

On Collaboration

We wrote back and forth with variable commitment to active uptake: we are separate people trying to stay in sync and to take in what isn't, to work with the heat of a proximity that echoes, extends, or hesitates into forms of life. Our bumpers are the archives we push off from. "Active uptake" was Michael Warner's phrase for how we enter a public through capture by its circulations; we become ourselves both more alive and tired at all kinds of speed. The impact that fires mutual awareness somewhere might figure as a thrilling link, an uneven curb, or persist like a conversation's low-hanging fog. Sometimes, a friend says, we wish that your texts would resist us more. Because, we respond, then you can feel that your reading is heroic. We're interested in what's active in receptivity. Active has no opposite. Even the easiest sentence is a test once you ask the background knowledge to come to the phone.

In any collaborative relation there is a fear of deep checking in. What do we do in the event of the force of clashing taste? It might turn out that we were falling through ice after all, not making tracks in the same-enough way. Some collaborators seek a secure job as the referent. The mind threatens to grow into an insane place if it's not getting to feel how it was supposed to feel. Some collaborators demand that everything confirms the circuits of their enjoyment. We are interested in the elaborate strange logic of the world. Being in the scene that is pulsating, not separating what's out there or in us. Without the plane of consistency, a series will often appear in tangles without syntax or as lines shooting out because the implication is on a frequency. A politics can be articulated in this difficult situation: these days we're panicking about causality; sensing mass mania, mass exhaustion, asthma; the distribution of borders and death and confused, upended life; the panic at what's fracking people in their bodies.

So we look for points of precision where something is happening. We don't presume what's going on in a scene but look around at what might be. We tap into the genres of the middle: *récit*, prose poem, thought

experiment, the description of a built moment as in *The Arcades*, the Perecian exercise, fictocriticism, captions, punctums, catalogs, autopoetic zips, flashed scenes, word counts.

(W. BENJAMIN 1999; DAVIS 2010; DELEUZE AND GUATTARI 1987; GIBBS 2005; GLADMAN 2016; HARNEY AND MOTEN 2013; MUECKE 2008, 2016; PEREC [1974] 2008; STERN 2001; WARNER 1991)

The Icing on the Cake

I am the girl who sits by the fire whether or not it's cold. The three kids at the next table are clearly siblings, stealing gleefully from each other's plates. They have similar haircuts and their eyebrows are noticeably thin. They are young and their teeth are tiny squares. One kid is having a birthday and a large cupcake with a lit candle approaches. There is oohing and clapping, then high-spirited bad singing. After the silent beat of the child's wish they all blow because everyone wants in unison to wish that the wish would have a shot at coming true.

Draw a storyboard of this scene.

Does "birthday cupcake" suggest a budget or a festive surplus? How big is large? Are the surrounding tables paying attention or passively penetrated by the family's sound? Is it sunny out? What are the genders and races of these children and their muffin-delivering adults? How big or cropped is their hair? Are they all dressed alike, or do generations shift? Are there presents on the table? Are these the right questions? What is it about icing that links it to joy, to empire and excess and the sovereign tongue? Seriously, what is it?

(LOEFFLER 2017)

Bad Feelings

I fall into step on the sidewalk behind a family of five. The thin, blond grandmother has the gnawed face of a meth addict. She lopes when she walks, swinging her legs out and forward, cutting her eyes over her shoulders, arms circling a little randomly. It's as if she'd been torn limb from limb and now finds herself at the outlet mall with her daughter's family. Her shorts are ironed, she has nice sandals.

She reminds me of a woman I met who has trouble being in a room. I stood next to her. We started off pretty well, talking about books and travel and how we knew people, but after twenty minutes we were trapped. I drifted away, releasing us. Over the next three days, we ricocheted off a backlog of social failures; there were furtive looks, the occasional sharp turn on the poolside pavement to avoid contact. No bad feelings but bad feelings were between us, suturing us in a contact aesthetic like my childhood visits to the piano teacher—the earthy oils she wore, the way she ran her hand up the page of music, opening it flat without catching her skin on the staples.

(CONTACT AESTHETIC; CONTAGION; GIBBS 2006, 2011; PINE 2012, 2016)

Halloweens

A carnival atmosphere reigns at the neighborhood school today, and kids run around the way they do every day but wearing brighter colors and fearing, I can feel it, disappointment on the other side, a dulled thread pulling them into knowing that it's all difficult, that they are difficult, that their relations and the chocolate in the candy bag are not really very delicious. A disappointed tongue is one thing. The optimistic and knotty collaboration that is the Halloween costume, another. Some adult loves, hates, facilitates, or pragmatizes a child's wish. And there it is, a thing that will be repeated.

A woman lugs a bowling ball right up to her neighbor's lawn and rolls it hard from between her legs, just like when she was little. Maybe they won't notice the defeated garden or the bent fence? She's overcome by the sight of her action: her face grows slow, cabbagy. Shadows move in a picture window beyond the lawn's carpet, dull to the event that has not yet become one. An act can never be withdrawn. On the street behind her the Halloween festival goes on. The poor kids come early and stay late rubbernecking, hungry and also lingering.

(ARENDR 1958; MAVOR 2012)

Take a Breath

You take a walk. Something incipient but weighted throws together around you. One walker with a routine arms himself with giant headphones and a stick, another stays alert for a quick response to comments from passersby. The questions are basic, like what to do with your eyes.

One day, Ronn is walking Copper, our ancient dachshund runt, on a busy Austin street. A man in a truck waiting for a light to change calls out in an Irish brogue: “What a *beautiful* dog.” And then, maybe because he notices that the whiteness of her face is age, not a miracle, that her eyes are blind black with cataracts—she’s not what she once was—he revs up his proclamations. “She’s the most *beautiful* creature I’ve ever *seen*.” Ronn is a little taken aback, but he’s on it. “Thank you very much! She’s a doll.” He would have gone on, stepping up to the opening, but the light changed. I imagine the two men gazing at each other for a few seconds as their paths pull apart, interrupting something set in motion.

Another Ronn story (he likes to talk to animals): “I’m buttoning up my shirt and all of a sudden I smell this smell and there’s this soft poop at my feet and Copper’s standing there looking up at me like (shrugs his shoulders and stares with a deadpan ‘Hooray for me and fuck you’).” Ronn walks away, a little jaunty now, putting a point on his story as he goes. I’m the slightly giggling cowitness and not the judge.

Once I was walking our other dog, Kuka, past the schoolyard. A young boxer ran up to a man whose dog was on a leash. The man yelled, “Hey! Get your damn dog!” The boxer’s owner was cavalier, slowly turning to amble over from the other side of the field. He called out way too casually, as if it wasn’t necessary to say anything at all, “He’s friendly.” The worked-up guy included me in his retort. “*We* don’t know that! Get your fuckin’ dog, don’t give me that shit.” Now he was bouncing up and down and moving fast-forward like a beach ball blown by the wind. I was a little worked up too, fashioning reactions in my head: “Yeah, that’s right!” or “Hey, leave me out of this!” Amazing how a dog loosed in public can

set a man bouncing, but also, he sounded like he was from New England. That explains *something*.

Ethnography's commitment to writing from the ground is an impulse to stay open to what's in your vicinity. But the "ground" is not just a backdrop or a context; it's the sensed social-material-aesthetic atmospherics resonant in a scene, the threshold onto worlds of expressivity in a problematic. It's what sends people bouncing at the drop of a hat or sets off a line of associations at the sound of an accent. It's what's already taking off, a space where dogs sometimes master the art of deadpan.

(B. ANDERSON 2009, 2016; DOG WALKING; EXPRESSIVITY THRESHOLDS; GENERATIVE MISPERCEPTION; MCCORMACK 2013; THE ETHNOGRAPHIC GROUND)

Friction

On one side of the café January (they talk at length of her name) is on a date with a sweet internet hookup whose fingers are like Tiparillos. And it's going so great for a while until January says no, in a slightly louder voice, NO, I do not eat meat, it makes me feel bad, I won't even have plants. The guy loves meat. It's the only reason I see my father, he says: no one cooks meat like him. The conversation gets quiet and then turns toward work, and phrases like "and whatnot" spring up, so things get sweet again.

I have eight pairs of khakis and eight shirts, he says, so I never have to make a decision. My underwear is all sorts of colors, but that doesn't mean anything, she says—I like to live simply—and to look at her metal T-shirt and sweet flats with jeweled skulls embroidered on them, I get it. They are trying to maintain. They already know how they will fail because when they're not alike their jaws get set. Santa over here wants to give them five pouches of patience and some Xanax to help them ace the test like in fairy tales.

Outside, in the sun, a couple who divorced a year ago has a date to take an "inventory." Before the woman arrives the man tells a friend he runs into that it's been a year since he's seen his ex: they've kept it to email. The friend nods and backs off. The remainder tilts back in his chair, straightening up when she arrives in a van. She is a foot taller than he is: wider too. There is no awkward hug, just the scraping of metal chairs. Both are gray-pale, as though they'd remained inside since the apocalypse poisoned the air.

Each ex has a paper with penciled notes—I'd bet anything that their mediator, or someone's shrink or sponsor, suggested this tool so that they could erase their bullshit if it showed up for a fight. From the outside they seem tired. The woman is wearing big metal jewelry and the man a baseball cap backward. I'll begin, she says.

1. I was a narcissist.

Then quiet. Things have gotten so bad, she rebegins, that I had to do an inventory with another friend too, and she made me admit it: I'm all about my own feelings. The guy gets sad and seems humiliated, too, that still, a year later, he is profoundly passive in the air of her. He makes supportive noises.

1. I had my stuff, too, he mutters, looking at the paper. I tested you. We played games, she said. I wasn't trusting, he said.
2. Also, she said, I owe you money, I took a lot from you when you were sleeping, and she hits the table with a crushed ball of bills that scatter to the ground. Everyone on the outside rises and laughs, pretending to steal what wasn't ours, or theirs.

(JACKALOPE COFFEE & TEA HOUSE)

The Game as Method

The game is a form of life coming into being, extension, and activity, the blinking at the start of the day and the beyond to anything to be explained. If I run out of gas but not out of love, if you let a piece go without completion, if the session's not finished but definitively over, if the delicious coffee would only wake us forever, if we could come forth as "I" with the other objects, if we could take in that all things don't happen for a reason, if the flat voice were other than trauma, a failing. If you could be the kind of person you'd go out with again, if we could host the accusations we've flung around, if I could see sugar, labor, and resting as questions, if we could take unforeseen touch with soft eyes and no flinching, if you could stop-motion the arbitrary, if they could bear the common structure like vomit or accident, if we could take the fatal hit that it is all brevity and struggle, if the form of life turned toward a way of life and on the lips of our heads the present fell open, if we were game.

(COHEN 2011; FOUCAULT 1997; HEJINIAN [1980] 2002; KOESTENBAUM 2011; LACAN 1991; MALABOU 2011; MULLEN 2002; SPAHR 2005, 2011; SUTHERLAND 2009; WITTGENSTEIN 2009)

Once

In the fifties, mundane forms of care formed a scaffolding of relays people becoming middle class couldn't quite claim as their own. New habits stood proud as if they were judgments held in common. There was spaghetti day, laundry day, vacuuming day, a week of spring-cleaning. You lined up the kids to go food shopping, you made meals with one green and one yellow vegetable every night. A phone call during dinner always got the same response: "I'm sorry. We're having dinner. Could I have her call you back?" Tips circulated. Gadgets came and went. Scenes of pleasure floated by. Every night they listened to the nightly news.

The world had become something to see. A life had become something to have. There were family vacations at the lake, rowboats, the women on chaise lounges, the near-glamorous intimacy of those bathing suits. Winter clothes went into cedar chests for storage. Plaques mounted on walls went for the commonplace: "It's not the mountains ahead that wear you down, it's the grain of sand in your shoe." Our mother's dresser had a jewelry box and a milky blue statue of the Virgin Mary that glowed when the lights were turned off.

One of the things my partner, Ronn, and I have in common are the round, silver-rimmed glass ashtrays scored on the bottom with ridges in a design between a snowflake and an abstract geometric pattern. His parents built their dream house in 1952. It had seven closets; the unheated one became the root cellar. Later, they converted the garage into an office for their manufacturer's representative business.

By the time Helen died, after fifty-one years of marriage, Pop's house stood as an infrastructure of an upright life. The same can opener still mounted on the kitchen wall, a special tool to core a tomato or a strawberry. Tiny white glass bowls for the potato chips that occasionally replaced the oyster crackers with the soup at lunch. He kept an inventory of the food in his freezer in the basement: barbecue sauce (1), chili beans (1), chicken broth (5 quarts), yellow squash (2), green peppers (1), mixed greens (17), vegetable soup (14), turnips (4), deer sausage (1), deer steak (2),

chicken legs, long (10), chicken legs, short (8), pork ribs (2), sirloin steaks (1), sweet potatoes (22), biscuits (30), rolls (1 box), sugar cake (1), turkey and broth (3), spaghetti sauce (27).

(1950S WOMEN'S BATHING SUITS; GLASS, SILVER-RIMMED ASHTRAYS)

This isn't consoling

One minute you're coasting happily, which is to say not coasting but enjoying the feeling of coasting minus taking it for granted, and the next moment it is gone and you were always the *bad dog!* of a universe of rules and judgments. You worry this knowledge until it breaches the ordinary with what might be an event or might, like most things, be healed by secondary intention. Not knowing until later what will have been easy and what will have been hard, what's a weapon and what nothing, what's an extraordinary or ordinary touch, what's a sneeze or sickening.

In the middle

Most people seem to be in the middle of something they somehow ended up in. What's happening's provocations propel us and drag on us. Sometimes an offbeat chanting wants things decided one way or the other (is it work or play, good or bad, up or down?) as if the diffuse environmentality of things is itself a threat or too much to handle. Some worry that any opening is also an opening for power that's always on the prowl for its next victim.

Everyone's got their stories lined up—litanies of injustice tangled in the crazy or the funny. My Santa Cruz shuttle driver started in with how he and his buddies got a rental house by showing up early and offering to do a major landscaping job and paint the whole place as part of their rent. They did it all in the first two months. He liked to work all the time; he got that from his father. His first job was flipping burgers at McDonald's but he burned his arm bad on the grease after only forty-two dollars' worth. He liked being a manager at a Ross Dress for Less until a customer spit in his mouth and hit customers with a shoe. One of the customers was so impressed with how he handled himself he gave him a job selling cars, which he liked until the new owners started whiting out commissions on his pay slips. Now he drives shuttle, Uber and Lyft, and he likes that too.

There are ways of being up for all this that no one really wants: splintering tunnels of how-to advice, ways of regulating yourself with mindfulness or drugs, or speed shifts to stay in sync with a quick-shifting tempo-participation. A life ecology bloats with remedial labors: the constant straightening up, the compulsion to grasp at straws, the need to retreat, the little jokes that mark social contact, the nested troubles multiplying, the resentments slowly accruing.

The social is a charge of free radicals that have to be carefully selected, like the guests at a dinner party, or sharply scheduled like the ten-minute mandatory time-out every hour at the swimming pool just to be safe. It's

an allegation paranoically aimed at you if you're the wrong color. It's an arraignment for those wearing really old shoes or sending out a vibe of defensiveness or judgment, even if it's accidental. The things that can make you or someone else the target of a war-mongering eye are so prolific and twisted that no list ever gets it.

Maybe there was a moment when all this became widespread. Thomas de Zengotita says the Kennedy assassination permanently tipped life into the surrealism of what just couldn't be true. Or people think modernism did something, or the industrialization of experience, or cognitive capitalism now, or the way media pull us into one little thing and then another. There's always talk of the fifties, or the thirties.

Meanwhile, back on the academic ranch, there was the time when social constructionists so locked onto the mediation of everything that *its* broken record became theirs, as if that was enough said. Humanist critique just keeps snapping at the world as if the whole point of being and thinking is just to catch it in a lie. As if some fixative of state power or normative fantasy could be the *only* problem and there's always something wrong with other people. Some of the things this view misses: all the extensions of ways of being touched, what it feels like to be carried along by something on the move, the widespread joking, the voicing, the dark wakefulness, the sonorousness, how managing a life vies with an unwitting ungluing, how things get started, how people try to bring things to an end, like the day, through things that slam or slide down their throats, why thought might become an add-on or take the form of a speed list, or why it matters that attention sometimes slows to a halt waiting for something to take shape.

We find speculative possibility not in dead matter or hypervalent structure but in rhythms interrupted, the shoot of an affect, trouble brewing in a posture.

(DE ZENGOTITA 2006; WAYS OF BEING UP FOR IT)

Cover Story

On an impulse you watch a stream of water bleed off the counter, which is what writing the present amounts to anyway, a scroll fighting off its own tears. Comedians call it commitment to the joke when the mind shadows itself and tries to push through to the front with an acrid hospital-room cheer. Tragedians and ideologues click along this arc looking for satisfying machines. But it's all a cover story: you can't say everything, even if you wanted to. You can't get to the bottom of things, just at the thick of them and the gravity that pulls them, and you, along. Yet the spike of attention from the rise of interest is only a certain kind of open.

It's like the adrenaline-coasting your body does when you dent a newly purchased car, launching it forever as a loser's possession. Then maybe you find a way to reattach to life, or it's the last straw. You can always shrug. You could notice that on the horizon there's sunlight and the world running toward you, and that's a happiness that will more than do. Some people slot kids into that scenario and others other things, and others nothing. It's all dilation, distraction, specifying attention. Daily we see things like that, like the guy at the reception hovering over his plate of food to protect it from the preying world. Or that look on someone's face because they *knew* they shouldn't wear that shirt. Or when your protesting mouth recalls the sharp hate of a child speaking with a limited vocabulary. Even if you're not free all the way through you can build from the space where you're not entirely crushed. Writing that requires composition and repetition, and the expanded time for untangling fresh extensions from the never quite vanquished complications.

In the cut

In writing condensed, we amplified through subtraction, tightened up thought through a detour, leaching words. A new sentence arrived just because it had seven words. We were trying to make theory descriptive. We became differently averse to reductions and foreclosures, to certain namings of politics or the real. At times, the privileging of representation or ontology would set us off. Some poems pursued the collapse of dissociation and association. There were sharp cuts, a surprise funny. Others tried to align words to the conceptuality of ordinary things, to build muscles of response to the suggestion of a color or tone.

What Does *Webster's* Say about Soul?

Everyone in this café is casual—the whole neighborhood is, except at 5PM, when the shiny-haired businessmen arrive to delay going home. At the next table two women and a man are wearing pretty much the same jean and sweater outfits. One woman's hair is tousled faux-carelessly and the other's is drawn into a ponytail; the man sports a baseball cap. Ponytail opens a large white box, inside of which are three perfectly round cakes, frosted white: a wedding is being planned. One cake is covered with the white sugar pearls we associate with festive decoration, the kind of thing that like life is supposed to taste good but might break your teeth. One woman tastes the cake and the other talks and waves her hands. The man gestures toward the tousled blond as if to say her happiness is all that matters. The salmon sweater of the consumer has more texture than the green cardigan of the provider. Pictures are taken of the three cakes to send to someone's mother. The baker wants to know if the cake will go onto a stand. She gestures at face height and higher. The couple furrows its brow at the gesture, the future.

(SCOTT-HERON 1970)

Against literal-minded explorations of the ordinary

So, you're writing. You make a pass at capturing something or tagging along. It's too fast for you, it doesn't cooperate, but you get something, backing up at the hint of precision, muscling your way in. You see how much you can't catch, especially now that you're onto a composition of your own. You need another detail, you get rid of a container concept that doesn't work. Writing's mechanics of expansion and contraction change the concept's environment. Thought becomes a little surprised to latch on to something, to arrive somewhere, and still looks around, testing what flashes up a surround.

(MCLEAN 2017; PANDIAN AND MCLEAN 2017; RAFFLES 2011, 2012; TAUSSIG 2011)