

## Chapter 1: How Does Your Data Glow?

Methodologically, [theories] recognise the impossibility of jumping clear of language, discourse, ideology or metaphysics, while reaching for that which escapes and exceeds language; and are resigned to dogged, fallible, partial, interminable work.

—Maggie MacLure *Offence of Theory*<sup>1</sup>

I coax myself through the heavy flow of morning with self-talk. Instruction, really. I instruct myself to rise, dress, walk, run, eat, think. I instruct myself to sit here, to read, and to write.

Mornings are always dense with intensities, noisy with inner speech, electric with anxiety spikes, turbulent with existential nausea. It's hard to believe that my eyes open at the touch of the sun, despite myself. Ragged, feeling dead before my time, loose threads trailing, I simply follow orders.

I speak to myself out loud while walking round the local streets. There's a grounding aspect to naming, and I speak the names of trees, buildings, pathways, colours as I pass them, touchstones to the material world. Sometimes I take a notebook with me and write these names and any other thoughts that arise. I wonder briefly what people think as they pass me but, never mind, I need to overspeak the dampening subvocalities of morning. The muddy and sticky undervoice I always listen to first, not with my ears but with my reluctant blood, with my tombstone eyelids, with my quavering heart. I am a body feeling itself and learning its trouble. It's hard to stay with it. In it. It's hard to stay in my body. This body full of slow flows seeking escape. Seeking respite from energetic floods and flights. These sensations are not unfamiliar and yet "mark the possibility of a trauma yet to be written into [the] flesh".<sup>2</sup> I experience them as if for the first time, every time. There is a comfort in the familiarity but also a fear that this time it will take an unexpected turn towards a new sensation. I speak to myself from outside of myself. I say, "You will go for a

---

<sup>1</sup> MacLure, "The Offence of Theory."

<sup>2</sup> Trigg, *Topophobia: A Phenomenology Of Anxiety*, xiii.

run and then you will go home and make your morning drink and then while you are waiting for it to cool you will go down and hang out the washing, and then you will read *Affective Methodologies*<sup>3</sup> and find meaning.”

There is another way of describing my morning. A way that foregrounds biodata in the storying of my body feeling itself and learning its troubles. I wake with a resting heartbeat that is high, higher, too high. *Tachycardic*. I feel every beat in my throat. My hands fly there to smooth the beating, to soothe the beating. Every hair on my arm in its own pore stands up in fright. *Horripilation*. Thrill after thrill of electricity courses from toes to skull. *Adrenaline surge*. Blood sugar spikes, I am trembling and nauseous. *Hypoglycemia*. Sweat breaks and cools on my skin, my palms are slick and sweaty. *Galvanic skin response*. I pant rather than breathe, it's shallow, high up in the chest, tight.

All of this happens, and it is measurable and “correct”, in its way. But the quantitative nature of these observations dampens the affective resonance of my morning ennui. Or: fact obscures truth.

Beneath the clinical specificity written by heartbeat, sweat, adrenaline, glucose and respiration is flush after flush of unvoiced sensing and inchoate thought rushing through the body and out. They are the unspoken “proto-thoughts”<sup>4</sup> that become the raw data that I flesh in the poetic or vocalise in performance. Proto-thought is a term coined by philosopher Michael Dummett to refer to thoughts “which cannot be accurately expressed in language”.<sup>5</sup> It arises from a philosophical distinction between the linguistic capacities of the rational human animal, and the non- or sub-linguistic capacities of other creatures. This category of thought and language resides in a perceptually rich realm, and as humans we experience proto-thoughts when we are thinking rapidly—for example when we are following a train of thought but cannot grasp a single one to articulate; or when we lose a word, experience an overload of sensory information, or a rush of affect. William Connolly attributes speed to these thoughts, calling them “quick as greased lightning”.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Knudsen and Stage, “Introduction.”

<sup>4</sup> Michael Dummett, *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 115.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>6</sup> William E Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking Culture Speed*, ed. Michael Hardt Sandra Buckley, Brian Massumi, vol. 23, *Theory Out Of Bounds*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002),

Panic's speed is fast, like a blow, or many blows. Too fast for words to form, but triggering impressions, sharp frights, sounds, odours, glimpses, alterations in your being-in-the-world. These impressions shimmer and linger.

It is this un-language sensing that I address in this work directly. I interrogate this embodied materiality in order to extract its data in a process of situated knowledge-making. I refer to this sense data or this affective data as "emic data". Emic data is an anthropological and ethnographic term I am using to discuss data that arises out of a research field with a "strong situational specificity".<sup>7</sup> I use the term "situated" in the Harawayan sense—to contest hierarchical systems of knowledge production. Author, multispecies feminist theorist, and philosopher of science, technology and gender, Donna Haraway, coined the term "situated knowledges"<sup>8</sup> in 1988 to draw attention to the power relations at play in the processes of knowledge production and to highlight the fact that there is no unconditional observation, no such thing as a purely "objective" science of observation. Knowledge is something we produce in a web of relations that are inherently hierarchical.

Situatedness, in the context of a research practice, is a process marked by the "researchers' intertwinement with the knowledge produced".<sup>9</sup> It is an investigation that is a conversation between the researcher, the site of research, the enquiry and the world – all "affecting and affected" in a feedback loop of shifting boundaries. As much as researchers set up or reproduce the world through research experiments, the world will break through these parameters at the intersection of the organic, the social and the discursive to reveal itself, because "the codes of the world are not still, waiting to be read".<sup>10</sup> The world as an object of knowledge is an active entity, and as Haraway would say, "we are not in charge of the world".<sup>11</sup>

---

64.

<sup>7</sup> Knudsen and Stage, "Introduction," 5.

<sup>8</sup> Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988).

<sup>9</sup> Knudsen and Stage, "Introduction," 6.

<sup>10</sup> Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," 593.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 594.

I am eager to learn what my panic reveals about being in the world, and if that knowing creates a space for transformation, a way to turn emergency into urgency.

It's important for me to note here that etic and emic do not equate to empirical and non-empirical respectively, or to scientific and non-scientific. There is no equation or binary opposition in these terms. Cultural researchers and affect scholars Britta Timm Knudsen and Carsten Stage point out the necessity for expanding our understanding of the scientific to include subjective accounts of affect, rather than excluding the subjective perspective from the empirical and thereby discarding its scientific value. Speaking specifically to the matter of affective research and methodologies, they state that this approach "should be regarded as an interesting zone of inventiveness, a zone raising reflections about what 'the empirical' produced tells us about the world and about the research setting, and a zone allowing us to generate new types of empirical material and perhaps to collect material that has previously been perceived as banal or unsophisticated".<sup>12</sup> It is the hope of this thesis that a more affective exploration and disclosure, presented through poetic enquiry and performance experimentation, will convey the full "feeling-meaning" of this "inchoate, affectively imbued thought"<sup>13</sup> that has "not yet found articulation",<sup>14</sup> and that this extra-discursive exchange carries with it a way of understanding that is beyond language, traveling directly from my body to yours, filling a room with the excess of intensities that panic generates.

As I noted in the introduction, poetic enquiry and performance experimentation are the arts-based methods I chosen to navigate this opaque space, which is full of the proto-, the half-formed, the lost, the intense, the peripheral. While I cannot wrap words around impressions in a linguistics of equivalency, since this "dark precursor"<sup>15</sup> can never be directly known, I have found that I can use the poetic uncanny to unsettle that which lies dormant in the reader and un-loose it into affective understanding or awareness. This unloosening is an uncomfortable awareness for me, drawing attention to the precarity within all "safe spaces"—the safest of spaces—the home of the body, the habitus, and the familiarity of language. The work of the poetic in the panic experiments I have created is

---

<sup>12</sup> Knudsen and Stage, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>13</sup> Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking Culture Speed*, 23, 85.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>15</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Columbia University Press, 1994), 119.

to use the familiar yet unfamiliar to trigger the heaviness of dread, or the blush of shame, or the frightened intake of breath as a realisation comes upon the affected body of the listener. Psychologist Sigmund Freud first drew our attention to “the uncanny”<sup>16</sup> in 1919 in an essay of the same name. Freud used the German word “*unheimlich*”, literally meaning un-homely, to explain the notion of the uncanny; that which is not cosy, comfortable, safe, and yet familiar. It also has the meaning of “creepy”, “frightening” or “scary”, while “*heimlich*” (in its adjectival form) can also mean “secret”. How many secrets live in the home of our bodies? What strangers live within us, what shimmering ghosts, or alternatively, how tenuous is our connection to this materiality, how estranged are we from our selves?

As is appropriate for thought that exists outside of articulation, I find gestures and vocalities that do the work of mobilising the inchoate thought-feelings, shimmering on the margins of language. Jean-Jacques Lecercle calls this marginal realm, “the remainder”<sup>17</sup>. Here, says Lecercle, lurk “syntagmatic monsters”<sup>18</sup>—the unstable, uncertain, overly certain syntax that escapes from, or does violence to, grammatical correctness. The excessive, the repetitive (when one NO is never enough), the peripheral, the neologistic, the florid: all these charming monsters exist in the remainder. We find here also the non-verbal, gestures which support the insufficiency of language, even as vocality becomes noisy—a growl, a moan, a sob, a laugh, a song. The bunched fist or the sharp intake of breath: these add texture, depth and intensity to such ambiguous utterances.

I have always been interested in the capacity of electronic sound and noise to incite a deeply embodied and wordless response, and over time I have taught myself to use softwares and digital instruments to create soundscapes for videos and installation environments. I don’t consider myself to be a musician or a singer, at least no more than I consider myself to be anything in particular. In 2018, under the name *Xenoblood*, I presented an improvised vocal and noise performance at The Metro, a pub in Adelaide that has regular experimental music nights. I was accompanied by Alice Nillson, a young philosopher and sound artist who live-mixed samples I had collected across time (on a plane, speaking panic thoughts into my Zoom recorder; walking through the forest in the

---

<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (Penguin Classics, 2003).121

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, “The Remainder” in *The Violence of Language*

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Northern Rivers of NSW talking into my phone about existential nonsense and capturing the songs of whipbirds and cicadas). Using a looping pedal, I was able to layer and disassemble my voice, while Alice deconstructed it further, using repetition and glitching to create a compost of verbiage, a breaking down of order-words, a foetid pile of language waste reeking of radical destruction and productive of meaning. This place of language rot is a safe space to communicate pain and to upreap<sup>19</sup> agency. In the normal course of social interaction, a scream is inappropriate. Yet I would often like to scream. The scream seems the only appropriate vehicle for containing my lived experience. The performance space unleashes a scream that doesn't choke me, or choke *in* me before exiting, self-censored. The performance scream is alive with meaning and devoid of language, riding on waves of extreme affect that hit an audience as surely as a sonic boom.

*Listen to Xenoblood here [\[LINK\]](#)*

## **Xenoblood**

Transcript of *soundtrack for dismembering the world*

Performed at the Metro Nightclub, Adelaide, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2018

shot through with barks, gasps, sighs, truncated exhalations and inhalations

s eeelf assembly

s s eeee e e lf ass em bly

self ass ee ee ably

s s sel lf assembly

ss s s elf assembly

screeeeeeeeeeee

---

<sup>19</sup> I use the term "upreap" throughout as an alternative to "upcycle" or "recycle" or "reclaim". It has been a staple of my vernacular since the early days in cyberspace. Characters/avatars/sentient code in online communities were sent to the reaper if unused for a period of time. I have since then used the term "upreap" to refer to discarded concepts that I am breathing new life into.

s s s self assembly

e e e lf

assembly l y

self

huh

huh

hey hee (high)

huh huh ah huh

huh huh (low)

huh huh ooooo oooo (descending)

oooohhh ahhhh (highlow)

self assembly

ahahooooo ahhhh

echoechoecho

sssssssss

eeeeeeee

|||||

ffffffffffff

in the panic cathedral

ratio

oooooooooooooooooooo

i leave my body behind

shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

shhh shhh shh shh

huh

(indistinct talking)

time

ourselves

paranoid

material-temporal

psychokinetic

articulate

prescient

spatio-temporal

shhhhhhhhh

[descending achromatic]

the gift that keeps on giving but is hard to take

seeing farther than you could see before

ahhh

heeee

ooooohhhhh (descending)

echoechoecho

seeing as all eye

(loud, overbearing, scary)

you see yourself

machine

machines at once

(machinic voices all speaking over the top of one another)

ahhhhhhh

ahhhhh

oooo

eee



(diving descending)

(child's voice, sounds menacing)

oooohhh ahhh

ooh ahh

ooh ahh

ooh

ahh

ooh

ahh

(descending achromatic)

(simple beat, not a beat for dancing but a beat for marching forever, through the mud)

(indistinct voices)

(crows cawing)

i leave my body behind

i leave my body behind

(indistinct talking)

20<sup>th</sup> century

words blister and carbonise

dribble from my mouth

inky

did i know i was in a dream?

oooohhhh ahhhhhhh (descending achromatic, stepping down, down, down)

(menacing voice)

(this underlies all mystical gate openings)

thanks for dissolving the world

just say

say a body with the mouth

the mouth speaks the world

the mouth that cannot speak of the world  
ends the world  
ends the world

shimmer  
shimmer shimmer  
shimmer shimmer  
shimmer shimmer  
shimmer shimmer  
shimmershimmer  
shimmershimmer  
shimmershimmer  
shimmershimmer

(urgent)  
(child speaks in a vicious voice)

shimmershimmer  
shimmershimmer  
shimmershimmer  
shimmershimmer

just say!  
say a body with the mouth?!  
say a body with the mouth?!  
say a body with the mouth?!  
say a body with the mouth?!  
say a body with the mouth?!  
say a body with the mouth?!  
say a body with the mouth?!  
say a body with the mouth?!  
say a body with the mouth?!  
mouthmouth  
mouthmouth  
(awful cry, increasing in fright)

mouthmouth

mouthmouth

mouthmouth

mouthmouth

mouthmouth

mouthmouth

with the mouthmouth

with the mouthmouth

with the mouthmouth

with the mouthmouth

with the mouthmouth

with the mouthmouth

(drop down down down)

(voices arising from a depth, a cavern, echoing chamber)

shh shhh

shhhhhhhh

I am returning now to this chapter's opening gesture: my reluctant morning instructional. My direction to self to "find meaning" is said without conviction. My gut already knows this is a hopeless pursuit and my gut is an indispensable tool in generating a not-knowing kind of knowing in the instant, an insistent spike galvanising as a decisive event in the multiplicity of affective flows that I pass through and that pass through me. The gut feeling is a non-linguistic sensing, as much as my gut "talks" to me. Growling, rumbling, sending chemical messages through my entire body in drips and drops and voltage. The anxious, suspicious gut generates "an embodied reaction",<sup>20</sup> a not-knowing affectivity that is in excess of discourse and my intestines and is "disclosed in atmospheres, fleeting fragments and traces...and in felt intensities and sensations".<sup>21</sup> In my case, the gut makes its feeling known through nausea, cramping and expulsion. Holding on and letting go. In

---

<sup>20</sup> Lisa Blackman, "Researching Affect and Embodied Hauntologies: Exploring an Analytics of Experimentation," in *Affective Methodologies*, ed. Britta Timm Knudsen, and Carsten Stage (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 25.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

*Gut Feminisms*<sup>22</sup> feminist psychoanalyst and author Elizabeth A. Wilson applies the term “organ speech”<sup>23</sup> emphasising “the entanglement of psyche and soma...to bring the psychically animated nature of biological substrata to the fore.” Wilson asks if we could “think of organ speech as a kind of bodily utterance...a biological performative—it enacts the events it appears only to be symbolizing”.<sup>24</sup>

I say to myself, “You will go through the motions of writing. You will create the conditions. It is the best you can do because you *don’t know*.”

“Don’t know” is an unsettling place to be. To be settled in research is to know, to know beyond a shadow. To be settled is the punctum. “Don’t know” drives us towards partial knowing, towards ambiguity rather than certainty. Ambiguity opens out, inviting us to look further. Certainty will brook no further curiosity or question. Educator, feminist theorist and author Patricia Lather writes that not knowing, or what she terms the “ungraspable”, is “not about ineffability but about how the ambiguities of knowing are the structure of our grasp”.<sup>25</sup> She positions this within a praxis of feminist experimental ethnography,<sup>26</sup> the work of which is to “enact the ruins of any effort to monumentalize lived experience”.<sup>27</sup> She asserts that rather than working towards “congealing” lived experience into concrete categories of analysis, this not-knowingness leaves space for us to “write towards what we don’t understand”.<sup>28</sup>

I situate my own “auto/critical”<sup>29</sup> research broadly within this feminist experimental framework, moving across autobiography, autoethnography, theory and critical thought using a kind of fieldwork that places primacy on what Lather, quoting ethnographer

---

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Gut Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> “Organ speech” is a term first used by Freud in his 1915 essay “The Unconscious”. Elizabeth A. Wilson seeks to critique and expand upon this concept, to consider that an organ is indeed capable of utterance, or performative speech.

<sup>24</sup> Wilson, *Gut Feminism*, 76.

<sup>25</sup> Lather, *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Towards a Doubled Science.*, 40.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Stacy Holman Jones, “Writing a hard and passing rain: Autotheory, Autoethnography, and Queer Futures,” in *Gender Futurity, Intersectional Autoethnography: Embodied Theorizing from the Margins*, ed. A.L. Johnson and B. LeMaster (Routledge, 2020).

George E. Marcus, calls “messy texts”.<sup>30</sup> that valorise partial knowings, diary entries, anecdotes, scribbled notes, cultural and critical assumptions; that riff on philosophical concepts and troubles the authority of institutional research fieldwork.<sup>31</sup> Marcus refers to these messy texts as “symptoms of a struggle to produce, with the given format and practices of analytical writing, unexpected connections and thus new descriptions of old realities”.<sup>32</sup> I have been living with these noisy scribbles, scraps and incomplete texts for a lifetime, and this makes for a complex and polyvocal representation of a shifting world. Auto-critical methods open up to allow all these voices and their internal conflicts and logics, embracing a multiplicity of “truths”.

I don’t know and can never know my panic—if that is its name—and yet I know it more thoroughly than I know my hungers, my sleep, my pains. It is the first time, it is the only time, it is time without number. Every panic is new, every panic needs to be learned over again, yet it lives inside every cell, forever. It is the reviled companion of repetition, a ritual of undoing that is necessary to a sense of self. Albeit a sense of self always under attack, always disrupted.

The naming of my experience and the partial and contingent knowing of it doesn’t begin with my title as “researcher” and end with the full stop at the conclusion of this project. I was born into this place of precarity, and have—for the most part—wrestled, grappled with, wrenched and extracted anything that I know about the conditions of my existence from the jaws of its terror. This is hard work, and it is also a kind of violence enacted upon myself in order to experience an aliveness that eludes me. There is a delusional belief that a return to “normal” is possible, at which time this aliveness will be accessible to me, but normal is a state of intersecting inhospitable conditions that created the panic in the first place. All this wrangling and grappling, it is clear, is relational, and relationality is central to the delving, peeling back and deep diving that is writing the self. Critical performance studies theorist and author Stacey Holman Jones talks about “balancing two sides of an equation” and stretching genres/categories as part of the process of writing “auto/critical” and “critical autoethnographic” works.<sup>33</sup> Holman Jones identifies this

---

<sup>30</sup> George E. Marcus, "Ethnography Two Decades After Writing Culture: From the Experimental to the Baroque," *Anthropological Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2007.0059>.

<sup>31</sup> Lather, *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Towards a Doubled Science.*, 37.

<sup>32</sup> George E. Marcus, *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 189.

<sup>33</sup> Jones, "Writing a hard and passing rain: Autotheory, Autoethnography, and Queer Futures," 250-51.

equation thus: “On one side: experience—my own and that of others I am in relation with and to. On the other side: critical theory—a way of not only explaining the inside working of relations but also a means for imagining how those relations might work differently, otherwise”.<sup>34</sup> In order to be survivable, panic needs theory. Otherwise it is just a painful wound inflicted over and over without reason. Reason, or a framework for thinking about panic—its origin story and its purpose—provides rich compost for the emergence of existential understanding and, with grace, agency.

Autoethnographers Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe highlight relationality as a hallmark of critical autoethnography, stating that it allows for “critical self-reflexivity and cultural commentary to examine embodied experiences, relational encounters, and intercultural conundrums”.<sup>35</sup> Holman Jones along with her collaborator—digital ethnographer and author Dan Harris—have identified critical autoethnography, in conversation with arts-based research, as a method which “...offers health researchers creative ways to share and understand complex and dynamic selves, to engage in difficult conversations in ethical and meaningful ways, and to change how we relate in healthcare contexts, particularly in the area of mental health and wellness”.<sup>36</sup>

As a person who has had multiple mental health diagnoses across a lifetime, and who relies on the anxiolytic power of salmon-coloured powder compacted into scored pills to see me through, from waking to sleep, I can say I exist within a healthcare context, that it would seem I am in need of “fixing” through the wellness industrial complex. The pills are the gateway drug that connect me, through the active ingredient clonazepam, a benzodiazepine, to the pharmaceutical industrial complex and to a history of sexism, racism and classism. Clonazepam’s sleepy older sister, Valium, was the star of a marketing campaign aimed at white middle-class housewives (well, their husbands actually) as “mother’s little helper”.<sup>37</sup> Valium was aggressively marketed by

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>35</sup> Orbe, "Introduction: Critical Autoethnography as Method of Choice/ Choosing Critical Autoethnography," 2-18.

<sup>36</sup> Stacey Holman Jones and Dan Harris, "Critical Autoethnography and Mental Health Research," in *Handbook of Ethnography in Healthcare Research*, ed. P. M. W. Hackett and C. M. Hayre (Routledge, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> *Mother’s Little Helper* is the title of a song by the Beatles, immortalising the drug Valium as “the little yellow pill” that “helps her on her way, gets her through her busy day”. The term “mother’s little helper” has

pharmaceutical advertising wizard Arthur Sackler who worked for the medical advertising agency William Douglas McAdams Inc. Sackler was instrumental in bringing campaign strategies such as direct marketing to physicians.<sup>38</sup> Many of the techniques he pioneered are under legal rigorous scrutiny.<sup>39</sup> The Sackler family also owns the now bankrupt company called Purdue Pharma, whose main drug is Oxycontin, one of the most addictive opioids on the market.<sup>40</sup> These targeted ads created a demarcation between acceptable therapeutic drug use and criminal drug use. This demarcation finds its fault line along lines of race, and the result is a carceral justice system in which black people are over-represented for drug crimes. The intersections ripple.

---

become synonymous with the drug. The aggressive advertising of Valium and other drugs in the '60s and '70s was focussed around making women more compliant, better housewives and lovers, and motivated to stay slim, attractive and well-functioning for their husbands.

<sup>38</sup> Patrick Radden Keefe, *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty* (New York: Doubleday, 2021), 55.

<sup>39</sup> Patrick Radden Keefe, "The Sackler Family's Plan to Keep Its Billions," *The New Yorker* (2020). <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-sackler-family-s-plan-to-keep-its-billions>.

<sup>40</sup> Keefe, *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty*.



Figure 1: Advertisement for Valium, Roche Laboratories 1965.

Phenomenologically, I find myself within the pages of Sartre's *Nausea*, in a state of existential meltdown. It is in these moments of meltdown that, "suddenly, all at once, the veil is torn away, I have understood, I have seen".<sup>41</sup> This is, to me, painful and important and it offers me breath-taking insight into the world as it is and being-towards-death, the Heideggerian concept of confronting our human finitude and in so doing, finding an "authentic" existence while learning to die daily.<sup>42</sup> The clue to joy is wrapped somewhere inside this painful package.

In another context I am a broken cog in Capitalism's machine of production, not capable of producing value as a worker-unit. I exist on welfare, taking from the pockets of productive citizens. I am marking time until death can free up my scrappy piece of the pie.

---

41 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983).

42 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 277.; Simon Critchley, "Being and Time part 6: Death," *Guardian* July 13 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jul/13/heidegger-being-time>.



I am an unproductive gender marker, a wasteful womb, a unit of no fuckable worth. And fucking is Capitalism's lifeblood.<sup>43</sup>

In another sense I see the world as it is, not as it seems; I am a seer, I offer the wisdom of no-hope to all who know me, and I withhold nothing. All this, wrapped up in the queerness of a body that is becoming, undoing, often without organs, diving into the lake of consistency, only to emerge dripping and tired, ready to begin again.<sup>44</sup>

On a Wednesday recently I really melted down, ontologically speaking. I didn't know myself at all. I had promised a friend that I would give them a lift to take their cat to the vet. I knew that this was risky, I was feeling very edgy, I was brinking, and I knew this, but I couldn't let them down. They live close by, maybe five minutes' drive, at the outside. The vet was a few kilometres from there. Five minutes? 15 minutes? These measures lose any meaning once the panic sets itself on its inexorable path.

This friend had never witnessed me in anything other than a well-put-together mode. I like to present this face to the world. I like to be normal-passing, because I know about stigma, being many things other than normal.

Anyway, we started to drive, and I felt myself departing, dissociating. It's quite hard to drive while dissociating, and I told him he couldn't talk to me because I was having an anxiety attack. Mostly people have no idea what to do, and he looked worried. I tried to tell him not to be afraid, in the few words I had at my disposal, to reassure I would get him there safely. Then I began humming, quietly, then louder, sometimes open-mouthed and becoming more vowelised. What happened next is that every second split into many other seconds, and those seconds split also, and so on. I was driving a neverending road, crossing a neverending bridge, drifting in time, cut loose, veering towards the railings. My friend should have been scared. I expect my friend was terrified.

---

<sup>43</sup> Deborah Curtis, "Commodities and Sexual Subjectivities: A Look at Capitalism and Its Desires" *Cultural Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (2004): 99.

<sup>44</sup> I refer here to the philosophical concept of the "plane of consistency" or the "plane of immanence" and the "body without organs" from Deleuze and Guattari's tome *A Thousand Plateaus*. The concept, briefly, suggests that we are all always becoming, and that we are in constant flux, from one becoming to another, until death. Even death is no end, for we are then Becoming-soil or Becoming-tree. We "reterritorialise" as a different milieu.

After I'm not sure how long, we arrived at the vet, and I accompanied my friend and his cat into the surgery, where I broke down in tears. This kind of public humiliation I have become used to, and my friend said: vets are often nicer than doctors.

This writing towards and into myself is alive, what Holman Jones calls, after Della Pollock, a "living body of thought".<sup>45</sup> Given that I am alive and I do not know what tomorrow holds, I am always writing towards what I don't understand, or/and also writing to understand and to reveal, to attend to that which requires constant reiteration and revisitation. Writing in this way is to be drawn along a "pathless path"<sup>46</sup> through unfamiliar territory, which reveals itself incrementally and partially. Anthropologists and authors Francisco Martínez, Lili Di Puppò and Martin Frederiksen refer to this orientation towards research as "the periphery".<sup>47</sup> We can never see the entire map of knowledge from this perspective. It has no centre and it contains no destination. The exploration is vibrant, dynamic, alive, neverending. The new arrives from obscurity to revelation, over the horizon, around a bend, down a byway. Writing towards a revelation is, as Lather writes, a "risky business".<sup>48</sup> Perhaps there's nothing there! Perhaps there's a something but it's unrelated, promising a further opening, but not delivering. But there's never nothing there. The "nothing" that is never there is often just not considered useful ground for institutional research—it's minoritarian, peripheral—harbouring the "kinds of knowledge that are hidden, counting as not counting, not easily transformed into data and information, or simply belonging to the realm of the non-measurable".<sup>49</sup> These "worthless" knowledges have historically been the stories of female bodies, bodies of colour, queer bodies; feminist ethnographies of vulnerability and embodiment. As art historian, critical theorist and author Lauren Fournier notes, "The very integration of auto or autos, the self, with

---

<sup>45</sup> Della Pollock, "Part 1 Introduction: Performance Trouble," in *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*, ed. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), 8.; Stacy Holman Jones, "Living Bodies of Thought: The 'Critical' in Critical Autoethnography," *Qualitative Inquiry* 22, no. 4 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800415622509>.  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1077800415622509>.

<sup>46</sup> Lili Di Puppò Francisco Martínez, Martin Demant Frederiksen, "Introduction: Welcome to the corners of the peripheral," in *Peripheral Methodologies: Unlearning, Not-knowing and Ethnographic Limit*, ed. Lili Di Puppò Francisco Martínez, Martin Demant Frederiksen (eds.) (Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2021), 4.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Lather, *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Towards a Doubled Science*.

<sup>49</sup> Francisco Martínez, "Introduction: Welcome to the corners of the peripheral."

theory into a single term is contentious, especially in light of the historical disparagement of self-reflective work as a supposedly narcissistic and therefore non-intellectual or fundamentally uncritical mode—and especially when the work is made by women and people of colour”.<sup>50</sup> Fournier introduces autotheory as a “contemporary feminist practice” in which “artists, writers, philosophers, activists, curators, and critics use the autobiographical, first person, and related practices of self-imaging [ ] to process, perform, enact, iterate, subvert, instantiate, and wrestle with the hegemonic discourses of ‘theory’ and philosophy”.<sup>51</sup> Autotheory enables me to lean into memoir as a way of cutting across academia’s institutional structures of knowledge production, inserting theory under the skin of self-writing.

As with any pathless kind of wandering, the researcher happens upon exits, openings and objects that warrant a closer look. There is a lot of wonder in the wander, as well as some stumbling, covering of old ground, getting lost and coming up against obstacles and dead ends. To be “drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters [found] there”<sup>52</sup> necessitates a readiness to treat these unexpected findings and obstacles with ingenuity, curiosity and care. Encountering a finding we don’t (yet) understand is a motivating experience. At the moment of the encounter we have reached the limits of our knowledge, while being aware that there is an outer limit we have not yet arrive at. In this way we are drawn along the pathless path, in the direction of the yet-to-be-known. Motivated, rather than bested by this encounter, this “awareness of the outer limits, of what remains unknown...becomes a resourceful component of knowledge-making and not only disruptively, but also generatively and with a methodological potential”.<sup>53</sup>

I call this attraction, inspired by educational scientist Maggie MacLure, as going where the data glows.<sup>54</sup> Allowing myself to be mesmerised by a glitter, a glimmer. Allowing the eye and the mind to be caught by a peripheral movement that might be a something. Taking a closer look. Experiencing hope, excitement, relief. Allowing the glimmer-glint to grow in intensity and take up residence in the researcher-body as affect. To pulse with rhythmic

---

<sup>50</sup> Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, 6.

<sup>51</sup> Lauren Fournier, "Sick Women Sad Girls and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 33, no. 3 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2018.1499495>.

<sup>52</sup> Francisco Martínez, "Introduction: Welcome to the corners of the peripheral," 4.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> MacLure, "The Offence of Theory," 283.

excitement and sometimes disappointment. This wonderment, this “baroque affect: [this] vertiginous sensation of vibration at the point of indiscernibility”<sup>55</sup> might become a something, might deviate into experimentation. Might move from my heart to yours. Might lodge there and might become a contagion.<sup>56</sup> Might become a poem, which is not a panic, but is a something.

*This poem is not  
a panic  
But it is a something*

MacLure posits wonderment as a way to push back against “the specious clarity demanded and enforced by audit cultures, whose workings could be summarised as the bureaucratic administration of banality.”<sup>57</sup> The bureaucratic dissemination of cultural value as “official renderings” creates the oppressive banality of audit culture, which drives policy-making and institutional regimes of ranking. These guidelines and rankings are hierarchical, inflexible, and can amplify inequities already embedded in academic and cultural institutions.<sup>58</sup> Audit culture takes an end point, and that end point is to know, unequivocally, not inviting wonder, or speculation, or disruption. It is the final roadblock. The punctum of knowing puts an end to wondering.

Is knowing a violence? Some violent ways of knowing: wrenching outcomes from a reluctant dataset, prioritising the quantifiable over the mysterious, compulsory production, all imperatives, all musts, certainty over ambiguity, annihilating the blurry and the shimmer, ignoring the affective, erasing subjective experience, never crying in the

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>56</sup> MacLure, via Massumi speaks about wonderment being a vehicle for experimentation via “creative contagion.” That wonder should have the capacity to affect others, to move them. In this way wonderment becomes mobile, might spark such a contagion. Massumi calls this leaving the audience with a “problem”, or a headache, the gift of a headache!

<sup>57</sup> MacLure, “The Offence of Theory,” 278.

<sup>58</sup> Sam Ladkin, “Against Value in the Arts.,” *Cultural Value Project*, 2014, <http://culturalvalueproject.wordpress.com/2014/04/11/dr-samuel-ladkin-against-value-in-the-arts/>

academy, pulling oneself together, autonomy of research, extractivist academia, not acknowledging entanglement.

I used to watch the Wile. E. Coyote and Road Runner cartoons when I was a kid, and I think what was so compelling about this cartoon above all others was the indefatigable desire driving Wile. E. to know. To know the taste of the Road Runner. Perhaps to know speed, and fearlessness. Every time the cartoon boulder smashes the lights out of the coyote of not-knowing we think it'll stop the wondering, the endless pursuit. But it doesn't. Coyote is indefatigable in their pursuit of the elusive and never-reached Road Runner. Both take great delight in the chase and seem more companions-in-chase than adversaries. We suspect that a bellyful of knowing would serve only to annihilate purpose for them both. The Road Runner is always more delicious uneaten.

Audit culture demands that we wrench meaning from experience in the service of a systemic drive towards metrics, categorisation and reduction. Curator, educator and author Craig Kridel discusses the alignment between audit culture and neoliberal economic interests whereby "diverse groups, individuals, communities, and histories"<sup>59</sup> are treated as commensurable, masking inequities in resources, power and access. Within research fields this correlates to advancement based on systemic review, the escalator of publication and citation, empirical-evidence-based practices, quantifiable analysis and outcomes. Basing productivity reviews and the legitimacy of knowledges on exclusionary rubrics represents one top-down way of oppressing meaning into pre-ordained frames that excludes certain marginalised identities or creates a hegemonic dataset that effectively erases otherness. The term "epistemic violence"<sup>60</sup> has been applied to this kind of institutional extractivist scholarship, but applies also to much broader systems of knowledge production. Philosopher, queer theorist and activist Moira Pérez identifies "different ways in which violence is exercised in relation to the production, circulation and recognition of knowledge: the denial of epistemic agency for certain

---

<sup>59</sup> Craig Kridel, "Encyclopedia of Curriculum Studies," ed. Craig Kridel (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2010. ), under "Audit Culture." <https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/curriculumstudies>.

<sup>60</sup> The term "epistemic violence" was coined by Gayatri Spivak in her text "Can the Sub-Altern Speak?" (Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. *Can the subaltern speak?* Basingstoke: Macmillan.), as a way of referring to the silencing of marginalised voices.

subjects, the unacknowledged exploitation of their epistemic resources, their objectification, among many others.”<sup>61</sup>

In audit culture, the direct line from experience to logos, to thus and therefore, bypasses wonder in favour of what Maclure calls the “pedestrian contributions to knowledge of audit-driven approaches such as evidence-based practice and systematic review”<sup>62</sup>. Audit culture shuts down less quantifiable avenues of exploration that are problematic for the ranked institutional outcomes it is reliant upon. Audit culture will not-see that which is not in its neo-liberal interests to see—eschewing the amorphous, extra-discursive and extra-textual vectors of glow, shimmer, wonder, fascination, anomaly, affect. The outcomes of these vectors do not serve any systemic metric, given that they may be very ambiguous, durational in the body, pre-linguistic, felt yet unspeakable, impossible to pin down. This does not mean that the outcomes are not known, but that they operate at the level of “intensity” rather than “qualification”—to follow Massumi’s theorising<sup>63</sup>—and are therefore “disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration...narratively de-localized, spreading over the generalized body surface, like a lateral backwash from the function-meaning interloops traveling the vertical path between head and heart.”<sup>64</sup> These durational intensities stay with you, lingering as a vibration, or pass through, leaving a mark for remembrance. The intensities are an event, triggered, and the vibration, once triggered, never ends, just adds to the vibrational becomings of the world.

While arts-based research—as a trans-disciplinary, multimodal paradigm—might present a problem for audit culture, it simultaneously opens up possibilities for experimental modes of research in that it rejects “forced structuring, methodology, and categorization in favour of embracing creativity and questioning...and allows [for] both ambiguity and precision”.<sup>65</sup> Often, in this paradigm, ambiguity and precision will exist alongside one another, weaving in and out, highlighting the impossibility of a pure, unambiguous

---

<sup>61</sup> Moira Pérez, "Epistemic violence reflections between the invisible and the ignorable," *El lugar sin límites* 1, no. 1 (2019). <https://www.aacademica.org/moira.perez/84>.

<sup>62</sup> MacLure, "The Offence of Theory," 278.

<sup>63</sup> Massumi, "Autonomy of Affect," 84-85.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>65</sup> Susan Finley, Toria Dawnielle Messinger, and Zachary A. Mazur, "Arts-Based Research," ed. Sara Delamont Paul Atkinson, Alexandru Cernat, Joseph W. Sakshaug, Richard A. Williams, *SAGE Research Methods Foundations* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd 2020).

research outcome. In my case, using both poetic inquiry, performance and experimentation within an auto/critical/theoretical frame, I am able to capture affective, sensory, embodied and conceptual experience in a way that I hope is insightful and multivalent. Each person who receives that knowledge receives it via their own positionality. This approach reveals ways of knowing the world and the self in the world that is inherently complex and relational.

The production of knowledges arising out of panic research is a scattered process and rarely happens in a state of panic. As I have made clear, panic is the least conducive state to “capture” what is happening when I panic, though a mode of recording (say, a video document or a piece of writing—almost asemic nonsense) can be an insightful document post-panic to translate into the affective expression. Revisiting the panic with discursive faculties functioning (these go offline during panic), I can approach a storying of the effects of panic using a kind of vocalisation that has become part of my linguistic set across a lifetime of activating it in panic states. This linguistic set could also be considered as pre-linguistic expression, given that it arises from my body riding on extreme intensities of affect, with no consideration for the formation of order-words or making sense. I have called this sonic expression “!ictic! vocalities” and I channel it in my performance experiments. The bangs hugging the word symbolise a suddenness, a fright, a seizing of attention, and the word itself contains a percussive series of plosives and glottal stops and starts. It’s a stutter, a cough, a choke and a cry.

!ictic! [IKTIK]:

Vocalising in fits and starts. Ticking language. From the Latin *ictus*, meaning literally “a blow, stroke, thrust”. In prosodic terms it relates to the “beat, impulse, stress” of voices or of speech. I am using the neologistic “!ictic!” for its phonological value. The “c” is a plosive, in both instances, sounded as the voiceless velar plosive “k”, and this doubled plosive, is quickly followed by the denti-alveolar consonant “t”—and so performs a stuttering seizure of speech, a way to approach languaging (within language) the seizure of a panic. It is a language always proceeding towards a silence, brought about by a stop, where the tongue, either behind the teeth or to the anterior of the mouth, blocks the airflow, creating a pressure of breath and noise and eventually either swallowing itself or voicing a wordless but forceful plosive.

*seized. on a blue day, on a fine day, on an ordinary day, on a day like any other, out of  
the blue...*

Massumi claims that affect hits first the pre-linguistic body and then, an instant later, the cognitive faculties take up the affect and wrap speech around it, what he would call a difference in “intensity” and “qualification”, qualification being the narrativisation of affect.<sup>66</sup> There is a gap between the two, for “the skin is faster than the word”,<sup>67</sup> as Massumi puts it. This gap is an aporia, “a state of suspense, potentially of disruption...a temporal sink, a hole in time.”<sup>68</sup> These different registers of embodied events—of apprehension and expression (a sound, a word, a flush, blush, a flash or a flee)—are not exactly oppositional, but operate perhaps at different depths, one skittering across the surface of the skin and flying off in all directions, often accompanied by paralinguistic events (gestures, facial expressions, bodily tics etc.) and the other, in the lag, diving deeply into the cognitive/discursive sphere, recovering the power of speech in the wake of the affective event. Thus, Massumi’s affect is “primary, non-conscious, asubjective or presubjective, asignifying, unqualified, and intensive; while emotion is derivative, conscious, qualified, and meaningful, a ‘content’ that can be attributed to an already-constituted subject”,<sup>69</sup> operating in an extra-discursive and extra-textual space, irreducible, belonging to no body.

Personally, I find this to be true.

In the grip of panic, I become non-verbal. All leg jitters and arms levitating and balloon head and swallowing swallowing swallowing air, the membrane of my throat, my tongue. Swallowing sound. All hands with fingers, like small birds flying upwards and outwards with my thoughts. Bringing these bird-hands to bear upon the page is a domestication I am mostly incapable of. Turning the throat spasms to sound makes for ghastly noise, a cry from the in-between.

---

<sup>66</sup> Massumi, "Autonomy of Affect," 86.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Steven Shaviro, "Post-Cinematic Affect," ed. Julia Leyda Shane Denson, *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film* (Falmer: Reframe Books, 2016), <https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/post-cinema/2-2-shaviro/>.



Sometime later, after the tongue returns to the mouth, there is speech. The speech is not the affect but is the recovery of the discursive and textual body after the affective wave passes through. And even though this speech is no longer affect, it can be affective, and trigger intensities of its own. These are new intensities, new vibrations, new mobile events. And the cycle begins again.

Massumi asks the question: "How can language capture modes of affective intensity?"<sup>70</sup> His response to this is that language can carry affective intensities through poetic expression. Rather than using language to contain affect within its structure, these poetic expressions are led by the mobility of affect, led by the intensities, the speeds, the flows of the affect. These characteristics become a part of the prosody of affective language, embracing the stutters, the silences, the pauses, the explosive runnings-on. Poetry is "the word we reach for when language is outdoing itself affectively"<sup>71</sup>.

This project dives into the intensity/qualification gap to see what happens in the instant between the skin and the word. The gap is where I situate my enquiry, as a site of production, gathering, translation, experimentation, analysis and transmission. It's where the data glows. A shimmering site. It is where the traces of panic exist, like the afterimage of lightning. A surplus, or a remainder. These traces still contain affective power, moving towards language and out, reverberating long after the words have been uttered.

The poetic is a category that exceeds genre, and we can find it in a grandmother's recipe, in a song or a theatrical performance, even in an instruction manual. It is a "generative text"<sup>72</sup> that contains more than it knows it contains, and between words is a whole universe of meaning, unfurling in all directions endlessly. In my work I deploy the poetic through experimentation, shifting into modes of performance, !ictic! vocalities and noise making, and autotheory—to pass on the thinkingfeeling experiences of the bodymind in panic. This can be a messy process, and I have cried in the conference halls and tutorial rooms and lecture theatres often, with a wide variety of responses from disgust to discomfort to laughter to walkouts. These instances of affective response have been

---

<sup>70</sup> Jacob Ferrington Brian Massumi, Alina Hechler, Jannell Parsons, "Affect and Immediation: An Interview with Brian Massumi," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 28 (2019): 115, <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.28.09>. <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol28/iss1/13>.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

enlightening. Writer Adrienne Swartjes says that one of the powers of autotheory is its “push toward embodiment and invention. It refuses the objective voice, the pretence of neutrality, the fabrication that we can be all brain and no body, with body’s accompanying pleasures, embarrassments, and disappointments. It brings in the vulnerable elements of personal narrative and of one’s own body”.<sup>73</sup>

One of the first performances I did to mobilise my research via my own body in a performance “laboratory” was at the Queensland School of Continental Philosophy (QSCP) in Brisbane in 2016 titled *the expanse of a dead open mouth*. The low ceilings of the tutorial room and the general ambience of the academic architecture was already loaded with the ghosts of learning, these ghosts filled with wonder, insecurity, anxiety, productivity, pain. Certain kinds of knowledges were shared in this space, and, having spent plenty of time in these spaces myself, I knew it was rarely the kind of subjective, affective, embodied knowledge I was about to produce.

*Ok! Today I am having a panic attack  
Nono, Today I am speaking to panic and it is speaking back to me  
ahhh, panic is doing me, or...I am doing panic  
anyway, today I am performing panic*

*Bear with me. Our relationship may become strained. There is an expectation that exists here, in this room, that I will observe time and linearity in coherent ways, that I will reinforce the integrity of this space, of the subjectivity I am wearing in order to separate myself from you. I am here to tell you something. You are here to listen.*

*You expect me to know what the fuck I am talking about, yes?*

*Clearly, that isn’t going to happen.*

*A scientific or symptomatic reckoning of the event of panic will note palpitations of the heart, sweat on the skin, raising of the hairs on the body, temperature fluctuations,*

---

<sup>73</sup> Arianne Zwartjes, "Autotheory as Rebellion: On Research, Embodiment, and Imagination in Creative Nonfiction," University of Michigan ed. *Michigan Quarterly Review*, University of Michigan, 2019, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2019/07/autotheory-as-rebellion-on-research-embodiment-and-imagination-in-creative-nonfiction/>.

*quickened breathing, adrenal tremors. There is more that can only be anecdotally  
recorded:  
I thought I was going to die  
I am going crazy  
I couldn't breathe  
I didn't feel like my hands were my own  
I was terrified  
I felt electric shocks running through me  
Everything was too noisy/went silent  
My jaw was tightly clamped*

It was not until I entered the embodied performance experiment as both researcher and site of research that I understood the contagion of affect. Translating the emic data produced by my body to noise, motion and intensities born of intensities was difficult, problematic, embarrassing and powerfully contagious. The task is to express the un- or barely-speakable data that skitters across the skin and gathers in the gap, noisily, before the word takes it. Perhaps it exits the mouth on the breath as cries, stutters, chokes, moans, gasps, gibberish. Perhaps there is no noise, but a paralinguistic expression of body parts flicking, tapping, rolling, jerking. Lightning-fast changes flicker around the eyes and mouth, pulling the face into tic-like movement as the body is taken by intensities.

When I am in the laboratory of my own body—pausing, coughing, crying, stuttering, not being a reliable scholar or a well-put-together academic subject—I can truly communicate the vulnerability and precarity of a subjectivity wrought in panic and tease out its social, cultural and political relationships.

Jean-Jacques Lecerle, philosopher and language theorist, says that not all language needs to be sensical and linear in the manner of linguist Saussure's "*langue*" or language, which operates within an ordered system of speech, language and speaking, using "syntagms" (words, phonemes or phrases) in a linear and sequential manner to communicate with others.<sup>74</sup> Saussure states that "...words acquire relations based on the

---

<sup>74</sup> Lesley Lanir, "Saussure's Linguistic Terminology — Signs, Language, Chains, and Associations," *Medium.com*, 2019, <https://medium.com/@llanirfreelance/ferdinand-de-saussure-the-linguistic-unit-sign-signified-and-signifier-explained-a7e361b5a2f3>.

linear nature of language because they are chained together...The elements are arranged in sequence on the chain of speaking. Combinations supported by linearity are syntagms".<sup>75</sup> Lecercle says there is another side to language, a "dark side" and that this side emerges through "nonsensical and poetic texts, in the illuminations of mystics and the delirium of logophiliacs or mental patients." He calls this dark side "the remainder", where "syntagmatic monsters"<sup>76</sup> shed light, from the edges, on what falls out of *langue*.

I speak as a spectral glitch from the outside, living in a shimmering liminality, never fully returned, never fully reconstituted, a ghost in the machine, always already dead. Walking and falling. Reporting from the other side of annihilation with a profound understanding of the maintenance of ontological security, of the workings of the machine, and this becomes deeply embedded in the everyday, one sees through this lens, and this is inescapable, valuable and political.

Monsters arise out of necessity. When the march of order-words fails and fails again to communicate intensity, I dive into Lecercle's "rag-bag"<sup>77</sup> to upreap the discards, the redundant, the excessive and repetitive, for this language trash has an amplified resonance that makes it unsuitable for the speaking of prosaic experience, an intensity which unsettles the symbolic, semiotic, narrativised order of linguistic communication. When I say "dive" I mean that I find myself in the "rag-bag", since, in the grip of panic, nothing else is available to me. After the fact of panic, in the creative practice of piecing together and performing panic, I tend to the rag-bag carefully. At that point in the process of creation, I can't hope to open my mouth and unleash a flow of little monsters. I need to revisit, I suppose, to return to the site of the event and "call in" the panic, and let the monsters find me. Affective communication unleashes a kind of vibration, motion and noise effectively making language "functionally redundant".<sup>78</sup> While functional language can communicate the workings of the amygdala, and the galvanic responses of the skin, it is the syntagmatic monsters birthed from the mouths of the delirious, the queer, the poets, the reviled, the outliers that have the power to transmit affect through what Massumi

---

<sup>75</sup> Wade Baskin Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, ed. Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy (Columbia University Press, 2011).

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/saus15726>.

<sup>76</sup> Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, 60.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Massumi, "Autonomy of Affect," 86.

would call a “creative contagion”.<sup>79</sup> Following the pull of the monstrous, the discarded, the reviled is a kind of experimentation that opens itself to a burgeoning of new growth, adventitious growth, and unexpected connections.

My languagebody opens out because it cannot hold itself together, it bifurcates along myriad lines of affective meaning, revisiting old wounds, lesions, triggers, terrors. Over and over. I am finding a form for excess.

### **Autotheory, embodied writing, antipathography: finding a form for excess**

Lauren Fournier situates autotheory as a “performative post-1960s practice”,<sup>80</sup> re-contextualising works previously designated as “critical memoir”, “theoretical fiction”, “life-thinking” and Audre Lorde’s term “biomythography”, which she used to describe her book *Zami*. Researcher, writer and philosopher Michelle M. Wright, quoting dance theorist Ted Warburton, notes that “[b]iomythography is the weaving together of myth, history and biography in epic narrative form...It is a transgressive form of writing, taking the idea of crossing boundaries as the basis of its form.”<sup>81</sup> While the most cited contemporary examples of autotheory are Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*<sup>82</sup> and Paul B. Preciado’s *Testo Junkie*,<sup>83</sup> there are plenty of emergent and historical works that exceed the page and transgress boundaries of genre by using the lived materiality of bodies, affect, trauma, sickness, precarity and oppression to create knowledge.

Fournier extrapolates on the autotheoretical as first articulated by Stacey Young in her book *Changing the Wor(l)d* and describes autotheoretical texts as those that “...combine autobiography with theoretical reflection and with the authors' insistence on situating

---

<sup>79</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 19.

<sup>80</sup> Fournier, "Sick Women Sad Girls and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice," 644.

<sup>81</sup> Michelle M. Wright, "Queer Temporalities: Space-ing Time and the Subject," in *Time and Literature*, ed. Thomas M. Allen, Cambridge Critical Concepts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>82</sup> Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2015).

<sup>83</sup> Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie : Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013).

themselves within histories of oppression and resistance.”<sup>84</sup> This situatedness and unpacking of social relations underpin the texts, body art and performance works of bell hooks, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Carolee Schneeman, Annie Sprinkle, Johanna Hedva, Havi Carel, Shawne Michaelaine Holloway and Panteha Abareshi. Abareshi says of her performance works, which mostly take place in hospital settings, as “...pushing my own vulnerability and objectification to discuss the realities of mortality and fragility, and the complexities of empowerment in the face of literal powerlessness.”<sup>85</sup> Affect theorist and philosopher Sarah Ahmed says of reading the work of black feminists and feminists of colour that the work shook her up, that it was life changing: “Here was writing in which an embodied experience of power provides the basis of knowledge. Here was writing animated by the everyday: the detail of an encounter, an incident, a happening, flashing like insight”. Through this work Ahmed “began to appreciate that theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin.”<sup>86</sup>

I also think the skin can do more the closer it gets to theory. Leaning into theory from the body, and leaning into the body from theory, helps us to not only define and explain our experience to ourselves, but to frame our experience as resonant, and as something that can be shared with others through a categorical unpacking, “something that can be articulated and defined.”<sup>87</sup> I understand my panic and its relationship to the world in a more nuanced way if I think panic *with* the phenomenology of perception or *with* affect theory. When I feel that I have left my body, I consider if I have also left the world and why, and I wonder what that means about being in the world. The application of philosophy to the affect of subjective evacuation does not necessarily make it easier to bear, but it does shine a light on the social and cultural knowledges that emerge from that event of evacuation, that flight from the body.

---

<sup>84</sup> Stacey Young, "The Autotheoretical Texts," in *Changing the World* (Great Britain: Routledge, 1997), 69.

<sup>85</sup> Panteha Abeshari, "PANTEHA ABARESHI: Work That Embodies, And Disembodies Pain," *Disability Aesthetics: Personal & Collective Meanings*, 11.10.2021, nd, <https://disabilityaesthetics.tumblr.com/post/651888275560251392/panteha-abareshi-work-that-embodies>.

<sup>86</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Introduction," in *Living a Feminist Life* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

<sup>87</sup> Arianne Zwartjes, "Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory," *Assay: A JOURNAL OF NONFICTION STUDIES* 6, no. 1 (2019). <https://www.assayjournal.com/arianne-zwartjes8203-under-the-skin-an-exploration-of-autotheory-61.html>.

I consider my historical practice within the arts to be part of a lineage of queer, feminist, outsider and punk body arts which pisses and bleeds (literally) on the pristine floors of gallery spaces and invites critique (at the very least) of the gatekeepers of knowledge production. In the 1990s when I hung upside down naked in the liminal space between earth and sky insisting with my voice upon the dissolution of fixed subjective categories as a revolutionary act, I was doing autotheory. I was performing impossibility, thinking outside of the limits of compulsory heteronormativity and gender construction through a kind of upside-down mangled poetic manifesto-ing that called upon bell hooks and Monique Wittig and Karen Finley and Kathy Acker and Linda Dement and Valerie Solanas and Poly Styrene and the Slits and Lydia Lunch and Kathleen Mary Fallon and many others who spoke directly to my guts and my nascent revolutionary spirit, my speculative future-worlding. Hanging there in the discomfort of organs shifting and blood pooling, I worked out stuff that had a direct relationship to the social, the cultural and the political. The theory was wrapped in embodiment and the body was wrapped in theory in ways that were uncomfortable for the institutions of cultural production and academia. I remember being critiqued by an older female academic as being theoretically and philosophically naïve, and incorrect, and I remember the shame I felt for a long time about that. But how much of theory lies in the moments of working out who we are and what we are saying, and how we belong, or not, to the machines of production, and each other?

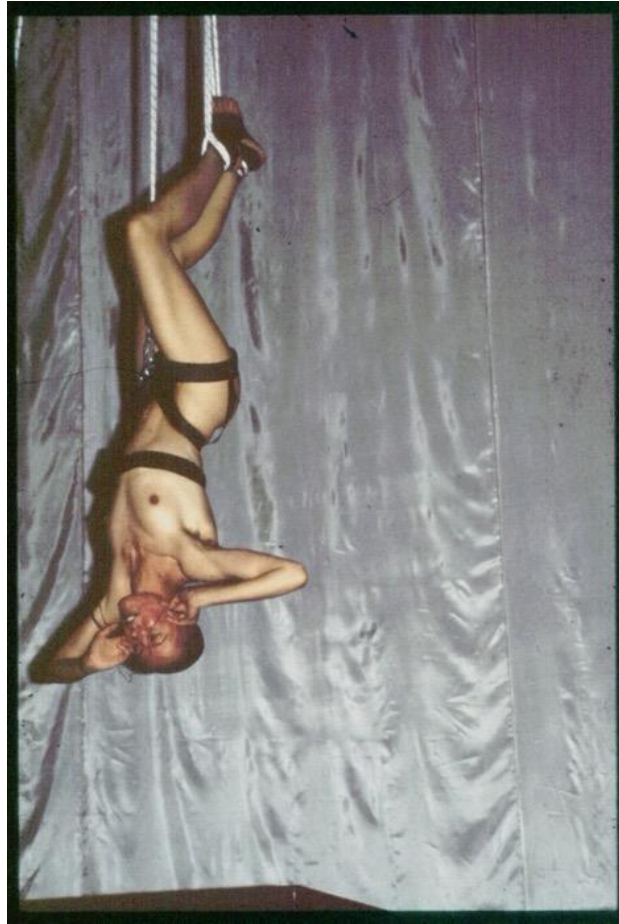


Figure 2: V Barratt, *Hysteric*, Experimenta, Melbourne, 1992

I have felt the kind of “historical disparagement” that Fournier refers to in reference to autobiographical or self-reflective work being supposedly narcissistic, non-intellectual and therefore uncritical. I was once a woman and a feminist one, making what could have been considered, at the time, the hysterical work of a madwoman. Now as a person who rejects the binaries of gender there is a doubling down of disparagement and an additional erasure, and this often arises out of feminist discourses that would refuse such bodies as mine. There are no safe spaces—that is a capitalist myth, and a racist trope. But for many, the experimental space of autotheory creates a way to write into precarity, trauma, vulnerability and transgression, or to “write the wound” as Xicana playwright, essayist, and feminist cultural activist Cherríe Moraga puts it. Moraga says, “I write the wound with the hope that in that aperture I might help create a better place for us to live”<sup>88</sup>. The feminist anthology she edited in collaboration with Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *This*

---

<sup>88</sup> Frederick Luis Aldama, “Cherríe Moraga,” in *Spilling the Beans in Chicanolandia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 169.



*Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*<sup>89</sup> is considered by many theorists, including Stacey Young, to be a very important autotheoretical text for its work in describing the relationship of personal experience to systemic racism and oppression, especially within a feminist movement that assumes a universal white subject.

Writing panic, and worrying the wound that splits open again and again, has taken me on a journey through life-writing that always exceeds its genre. Given the situated and specific nature of the research matter—my panic—I have sought a category that can hold the political and/as the personal, with the philosophical, the pathographic, the ethnographic, the affective, the embodied, the vulnerable, and the precarious. Autotheory can shape-shift to contain the affective data that spills over, inevitably, from the page and from the academy and into the experimental space of embodied performance, !ctic! vocalities, and poetic enquiry. These experiments distil, translate and amplify my personal experience of panic to make it glow, vibrate, resonate and explode into a multiplicity of knowledges that transcend personal devastation, that is more than my body laid to waste, more than a “solely subjective account[s] of affect.”<sup>90</sup> Solely subjective accounts of affect that are disconnected from the relational do not make for a faithful account of the world. Haraway insists upon “critical practice for recognising our own “semiotic technologies” for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ““real” world”.<sup>91</sup> She says we “need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life”.<sup>92</sup> Legitimate epistemologies of affect are made of this intersection of bodies, situatedness, awareness of the researcher’s enmeshment in the research field and a desire to “change the problem”.<sup>93</sup> Moraga writes the wound in order to create better futures. Other creators, such as musician and writer Johanna Hedva, who wrote *Sick Woman Theory*<sup>94</sup>, explore the social and political

---

<sup>89</sup> Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. (eds), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Woman of Colour series, (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 2002).

<https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999469735702121>.

<sup>90</sup> Knudsen and Stage, "Introduction," 5.

<sup>91</sup> Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," 579.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 580.

<sup>93</sup> Knudsen and Stage, "Introduction," 6.

<sup>94</sup> Johanna Hedva, "Sick Woman Theory," (2016).

[http://johannahedva.com/SickWomanTheory\\_Hedva\\_2020.pdf](http://johannahedva.com/SickWomanTheory_Hedva_2020.pdf).

dimensions of living with disability and chronic illness, and its capacity to reframe ideas of productivity, usefulness, engagement and agency within an intersectional feminist politics.

On my way to autotheory I considered for a while the use of the term autopathography, a self-writing of the pathological. The term was proposed in the 1990s by literary critic and author G. Thomas Couser<sup>95</sup> who proposed substituting “patho”—the Greek root for suffering, and usually applied in clinical settings—for “bio”. Autopathography offered to people writing from or into the space of illness or suffering the agency to tell their own story rather than their story being physician’s notes, filed and categorised according to axioms of wellness or illness. Couser went further to say that an autopathography was in a sense an *antipathography* because pathology inherently implies a lack of control or agency; it implies unhappiness and suffering and an infantilism whereby the subject becomes a ward of the institution. Resisting this institutional control through autopathography enables the subject to “define one’s condition in one’s own way – to recover one’s body, so to speak, from those who would determine its story.”<sup>96</sup> But ultimately, while I do engage with the agential nature of autopathography, its use is delimited by the pathological focus. Autotheory can contain autopathographic accounts, but can also exceed that narrow focus to bring in a more intersectional discourse.

### **Data and transformation: finding a methodology for affect**

All of this is difficult and sometimes painful, of course, in the way that revisiting wounds can be. In writing into and from the space of panic, I consent to engage with its affects time and time again in order to fully know it. The event of a panic attack can be seen as a peaking of my baseline daily state of high anxiety, dissociation and agoraphobia. To invite panic in, in order to ask questions of it and produce academic knowledge, is a challenge I have gone into willingly but with trepidation. My task has been to harness the affective data produced by a panic attack and transform it into a contagious event (a performance,

---

<sup>95</sup> G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

a text, a sound) in order to reveal the precarity of being a certain kind of undone and non-complaint body within a system of Capitalism that requires well-oiled labour bodies that do not falter in order to keep the machines of production turning. Faltering bodies reveal something about the world that a well-oiled machine does not. The world reveals itself through these ruptures.

This body of ruptured text has been a long time coming. It's difficult to know how to manage the knowledges that accrue and accrete across a lifetime and that are such a core part of the constitution of my subjectivity. Unspoken for a decade except in the course of clinical intervention or crying for help, each critical moment of existential fracture left a trace and these traces pile up. These traces are inscrutable, especially since in the event of a panic, "I" am not really "there". How do I extract data from experience, when "I" am absent? I need to crack myself open in order to chip away, to lever off the calcified accretions of the self and read the data embedded there. Philosopher and author John Protevi notes that "drastic episodes of rage and fear are de-subjectivizing",<sup>97</sup> and that in the event of such an episode, including one of panic, an "evacuation of the subject"<sup>98</sup> takes place and "automatic responses take over".<sup>99</sup> The body may act in such episodes, entirely in the absence of a subject. As Protevi notes: "...the body does something" but there is no "first person".<sup>100</sup> And so the question remains: how do I write a thesis as nothing, as nobody in particular, as a body without me, without self. How do I know my self evacuated from this subjectivity? I go there.

I decided in 2015 to try flying. I don't fly can't fly won't fly. But I decided I couldn't live like that anymore, just rooted to the spot, literally growing roots living deep in the forest with mossbodies and cloudmonsters and dingo howls and fungal rippings, lighting up the path at night. So, I tried. The first rush of terror is when the door shuts and the plane begins to roll. From then on it's an endless flight of fright. I am sitting next to Amy; she says, "There's nothing you can do". I record this mantra over and over. I type into my iPad, my whole body in tremor. My eyes leak, my nose leaks, I leak, without shame, or full of

---

<sup>97</sup> John Protevi, "Deleuze and Wexler: Thinking Brain, Body, and Affect in Social Context," *Cognitive Architecture: From Bio-Politics to Noo-Politics; Architecture & Mind in the Age of Communication and Information*, ed. Deborah Hauptmann and Warren Neidich (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2010).

<sup>98</sup> Protevi, "Deleuze and Wexler: Thinking Brain, Body, and Affect in Social Context," 181.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 180.

shame. Later I use the sound recording and I make a performance out of it. I use the typing as scripted nonsense, as rags I can stitch together to keep me warm.

Knudsen and Stage have developed a methodology for working with affective data to produce academic knowledges which I have found helpful. In their anthology *Affective Methodologies* they propose a raft of approaches towards the exploration of affective processes in relation to empirical study and a number of strategies that constitute an “affective method”. The book aims to identify innovative strategies towards approaching the following challenges:

- 1) asking research questions and formulating research agendas relating to affective processes, for
- (2) collecting or producing embodied data and for
- (3) making sense of this data in order to produce academic knowledge.<sup>101</sup>

The authors identify a number of strategies and meta-strategies towards this end, which include:

- (1) the creation of inventive experimental milieus,
- (2) the rethinking of traditional fieldwork techniques such as observations and field notes,
- (3) the collection of often-overlooked forms of existing textual material or development of new approaches to texts and writing in order to grasp their affective dimensions.<sup>102</sup>

This methodological approach takes as a core value the notion that affective experience is an indispensable part of knowledge production and empirical study. We often associate empirical research with scientific truth, fixed categories and institutional hierarchies of method, extraction and analysis. Affective methods instead acknowledge that there is no research without the researcher, and that tacit knowledges and inherent biases impact outcomes, as do the dynamics of material, cultural, social, embodied contexts.

My site of research is very locally situated: I am the researcher/body. The site of production, research and analysis. In the first instance, I need to create the conditions. To invite panic into the site. In one instance I collect panic utterances while on a plane and

---

<sup>101</sup> Knudsen and Stage, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

attempt to also capture in text, typing on my notepad, the thoughts and the experience of panic in that environment. I use this emic data collected in situ as the basis of a performance text, which I perform at *Tuning Speculation*, a philosophy conference in Toronto in 2015.

In another instance, more prosaically, I try to record, after the fact, one of the very frequent daily panics I experience, while driving.

*I drive home. trepidation rising like dirty water in a gutter in the rain. swirling around my toes and my ankles, my calves, thighs, torso, throat, into my mouth. all kinds of muck floating on the surface, leaving a residue of filth at its highest point. there's a tingle in my left hand, along the fingers of the left hand, a signal of something, part of the symptomatic repertoire of anxiety. If I pay attention to it, it amplifies its resonance. swallow, swallow the dirty water. try to ignore the foreboding that comes in waves, look away, try to minimise the chatter in my head, the fragments that collide in a crazy cacophony of non/sense. drive just drive, don't attach to thoughts of safety or catastrophe, there are no safe spaces. safety is inside, i take it with me when i leave the house, it's with me in the supermarket, and out at university. and my anxiety, it's there with me too, sitting pretty next to safety, with me, inside me. I take it everywhere too. past the turnoff and onto the highway, ok ok. and there's that feeling in my gut, the electric one. And the one in my heart. anxiety making its presence felt, coming to life, causing some chaos inside the biochemical factory that is my brain. so, breathe in, 1, breathe out, 1, breathe in, 2, breathe out, 2, breathe in, 3, breathe out, 3, breathe in, 4, breathe out, 4... a focus, attention turned onto the body, the mechanics of the body, the autonomic system...feel the substance of myself, because my thoughts are so numerous and so light that they fly away out and up and my head flies away out and up with them. damn that tingling hand, i must be overbreathing. electricity amps up. count again. ignore the feelings that i don't even own this body that's driving this car, look at it, hand on steering wheel, my hand. i know it's my hand because it has that incredibly gnarly look like my mother's hand, with that odd protuberance of bone that is familiar and comforting. like my mother's hand. breathe in, 1, breathe out, 1, breathe in, 2, breathe out, 2, breathe in, 3, breathe out, 3...drive down towards the skate park, turn right at the roundabout, stop at the roadworks, turn right into my home.*

As a researcher/body I need to be open to channelling panic within a delimited context, that context being the experimental space of poetic enquiry, autotheoretical text, vocal performance. In performance these channellings are sent out in affective waves to mingle, wrap, pass through, stick and shake via the resonance of creative contagion. These layered affective blocs unfurl together and they entwine, speaking into and away from one another, feeding back, as affect passes through, around and between bodies.

## **Performance as experiment and laboratory**

Historically I have produced knowledge through performance, usually beginning with a written text which I embody through vocal performance and movement. Earlier I included a historical image of a performance in which I was suspended from a height, inverted and naked. There is something I was trying to get at/to through the extremity of the embodiment which was not graspable through written text alone. Naked, upside-down bodies produce quite a different vocality to bodies which are on stable ground (and clothed). This destabilisation is the just-out-of-reach affective experience I continue to strive for, in an effort to understand my own subjectivity, as constituted by my conditions. If I can understand myself, then there is the potential for connection with others. The creative works listed below are part of this lineage of embodied and affective works. As you will discover when you begin to experience the creative works threaded through this thesis and those included in the online component, these “living experiment[s]” are sites that “strengthen and stimulate affective responses”<sup>103</sup> between bodies.

Queensland School of Continental Philosophy (QSPC), Meanjin, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.

It is night. I am wearing a suit made of paper in a darkened lecture theatre. It rustles restlessly. There is an abstract video playing on the ceiling and a soundtrack of rustling paper underneath. The lecture room is full, the audience is sitting in rows on chairs. During: a walkout. After: questions about the authenticity of the experience and questions about whether this is therapeutic.

---

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 18.

Performing Art Forum, St Erme-Outre-et-Ramecourt, France.

It is midday on a sunny day. I am in the Peacock Room surrounded by people sitting on the floor or lying on couches. There is no order. Most are hungover, some are snoozing, some have laptops open, ready to take notes. I am crying and feel sick. Nobody moves except to sink further into the soft couches. Jassem remarks that all of philosophy is contained within the painful presentation. Autotheory.

Lire Pour Faire: Sorbonne, Paris, France.

It is morning. Daylight is streaming through the windows of the small seminar room. Tables are arranged in a circle, and the presenter is in the centre of the circle. It has the feeling of a panopticon. Afterwards somebody asks me why I would put myself through this. It is the only way.

Berlin colloquium, Writing as Research: The University of Edinburgh School of Architecture in collaboration with the Writing and Society Research Centre of Western Sydney University hosted by the Institute for Cultural History and Theory, Humboldt University.

It is day. I present/perform to just a few people in a larger lecture room with no order to the layout. I can move wherever I like in the room. I cry and pause and stutter. It is hard because the room is so cold and empty. It is easy because the room is so cold and empty and I am far from home.

*You are standing in a room, it is a lecture hall, it is a seminar room, it is on the third floor of a university in a country that you flew halfway around the world to arrive at, it is a room in an old monastery (a monastery), it is underground, the air is cool from the stones, it is looking out over a garden, a street, a city. You know the audience, they are your friends, they are not your friends, you don't know them at all, they have never heard of you, you don't speak their language, they have expectations, they are curious, they sit back, they sit forward, they have laptops, notebooks, recording devices. They sit back, they close their laptops. They cry, they walk out, they do not understand, they understand too much. They wait. You wait.*

*You are about to dissemble before their waiting pens, their blinking cursors.  
You are creating the conditions.*

Where does my data glow?

It glows in the moment I lose myself to the outside

It glows in the shimmer body

It glows in the meat body, evacuated

It glows between my body and the bodies of others (tables, chairs, window ledges)

It glows in intensities and flows through veins electrified with panic

It glows in poetry and in silence, at the beginning and end of day as time collapses and I  
meet myself at the moment of my own death

It glows in the accreted knowledges of a lifetime, secreted into pearl.

Soft.