact liked having negative emotions, particularly about him and his message.

This story's ironic ending is interesting given Davis's usual interest in negativity as lack (recall the problem of motherhood being turned into a grammatical and mathematical equation in "A Double Negative"). Here, negative feelings aren't ones that aren't there—they're antagonistic, even spiteful ones that *are.* The language of wellness, we see, has unintended consequences, just as some emails do.

And because Lydia Davis herself is a professor—she teaches at SUNY Albany in upstate New York—I want to end this chapter by considering one final story, also from *Can't and Won't,* that probes the strangely impersonal experience of teaching at a university, even as a famous writer, and the low-key dread that accompanies the job for Davis. The story offers a reflection on Davis's own detachment and preference for solitude. "The Letter to the Foundation" is one of Davis's longest and most obviously autobiographical stories and one that I find fascinating in its rawness—there's an intimacy to it that feels rare and important, an almost confessional tone. Written in the form of a letter to a fellowship foundation from which she received an award, the story expresses in first-person Davis's shifting thoughts and feelings about her professional life, how she hopes the award will relieve her of teaching duties, and how it, ultimately, does not. The genius of the story is that its "oversharing" occurs in the form of a rambling professional letter addressed to "Frank and Members of the Foundation."

Davis's speaker—who really, is indistinguishable from Davis herself—begins by explaining her reason for writing and acknowledging that perhaps the Foundation isn't expecting her letter: "I was feeling such relief. I wanted to tell the Foundation about this immense relief. But then I thought that of course it must be obvious to you. You probably hear this from every person you help!" (180). She describes the experience of receiving news of the award, which came in the form of a phone while she was getting ready to ride the bus, of how it gave her a chance to

"observe…how [her] mind adapted to a suddenly new situation," and how, belatedly, she realized she could have bought an $11 salad (not a $7 one) for lunch (182). Davis then expresses her feelings of dread about teaching—describing the fear that accompanied her hypervisibility in the classroom—and her excitement about being able to avoid this difficult work for a time. This would not be the case, but for a while, she thought it might.

Davis muses on how the news of this award, and the future she thought it held for her, gave her a different perspective on her own routine:

> I sometimes felt removed from my life, as though I were floating above it or maybe a little to the side of it. This sensation of floating must have come from the fact that I would no longer be attached to anything, or to much: I thought I would not be attached to my teaching job, and I thought I would not be attached by those many strings to all the necessary other small and large jobs that would earn me four thousand dollars, or three, or two, to cover three months, or two or one. I was floating up and looking out over a longer distance, at more of a landscape in a circle around me. (184)

Davis also shares that she had plans to "cut ties" with her university, regardless of the department party they throw for her, in spite of the fact that "the department, and maybe the college too, now valued [her] more than they had before" (185). She "feel[s] as though outside [her] life" (187).

This feeling of freedom from responsibility that Davis expects doesn't continue, however, and the rest of story delineates how she must continue to teach despite her fellowship: she remains attached to the university and to the role of "competent teacher" that she plays, uncomfortably. She continues in her role, in relative anonymity, with her students uninterested in her award at first. The bulk of the rest of the story consists of Davis burrowing into and examining the anxieties and difficulties teaching poses for her: at one point, she connects facing a classroom of students to a blood clot she got in her eye, a "psychosomatic injury, if that's the right term for an injury caused purely by an emotional condition" (193). She describes other moments of awkwardness or lingering bad feelings after something said in the classroom, as well as the mundane moments of

office hours ("I always sat in my cubicle alone") (199). Soon, she admits that she "had grown used to feeling two contradictory things: that everything in my life had changed; and that, really, nothing in my life had changed" with the advent of the fellowship (198).

The fact that this story shows us Davis immersed in the world rather than withdrawing or retreating from it (as much as she wishes the fellowship would allow her to) makes it an interesting late career rejoinder to "The Professor," a story about wanting to break free from the mental and spatial confines of university halls by marrying a cowboy, about wanting to get rid of her glasses and briefcases. Years later, the romance of a life lived in simplicity, now, appears to take the form of relief from teaching, but this romance isn't indulged: this story dwells not with the speculative or hypothetical so much as with the daily reality of continuing unglamourous work, done in relative anonymity and with much emotional distress:

> I have been writing to you at length about teaching. That is because when your grant came, I thought I wouldn't have to teach anymore. I also thought, and still think, that because you took enough interest in my work to give me the grant, you would be interested in everything about me and everything I had to say. I know this may not be true, but still I choose to believe that you care about how I am and what I am doing. (199-200)

The personal appeal in the midst of an impersonal letter is striking. The intimate details Davis shares about her professional routine—getting hot chocolate in the college cafeteria, riding the bus—are ordinary yet deeply personal and affecting. They are moments of respite. What's worth thinking about in this story is how detachment can't last; it wears off, the attachments linger. The frustration and stress of teaching also doesn't go away. Tranquility just isn't in the cards, even though that may be what the Foundation is expecting to hear. Instead, Davis offers a record of a mind very much involved in the world and unable to withdraw from it.

Davis ends the letter mildly, with a decorum that only underscores the deeply personal and quirky content that has preceded it: "By now, many years have passed since I began thinking

about what I wanted to write in this letter. The period of the grant is long over. You will barely remember me, even when you consult your files. I do thank you for your patience and apologize for the long delay, and please know that I remain sincerely grateful. All my best wishes" (207). In this moment, and in this story, at least, Davis trades in her characteristic brevity for an autobiographical but dry reflection, observing her personal feelings at some length in order to account for her own professional feelings that don't quite add up.

Coda:

Feeling Like an Academic

Writing a dissertation is often viewed as an exercise in personal discipline and impersonal analysis, a dispassionate probing of questions and texts that require careful thought and sharp critique. Personal investment is important, of course, but mainly because of all the work you'll put in: you've got to love your object of study because it will demand everything from you—maybe even your personality. This project didn't focus explicitly on whether writers either do or do not affiliate with the academy and its protocols of method and temperament—there's more to be said, in fact, about Sontag's allergy to being a professor or about Davis's professional ambivalence as a university writer-teacher—but it is worth reflecting now on how the impersonal and often unfeeling nature of academic life as it exists today, under the conditions of worsening precarity, relates to the literary prose experiments I have been describing. If academic work and style tends toward impersonality, in other words, isn't this dissertation taking up its own conditions of possibility and production in some slant way?

Sontag wrote that her essays in *Against Interpretation* ultimately revealed to her her own sensibility. What is mine? Why have the theatrics of cool prose and detached, withholding narrators snagged my attention for these past few years? I wonder: is there something about graduate school and about university life itself that lends itself to coolness, to deadpan, and to my own appreciation of it? In *Can't and Won't* (2014), Lydia Davis glosses the academic veneer poses of rigorous impersonality often have, in language that smirks: "All these years I thought I had a Ph.D. I do not have a Ph.D," the story reads. In interviews, Davis has mentioned writing this story based off a professor friend's recurring bad dream—that she had forgotten to fulfill some tiny requirement in her doctoral program and that she did not, in fact, have her Ph.D.

(Mathews). The latent fear this story expresses (some might call it lingering imposter syndrome) belies its aphoristic perkiness. And there's humor too, of a self-depreciating kind, because what's funny about it, at least in my mind, is that the distinction between having or not having a Ph.D. is perhaps not something to fret over in the first place. Unlike "The Letter to the Foundation," which chronicles academic feelings of anxiety, hope, and dread in the form of a long-winded fellowship letter, this story keeps it short—and light.

Such sharpness and levity is needed in these times, perhaps in equal doses: the impersonal machinery of academic life—and much of professional life—in the U.S. can leave one feeling numb, depressed, or even spiteful. As I write this, I receive emails from tenured professors encouraging me to apply for one-year contingent positions at universities near and far. These do not feel so very different from the wellness email Davis describes in "Negative Emotions." But I regard these well-intentioned missives coolly, dispassionately. I try not to feel too much about them. I know we all are caught in large, institutional nets not of our own making.

In this dissertation, I have been describing how certain "cool" women writers take up and rework an impersonal mode to comment on cultural and aesthetic imperatives of emotional self-styling and individual expressivity, grappling formally with the relationship between feeling and politics, separateness and solidarity. What I want to consider in this coda is how, in recent U.S. literature even more explicitly than before, academic contexts and labor conditions are often the backdrop for feeling impersonal. The impersonal and increasingly precarious nature of academic life, in other words, has explicitly shaped recent U.S. literature (and scholarship), as many of its authors think of themselves not as "professors" now but as contingent workers. In a recent piece for *The Nation*, "The Rise of Adjunct Lit," Maggie Doherty reflects on how the detached and clinically-cool millennial narrators of Christina Smallwood's *The Life of the Mind* (2021) and

Lynn Steger Strong's *Want* (2020) present us with a contemporary twist on the campus novel and the bildungsroman. Rather than flashy satires of faculty life in the ivory tower, these novels offer portraits of overworked sort-of professors and narratives of thwarted development, mounting debt, and precarious health (mental, physical, and reproductive). Doherty points out that these novels' highly-educated, white female protagonists choose "emotional detachment as a response to apocalypse." These novels, with their "atmosphere of anxious uncertainty" are "familiar to many of us who came of age during a moment of financial and ecological crisis." (Jia Tolentino's review of Smallwood's novel similarly emphasizes its "depressive realism.") In this way, they seem similar to the slew of recently published contemporary American novels with alienated female protagonists that Jess Bergman describes in *The Baffler*, one of which is Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* ("I'm Not Feeling Good at All").[93] Yet what Doherty's describes—that twist on the campus novel, the adjunct novel—uniquely engages a generalized mood of anxiety and despair as a result of the impersonal structures of academic contexts, the way they tend to make contingent workers, especially, disappear.

Weike Wang's debut novel *Chemistry* (2017) explores a similar affect and alienated condition, but in a different way than the two adjunct novels Doherty reviews. Offering a different (and less bleak) response to the climate of academic impersonality, Wang opts to reclaim the impersonal mode and figure it as a resource. I dwell with Wang's text for the rest of this coda, thinking about its theorizing of the impersonal in light of my previous chapters. Wang's deadpan sensibility places her novel alongside Moshfegh's, especially, while also

[93] Bergman also surveys Alexandra Kleeman's *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*, Catherine Lacey's *The Answers*, Ling Ma's *Severance*, and Halle Butler's *The New Me*, noting that this is not an exhaustive list of this trend. I'd add Jenny Offill's fiction of climate anxiety, *The Weather*, to this list as well.

drawing on the moral intelligence of Sontag and Davis. *Chemistry* is a coming-of-age novel narrated by an unnamed Chinese-American Ph.D. student in chemistry, and it probes the experience of opting out of a Ph.D. program in an impersonal, depressive, and arresting voice. Much like *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, this story centers around the psychic pain of a young female protagonist who is withdrawing from the world even before she drops out of her Ph.D. program.[94] Upset by the trauma of her parents' unhappy marriage, the racism of her white American classmates, and the unrelenting expectations of her advisor and lab, Wang's protagonist cannot even muster the enthusiasm to accept or even respond when her long-term, boyfriend, Eric, who is a white PhD student in chemistry, proposes to her. She simply doesn't or cannot feel what she should. Her Bartleby-esque opting out looks like political refusal—a refusal of the heterosexual contract and the academic one—and exhaustion all at once.

But Wang's story is not primarily a screed against graduate school and its numbing effects; it is not merely protesting the cool, impersonal environment of the chemistry lab (though its culture of overwork certainly plays a role in the narrator's depression). Instead, *Chemistry* embodies and reflects on "the style of science"—as Sontag once called it in "One Culture and the New Sensibility"—in novel form to interrogate an impersonal mode but also to reclaim it, to show what it can do. As a narrative voiced in the "clipped, understated, and curiously affectless" tones of a Chinese-American graduate student, Wang's novel very self-consciously engages and upends stereotypes of Asian inscrutability, as Jane Hu points out in her excellent *New Yorker* essay "The 'Inscrutable' Voices of Asian-Anglophone Fiction," and also of scientific

[94] Wang's narrator's detachment borders on the misanthropic. In a move that directly recalls Moshfegh's protagonist, Wang's narrator chooses to paint her walls the color of "permafrost," because she likes the word, joking with a cashier about the color, "sea sprite," as being like "see" "spite" (164).

impersonality and graduate student social awkwardness.[95] Hu writes, "In the West, the Asiatic figure has long been associated with aloofness and obfuscation, as exemplified by the notion of the 'inscrutable Oriental'"; yet, she sees Asian Anglophone writers such as Weike Wang reworking "the trope of Asian affectlessness" to "overturn" it and to reflect on the Asian-American immigrant experience anew. I'd add that, by making her Chinese-American protagonist a female graduate student pursuing a Ph.D. in chemistry, Wang also burrows into gendered and racialized assumptions about particular courses of study and what it takes to succeed (in higher education, in America, in the eyes of her family as a Chinese-American woman).

Take, for example, a passage early in the novel that Jane Hu flags in her review and that nicely illustrates both the narrator's deadpan, impersonal style and the professional-academic situation she is tied up in:

> I am certain that Eric will get the job. His career path is very straight, like that of an arrow to its target. If I were to draw my path out, it would look like a gas particle flying around in space.
>
> The lab mate often echoes the wisdom of many chemists before her. You must love chemistry even when it is not working. You must love chemistry unconditionally. (9)

It is not clear that our protagonist does love chemistry unconditionally (she withdraws from her program, she resists loving what others expect her to), but she does identify with the detached norms of scientific observation and empiricism. Like Lydia Davis, Wang's narrator is analytical, above all else, her voice deliciously deadpan.[96] Just as the narrator compares herself to a gas

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[95] Thanks to Joseph Wei for directing me to Jane Hu's work.

[96] Compare this passage, for instance, to "A Double Negative": "Genetics aside, I don't see myself having kids. Not one? Eric asks. If I had one, I would want to have two, and if I had two, I would want to have zero" (22).

particle, *Chemistry* continually turns to the natural world—and to scientific principles and theorems—to explain and explore relationships and social situations. (For example, when Eric does get a job and decides to move without the narrator, we get this: "The breaking of bonds requires energy. This is a fundamental law of thermodynamics") (104). Wang's novel shows us the elegance, and humor, of these impersonal statements as they take on a riddle-like meaning. They pepper the episodic narration of the novel alongside Chinese proverbs, which appear something like theorems themselves, as the narrator draws wisdom from her Chinese culture and language.

In this impersonal narrative mode, the narrator scrutinizes her own detachment throughout the novel, aware of the racist stereotypes that surround her academic career and affective disposition, connecting these to her immigrant experience as a Chinese American girl in the Midwest. At one point, she describes a "joke" a white student tells her in middle school: "When an Asian baby is born her parents hold up two signs, DOCTOR or DOCTOR, and the baby must choose" (46). This "isn't a joke so much as a statement," the narrator explains, saying that no, she has never had to choose between signs. She relays this experience to her therapist who, unlike Moshfegh's Dr. Tuttle, doesn't traffic in dizzying misinformation. Instead, "the shrink," as Wang's narrator refers to her, diagnoses something important but elusive to the narrator: that she is angry. In another session, the narrator associates her own depressive attitude with her mother's, describing how her mother would take her out of school, where she was picked on as the only Asian student, and go to a fun park, watching without enjoyment. In these outings, her mother seemed distant, unable to join in her daughter's happiness: "*Deadpan*, a word I learned later on in high school, a casual and monotone voice that expresses a calm demeanor, despite the ridiculous of the situation. A voice that an unhappy mother and wife might

use with a child" (121). Distancing oneself from a situation appears, in these moments, as an intergenerational response to injustice, displacement, and pain.

Wang also figures a deadpan pose as a distinctly gendered or even maternal tactic, something necessitated by the relationship between mothers and daughters or by the situations they tend to find themselves in. (The narrator and a female friend wonder, relatedly, why all the "sad idioms" are about girls—"Debbie Downer," "Wet Nancy" (166)). Throughout the novel, the narrator grapples with how to relate to her parents (and how to tell them she is dropping out), weaving in stories of her mother's childhood in Shanghai and her father's growing up poor in the countryside to understand their past and their present. But the focus is on her mother especially, who she admires for her courage in leaving her home. Towards the end of the novel, she describes her mother's resilience as something genetically passed on to her:

> The online fitness guru talks often about core strength. The idea that once you have a strong enough core, you and do all these ridiculously hard moves with a smile on your face.
>
> The shrink says something similar, but she refers to it as inner strength.
>
> Biologically, physical strength comes from mitochondria, which are organelles that generate all our body's energy. A unique feature of mitochondria is that they have their own DNA. Whereas the rest of the body is built on code that is half paternal and half maternal, mitochondrial DNA is entirely maternal and passed down from the mother. (198-9)

This specific kind of toughness is figured not as attitudinal fitness but as a matter of biology: something inherited and passed on. More importantly, it is a trait they share, something that binds them together even as they are apart.

This is the kind of bond and connection that *Chemistry* analyzes: the kind of love that hurts. Ultimately, Wang's novel is a thwarted bildungsroman—like that of Christine Smallwood's—but in the sense that her protagonist refuses the linear trajectory her boyfriend

and academia expects, refusing the assumption that, to gain maturity, she must separate or detach herself from her family for romantic love instead. She cannot break these bonds and she does not want to. Instead, she has to reimagine the concepts themselves, rejecting norms of American individualism and expressivity. It is "the Chinese way," she says, "to not explain…to keep your deepest feelings inside and then build a wall that can be seen from the moon" (196). Her detachment, she suggests, is not an absence of solidarity or loyalty, just as her hesitance to disappoint her parents is not a failure of independence.

And ultimately, she is not as alone or as aloof as she thinks. Towards the very end of the novel, Wang's narrator takes stock of the relationships that have come from her tutoring, which she never expected to be very good at: "To my surprise, most of my students keep in touch. I find in my inbox the occasional greeting. Hi, teacher, some of them still say. I am well. I am doing this now. I am reminded of you by many things" (186). This list follows, referencing various things the narrator has taught her students about:

> Clouds
> Balloons
> A running faucet
> A satellite
> Mirrors
> Baseballs
> Bubbles
> A sunset
> A closed door
> A full moon
> Rocket ships
> Chocolate
> Glow-in-the-dark anything
> A green laser
> A green leaf
> Teeth
> White light
> An oil slick
> A spoon. (186-7)

Here, science and poetry meet. Objectivity and worldly engagement meet too; it is through tutoring students in science that our narrator finds connection with them, feels tethered to something beyond herself. Wang's narrator expresses her approval of this self diffusion in characteristic understatement: "Put that way, I don't mind being a cloud," she says (187).

Wang's novel thus figures feeling impersonal as a resource and a way of being, not an unwanted, modern stripping of the self, though difficult social and institutional circumstances certainly do not escape critique. *Chemistry* suggests that feeling impersonal—thinking and observing the world and the self with detachment—is a cultural, aesthetic, and even disciplinary inheritance and practice, not simply a default condition of the modern, alienating world. This is what seems so important to me about the novel, and what distinguishes it from others that probe dispositional coolness and the impersonal labor structures of modern professional life. Graduate school is alienating and depressing, at times, but Wang's narrator has her own coping mechanisms, too, an inner strength.

If Wang—like Sontag, Davis, and Moshfegh—reworks and reflects on an impersonal mode to reconfigure the usual coordinates of gender, selfhood, and expressivity, *Chemistry*'s uniquely academic and scientific context reminds us, too, that viewing the world analytically or through the lens of a formal discipline does not or need not make it more removed. There's a different kind of intimacy to such scrutiny. After all, you can only really see clouds from a distance.

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