

Feeling With–

by

Laura Hudspith

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Approved By:

(Jon Rubin), Project Advisory Committee Chair

(Elizabeth Chodos), Project Advisory Committee Member

(Lawrence Shae), Project Advisory Committee Member

Katie Hubbard, MFA Program Director

Charlie White, Head of the School

Mary Ellen Poole, Dean, College of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

Grounded by the experience of becoming chronically ill as an adult, my thesis aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on sociogenic illness, through an artistic and feminist lens. While medical research is beginning to connect the prevalence of fibromyalgia in women to the stress caused by life amidst ambient patriarchal social structures, contemporary theorists are calling attention to the deleterious effects of western culture on health. This, the burgeoning field of sociogenomics, examines the capacity of non-material technologies of culture such as spoken language or gender norms for example, to osmose somatic membranes, produce illness, and even to affect the genome. Inspired by Audre Lorde's 'erotics' and Deboleena Roy's 'molecular feminist' ethic of encounter, this experimental text takes an autotheoretical approach to the field of sociogenomics and related critical theory to explore the personal and societal biopossibilities that can emerge through cultivating a practice of turning inwards. By this, I mean cultivating a practice of feeling with one's illness in an attempt to envision the molecular and atomic body and beyond. For this task, I look to a series of geometric topologies that order our world at both macro and micro scales, to act here as textual and aesthetic guides. These are the Torus, the Sphere, the Möbius Strip, and the Dot. Each carries a poetics that helps reorient my attention to bodily matters and to the interconnectivity and mutual affectability between organic, inorganic and other materialities, what Jane Bennett refers to as 'matter vibrancy.' It is through this practice of deep feeling and philosophical rumination that I experience the immense yet embodied sensation of coming to know something profound: wonder. I offer wonder as a form of molecular healing capable of soothing the chronically ill body, even modulating it in real time.

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I who am sick with the human condition.

— *Agua Viva* by CLARICE LISPECTOR, 85.

The Torus: Feeling from Within Outward

First introduced by Audre Lorde, *the erotic* is a source of inherently female knowledge-power, the power to create change. It is a compass; a secular spiritualism derived from deep feeling; a philosophy for embodiment; being put into practice; and an ethic for encountering ourselves and each other in the world. Engaging our erotic selves creates an openness to being fully embodied, to profound self-connection without myopia. As Lorde writes, it is for living “from within outward.”¹

Lorde considered the mechanisms by which western culture maintains its top-down, patriarchal, racist, and ableist power structures. One such mechanism is that of devaluing and corrupting the erotic. But, she urges, an ascetic’s life “who aspires to feel nothing...is not one of self-discipline but of self-abnegation.”² I can relate. Or, at least I used to. Living with chronic illness often necessitates a temporary separation of mind and body as a pain-mitigation tool. Actually, I thought I had it in hand, my agency, my elective dissonance; migrating the sick-object that I inhabited from hospital to bed to studio, attempting creative exorcism of my physical form, un-bodying through object-ification, body doubles, and stand-ins ad infinitum. I found, however, that such a disembodied strategy limited my access to my erotic self, a guide that I could not live without for long.

Lauren Fournier tells us that *autotheory* is the practice of non-hierarchically engaging with art, theory, and life from the perspective of one’s lived experience.³ The self—our innermost being and embodied knowledge—acts as a locating device, diving board, kite string or tether into the im/material present and possible that engaging in such modes of inquiry may bring into

¹ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” *Whole Earth (San Rafael, Calif.)*, no. 63, 1989, 66.

² *Ibid.*, 68.

³ This definition of autotheory as a cultivated practice and methodology for engaging in various modes of inquiry through the lens of lived experience has been put forward by this relatively new field’s most prominent scholar, Lauren Fournier, Ph.D.. Lauren Fournier, “Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 33:3 (2018), 643. doi: 10.1080/08989575.2018.1499495

being. I have come to see the erotic *as* the poetic of autotheory, a connection so clear to me that the hyphen in my methodological approach hardly seems necessary: the *autotheoretical-erotic*.

For several years following my first autoimmune flare, I grounded my work in the experience of living with chronic illness. I set the scope of my research to look upon and interrogate the relationship between culture, gendered illness, and agency; ‘majoritarian’ concerns. Borrowing from chemistry, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe “those modes of thinking and politics that draw upon philosophies of being, stasis, and identity” by focussing on “unification, totalization, integration, hierarchization, and finalization” as majoritarian or *molar* in nature.⁴ ‘Minoritarian’ or *molecular* approaches, they describe, are “those tactics that build upon the ideas of becoming, change, process, and event.”⁵ I see great need for—and therefore do not abandon—the many molar projects that aim to bring about equitable social change at the *systems* level. However practical these may be, I find myself troubled by approaches that share operative mechanisms with the oppressive structures that they seek to dismantle.

Lately, the philosophical terrain of my work has begun to shift from major- to minor-, from molar to molecular, from *being*, as in ‘fixity,’ to that of *becomings*. And yet, as Elizabeth Grosz so eloquently notes, these things have a way of coming back around. While “molar unities, like the divisions of classes, races and sexes... attempt to form and stabilize an identity, a fixity, a system that functions homeostatically... molecular becomings traverse, create a path, destabilize, [and] enable energy seepage within and through these molar unities.”⁶ In other words, thinking *with* the molecular works athwart those technologies of culture and structures of power that seek to devalue our erotic learnings and knowings—a practice with feminist, decolonial, anti-racist, anti-ableist and might I say *sick* benefits as multiplicitous as molecular matters of perspective. Molecular approaches can “work to deterritorialize our thoughts.”⁷

⁴ On the terminological origins of ‘molar’ and ‘mole’: “The term ‘molar’ in chemistry refers to a unit of concentration (known as molarity) that is equal to the number of moles of a substance per litre of a solution. A mole, in turn, is a chemical mass unit of a fixed number (6.022×10^{23}) of molecules or atoms of a substance, also known as Avogadro’s number.” This representation of a group of molecules or atoms that come together to form one entity is what Deleuze and Guattari allude to in their use of the term “molar.” Deboleena Roy articulates the terminological origins of ‘molar’ and ‘mole’ in, Deboleena Roy, *Molecular Feminisms: Biology, Becomings, and Life in the Lab* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 20.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 41; quoted in *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, “A Thousand Tiny Sexes: Feminism and Rhizomatics,” *Topoi*, 12 (1993), 176; quoted in *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷ Roy, *Molecular Feminisms*, 20.

Feeling With— is a text that explores the personal health and socio-cultural possibilities that might arise through cultivating a practice of turning inwards. By this I mean a practice of reorienting ourselves toward molecular or atomic concerns, toward the in/organic animacies⁸ and vibrant materialities⁹ that flow through, around, and comprise us, and toward questions on the nature of being and the mattering of matter. For this task, I rely on knowledges gathered from critical theorists such as Deleuze & Guattari, Deboleena Roy, and Jane Bennett to name a few, experimental theory-makers such as Clarice Lispector and Maggie Nelson, as well as insights gathered from the field of medical sciences, and those knowings that I struggle to glean—let alone articulate—from encountering other-than-human material formations within and around me.

I offer such onto-scientific insights autotheoretic-erotically through *inference*, looping, atemporally, autonarratively, sketching out the contours so that we might come to know the *insides*. Footnotes act as second skin across the erotic body of this text. Integral to- yet distinct from the main body, my notes possess their own logics and poetics, forming an organ of empirical specificity—a productive confusion of major-minor or molar-molecular forms of knowing, approaches to being. I see the short line in between and the opening that follows as an interlocutor, a mark of this textual body’s *porosity*—themes that emerge time and again through *feeling with* and *Feeling With*—.

Guided by my body and its illness in the studio and on the page, I wonder at questions like: *What are the biopossibilities¹⁰ of rethinking bodies and illness through the lens of the molecular-erotic;*¹¹ *What new “lines of flight”¹² may emerge from within this new ethics of*

⁸ Having “been described variously as a quality of agency, awareness, mobility, and liveness,” *animacy* applies pressure to presumed hierarchies of being by slipping over and in between seemingly fixed ontological (and therefore sociopolitical) positionalities. Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Durham, Nc: Duke University Press, 2012, 2.

⁹ *Vibrant matter* is a concept introduced by Jane Bennett in her book of the same name. Vibrant matter is animate, agential, and other than human. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Noting Audre Lorde’s influence on Angie Willey’s more recent work across science and gender studies, Deboleena Roy introduces Willey’s concept of ‘biopossibilities’ in her book *Molecular Feminisms*. Resonating with Roy’s own project aimed at expanding our understanding of *being* and *matter* so as to learn how to more ethically encounter and engage with matter formations in the laboratory, Willey put forward the term to “encourage us to think differently about bodies and biologies.” Angie Willey, *Undoing Monogamy: The Politics of Science and the Possibilities of Biology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); quoted in Roy, *Molecular Feminisms*, 5.

¹¹ Like my term “autotheroretical-erotic,” *molecular-erotic* hybridizes the philosophies that undergird its constituent parts: *minoritarian* or *molecular* approaches, with Lordean *erotics*. For example, an erotic reorientation towards molecular matters would highlight the kinships shared between matter formations while nonhierarchically revealing all as uniquely erotic.

¹² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brain Massumi. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3. Continuing the example of western culture (a *system*) to better explain the concept of *lines of flight*: conforming to ‘traditionalist’ gender roles as these *e/affect* social connections, interests, work, finances, etc. would represent connecting to the world along established, ‘molar’ (major) lines, limited though they may be by the social hierarchies they create that segregate persons into strata. Attempting to deterritorialize this system by voting for minor political

encounter? Adopting an openness to ruminations along these lines is the first step in learning how to see the world as ontologically flexible. Through such querying, I have begun to recognize molecules, cells, viral and inorganic matter as possessing distinct autonomies, for example, a recognition that has brought *wonder* to illness. Becoming molecular, seeking this sensation out, entering what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as “zone[s] of indiscernibility,” and “reducing [my]self to an abstract line” has been profoundly healing in psyche and soma.¹³ Here, the sick-body and its infinite matter-actants, may do as they will without the ascription of self-blame—the ‘auto’ in autoimmune—or the assumption of pointed intent or simple bad luck.

Though I will require medical care throughout my life, I don’t want to know myself as a ‘forever patient.’ I do, however, value *patience* as a vehicle that has carried me to spaces of and encounters *with* wonder, with the vibrant matter of my being and all of the spaces in between. At home, I tie my illness around me and dive into theories of animacy and molecular feminisms.¹⁴ Delving deep into the body, attempting to visit via envisaging the myriad molecular animacies that comprise me as along an ontologically singular field—what Deleuze and Guattari call the *univocal plane*¹⁵—requires being present with oneself in a full embrace of the here and now. A ‘univocity of being’ does not purport a monotonous sameness, an erasure or flattening of difference, or a theological ‘oneness’ of/in all things. Rather, on the univocal plane, everything is not *the* same but “exists in the same *way*.”¹⁶ By allowing for ontological univocity, I begin to encounter different modes of being without hierarchical value, seeing instead difference with relational continuities, difference not in degrees but in kinds; different logics, knowledges, mechanisms and a/effects, all changeful, all erotic, all becoming, still.¹⁷

Such shifts in one’s ontological footing can be as horrifying, even vertigo-inducing, as they are marvellous. I might vomit. But I might also deflate or avoid a flare-up altogether by

candidates, community organising, rallying, striking, demonstrating—modes of *refusal*—would here represent connecting with the world along less established, ‘molecular’ (minor) lines. If, in traversing those molecular lines, a person were to come across previously unimagined or unforeseen pathways to deterritorialization, such as one that offers a guide to connecting ourselves or with each other across social strata more deeply and empathetically, this pathway would be a ‘line of flight.’

¹³ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴ The terms *animacy* and *molecular feminisms* refer to two critical theorists and their texts, Mel Y. Chen’s *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, and Deboleena Roy’s *Molecular Feminisms*, respectively.

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 20.

¹⁶ Brent Adkins explains the formula that Deleuze and Guattari’s put forth for an ethically necessary, ontological reorientation: “pluralism = monism” or what they call the “univocity of being.” Pluralism = monism, Adkins explains, invites difference and harkens the possibility of new material formations, assemblages, multiplicities; matter’s (our) transformative potential. Brent Adkins, Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 31; quoted in Roy, *Molecular Feminisms*, 42-3 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ Ibid., 43.

such wa/o/nderings. Here, Jane Bennett would refer her readers to Bruno Latour’s definition of an *actant*. Whether human or otherwise, an actant “has efficacy, can *do* things . . . make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events.”¹⁸ In my case, philosophical rumination reveals itself as an *immaterial* actant mattering my body. In this way, theory has become a peculiar and unexpected sort of healing channel as it transitions from elusive concept into a cultivated, applied biophilosophy and meditation. I have found it useful not only in encountering my body and my illness—that is, learning how to *live with* my somatic reality—but in encountering others in the world in which we are mutually e/affected and e/affecting.

From time to time, I turn to the laboratory for little peeps at molecular worlds. I dip my toes into medicine, chemistry, biology, and physics as an outsider (re)searcher in relation to these institutions: artist. There is poetry inherent to such fields of inquiry that its professionals must ignore in favour of empirical data. Still, the sciences can only bring me so far, or near. Laboratories create artificial separations between bodies in that the scientific apparatus acts as a physical intermediary that necessarily creates hierarchized ‘fixities’ on either side of it.¹⁹ Though incommensurable and diffuse, engaging instead in the poetics of these disciplines can be as generative. It gives my presence in these spaces a different cadence, allowing me to search for material resonances to bring back to my studio. As I wander through the poetics of the indiscernible, I hope to be in collaborative communion, to find kinship with the body(ies) of/within my work: glass, copper, salts—medicinal or otherwise.

As I examine the makeup of my body’s tissues and the atomic forms of my studio materials, I begin to realize that the autotheoretical-erotic has a shape. Its form shares the same geometry that I envision the chronically ill to inhabit in symptomatic hypervigilance: the *torus*. The torus is a three-dimensional surface that looks in- and outwards simultaneously, uniformly expanding and contracting itself in every direction. Looking deeply—funnelling its focus and tumbling into the core of its being, its space in between, its *center*—the torus’s gaze begins to bend around its own curvature and is suddenly looking out into spaces that exceed its surface, yet

¹⁸ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii.

¹⁹ Even science and medicine are modulated (and modulate) at the level of the system. In the western context, this means having been built upon and continuing a legacy of placing, what Audre Lorde refers to as a “mythical norm,” as the key to analysis and knowledge production which, in turn, re/produces systemic hierarchies that order our ability to perceive and orient ourselves within and towards the world, and indeed sociogenic illness. Lorde defines the *mythical norm* as: “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure.” Audre Lorde, “Age, race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press), 116; as quoted in Roy, *Molecular Feminisms*, 37. I add ‘cis-gendered’ and ‘able-bodied’ to the list.

exist in the same way; an auto-reorientation from within to without and around again. A torus lives the Lordean ethic, *from within outward*.

Recently, I've brought a stained glass torus sculpture into being from my studio. Its body²⁰ is round and planar and rigid and soft, shockingly still as horizon, yet moving as glass,²¹ as guide. Its topology motions me to follow in its poetics, as sick-body, as maker, as citizen, as writer of this text: turning inwards so as to look out (to). As *Feeling With*— telescopes towards illness and other molecular concerns, further erotic topologies will emerge as practical models and textual guides including the sphere, the Möbius strip, and the dot.

In search of the biopossibilities that may emerge from the spaces in between all matter, and in the construction of this text, I will put into practice Lorde's erotic to better connect with what I know in my mind and feel deeply within my soma, molecules, atoms, and beyond. I will attempt to *feel with* that which has rewired my body's 'feeling systems,' my illness. The search for new modes of encountering our bodies, their illnesses, and each other in the world, will require deep feeling as much as disciplinary mobility. It will require *practice*; I will. Like me, *Feeling With*— is an emergent text, one that is still becoming.

²⁰ Any quick internet search of "torus" and "body" will yield a slew of mathematicians' playful musings on how the human body is topologically reducible to a torus. But torus geometry holds within it other fundamental poetics that biophysicists are just beginning to understand as playing a critical role in systemic human bodily health, from the molecular level. *Erythrocytes* (more commonly known as red blood cells), are the most plentiful cell type in the human body. Their relatively unique biconcave shape shares the same geometry of a torus which conforms to Golden Ratio (a function of Phi ϕ), also known as the *divine proportion*. Maintaining the cell's proportion is crucial to its health and function; long-term morphology of red blood cells (even by simple oxidative changes) can be carcinogenic. Purnell MC, Butawan MBA, Ramsey RD, "Bio-field array: a dielectrophoretic electromagnetic toroidal excitation to restore and maintain the golden ratio in human erythrocytes," *Physiol Rep*. 2018 Jun; 6 (11): e13722. doi: 10.14814/phy2.13722. I see torus as a *body*, and within its geometry, symbolic of *health*.

²¹ Atoms and molecules in glass do not behave in unison when heated to a liquid state, or when cooled to a 'solid' state. Glass is neither a liquid nor a solid but rather an *amorphous* solid, a matter of the in between. Andreas Zumbusch and Matthias Fuchs at the University of Konstanz have recently identified a new and transitional matter state that they call *liquid glass*, matter that is on the move and unpredictable, slowly. See also, Ciara Curtin, "Fact or Fiction?: Glass Is a (Supercooled) Liquid," *Scientific American*, February 22, 2007, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/fact-fiction-glass-liquid/>, and, University of Konstanz, "Neither liquid nor solid," *ScienceDaily*, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/01/210105095634.htm.

Words—I move cautiously among them as they can turn threatening...

—*LISPECTOR, Agua Viva, 16*

The Sphere: Vibrant Words and the Inexplicable

A triage nurse asks me to rate my pain on a scale of one through ten. I always know that the question is coming, but I never quite know how to answer. I pause, a momentary deliberation that I know might not work in my favour, but I can't help to wonder how to begin assessing this thing that cannot make the leap of shared comprehension through words. I do know that if I say 'nine' or 'ten' I may be seen sooner. But I rarely answer with a nine or a ten for fear of the possibility of eleven which looms at the edge of my body's event horizon.

Pain can go unspoken, though, without enumeration when accompanied by an obvious source ascertained through our most used diagnostic tool: sight. We might *see* swelling, a flash of panic, or the ooze of the inside coming out; *there*.

Pain hurts. *It* hurts. We know it because we can feel it. It acts in and on us to act it out like a glowing diner sign that points an arrow, *here*. A stiff manufacturer's tag on the inside of my jeans is one such arrow. It points to another, a corresponding patch of flesh across my lower back. 'Right here,' it says, 'you cannot wear those today.' Tomorrow it may be somewhere else, a pain that is on the move, peripatetic.

To say that we hurt is different than saying that we are *in* pain. It's a curious linguistic shift in meaning, one that suggests dimensionality and spatiality; a turn of phrase that extends the possibility of its scope so as to exceed the boundaries of our bodies, to envelope and subsume us completely, to be encircled by it, *held*; tenderness. Our nerves have conductive coatings around them called myelin sheaths. These transmit electrical currents from body to brain and back again on a loop.

Pain loops. It's on a slight delay. I begin to visualise the pain scale as a series of concentric circles drawn on water using my index finger, and recall Gerard de Champeaux and Dom Sebastien Sterckx's description of concentric circles as representing different "states of being;" circular emanations.²² That makes sense to me, or at least it does when I imagine living the 'in,' in the phrase, *in pain*. But perhaps its shape is spherical rather than circular, concentric spheres. After all, the sphere "adds a third dimension to the meaning of the circle...corresponding better to actual experience," while its perfect symmetry savours also of "ambivalence."²³

The meaning of *being in pain* seems to me to inhabit the space of the perlocutionary, the text outside the border of spoken language. Sitting at the triage desk, I wonder how I can give this thing a number, how to locate it as it moves, pain that although very *real*, leaves no visible, no tangible trace of its presence on the body. I begin to understand the limits of our human perceptual range and the limits of the language that we have built up around it.²⁴

Look, I'm here aren't I? I can locate myself. But I settle for 'eight.'

Later—and years later—I wrestle with medical words that live a different resonant life outside of that sphere. They gather on me, *live* in me, picked up in conversation with doctors, troubling me as burrs that I want to gnaw out of my fur, words like *benign*, for example. In the medical field, a benign condition denotes an ailment that is not—at least immediately—*fatal*, yet something to keep watch of. But the word carries a different connotation in casual conversation: *not harmful*, *gentle*, *kind*, even *favourable*. When doctors, nurses, public health officials, hospital administrators, medical legislators and researchers enter medicine's terrain for daily rounds, is the outside brought in, spheres of meaning that permeate each other at the thresholds of their buildings? *What does pain to the amount of eight mean to you?* I wonder. *Eight concentric spheres?*

²² Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, trans. John Buchanan-Brown, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, 2nd ed., (reprinted ed. London: Penguin, 1996), 195.

²³ *Ibid.*, 901-2. One of the four fundamental geometries that orders matter both macro and micro, a sphere has no beginning or end, no structural discontinuity that might serve as a point of entry or departure. In this way, a sphere has a certain ambivalence.

²⁴ I add *pain* to a list of ontologically confounding matters: an immateriality both *animating* and *animate* in dynamic relation with material me, *shaping* me as in contortion, *driving* me as in energy, *shifting* how and what I see, feel, think, what I don't.

“Words change depending on who speaks them; there is no *cure*.”²⁵

It begins to make sense, the sheer number of conditions that a/effect *femme*²⁶ bodies and the many varied bodies of those at the margins that are shrugged off, misdiagnosed as *imagined*, granted less research funding, left sitting in the waiting room. Many moons and specialists later, a partial diagnosis is ascertained: fibromyalgia. Is it pathogenic? no. Where does it come from? unclear. How does it work? unclear. Does it kill you, will it kill me, is it fatal? no. This, the incipient diagnostic text to direct the rest: it’s chronic, but ultimately *benign*.²⁷

I grew strange, to myself: *autoimmune*.²⁸

Earlier and somewhere in the labyrinth that is St Joseph’s, I will have just been told by a kind but tired doctor that unfortunately, “*E.R.s aren’t set up for mysteries*.” Fair enough. E.R.s are best suited for injuries, traumas, and somatic events that have a *here* or a *there*, those that can be *seen* so as to be *believed* so as to be *seen to* by emergency teams, acute.²⁹

Being discharged without diagnosis (let alone treatment) means that you leave with a string of words that cannot form a coherent sentence *about you*. When I return home and crawl into bed, I begin to transition my being to horizontal time—*sick time*³⁰—interrupted only temporarily by further hospital visitations and sluggish journeys from bed to bath and back again, another loop.

Mostly I languished, getting to, and then through each moment, for months. Now. And now. And now. And now. Later I would read Sarah Manguso’s memoir on living with chronic illness and

²⁵ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015), 8, (emphasis added).

²⁶ A colloquial term, *femme* emerges from inclusive feminisms denoting persons who identify as women, trans, or non-binary.

²⁷ *Words* get added to my growing list.

²⁸ “Autoimmunity, the state in which the immune system reacts against the body’s own normal components, producing disease or functional changes.” In other words, the body turns against itself. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. “autoimmunity.” Encyclopaedia Britannica, November 20, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/science/autoimmunity/>.

²⁹ Acute illness tends to develop suddenly and is of short duration. Chronic illness is slower to develop and may never resolve.

³⁰ *Sick time* is borrowed from activist/artist collective, the Canaries (specifically, Carolyn Lazard), and is a part of *crip theory*. Crip theory proposes that illness offers radical and more ethical ways of operating in the world. Regarding ‘sick time,’ crip theory champions (as ‘anticapitalist’) a ‘slowing of time’ that living with illness seems to create. Taraneh Fazeli, “Notes for Sick Time, Sleepy Time, Crip Time: Against Capitalism’s Temporal Bullying: In Conversation with the Canaries,” *Temporary Art Review*, May 26, 2016.

find her kindred. She writes, on the shrinkage of her existence to only the present moment, that she “got better...at making the world into that point.”³¹ It’s more manageable this way—pathological time—shifting your being to a temporal zone that is a *dot*, underwhelming—as protection—your *thinking-feeling*.³² If I focussed on the now, there would be less room for feeling, me. And I was treacherous.³³ It’s more manageable this way, that is, until it’s not. As I reassess what I think is my subjectivity over the next few months, I will add “sick” in front of my person. I won’t need any reminders. When I dare to string a few points together, they spell me out: * * * *. But, I am also *well* today, in many ways, as I write this. I’ll linger here for a moment.

“Part of the trouble resides in the word itself, whose meaning is not always self-evident or shared.”³⁴ *Well*: a word, as a root, as a state of being, as in life/’s/tyle, has grown up under (the) skin (of our time) to top of mind, though it remains difficult to track its tendencies. *Wellness* is the opposite of sickness, apparently, but it’s also more I think. It’s *healthiness*; *wholeness*, as in an *un-encumbrance*... Affluence? Avocado.

But the word ‘mystery’ will stick in my mind too. At first I take it in as *indeterminate*: indeterminate being, health status unknow/n/able; a medicalized object-riddle for the parsing where the time and interest of accredited persons permits; a subject made lesser somehow by the word’s trivialization of what *is* deadly serious, to me. Is.

There *is* yet more at work here in this thing, language. I can feel it: body becomes the swirling word (cloud); an inexplicable some-*thing* ‘more’ working in and on me-you across psyche and soma, psychosomatically, *ionically* as in the energies of a creative force that add to me as with a hidden exponent. This is the “alchemical magic of language,” or the capacity of

³¹ Sarah Manguso, *The Two Kinds of Decay: A Memoir* (New York: Straus and Giroux, 2009), 165.

³² *Thinking-feeling* is a concept created by Clarice Lispector that I borrow here to describe a mode of being embodied. It holds within it the principals of *approach* (feeling around for-) and of *encounter* (thinking with deep feeling—as a matter of ethics—our encounters with self, other, and the world), which I call the *autotheoretical-erotic*. Clarice Lispector, ed. Stefan Tobler, and Benjamin Moser. *Água Viva* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), 17.

³³ Little understood illness including autoimmunities can elicit a sense of embodying *treachery*, especially when even recollection of a somatic event can bring it into being once more. Psychiatrist and researcher, Bessel Van Der Kolk, outlines the profound connection between psyche and soma. He writes, “[w]hen a circuit fires repeatedly, it can become a default setting—the response most likely to occur.” Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 56. *Thought* and *memory* join the list of immaterialities that matter me.

³⁴ Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2021), 4.

immaterialities—for better or for worse—to de/animate³⁵ us all. To make us sick.³⁶ And to make us well again.

In the case of language, the capacity of the immaterial to matter us can occur in ways that far exceed an utterer's intent. "One must also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can *fly*," warns Maggie Nelson in *The Argonauts*.³⁷ Flight. Just as we are modulated by matters of mass, the immaterial too, has bio/e/ffects. Chen names such matters, *animacies*.

Eventually, I will learn to lean into the ontological pluripotency of immaterial matters as a healing strategy. But for now, simple pleasures: I am starfish across my bed (!!) just a dot of pain in a point of time. Now I am; (still) starfish. And now, and now, and now, in the fullness of each point as "I let myself happen,"³⁸ a question occurs to me for the first time: *What can I learn to know by being with my illness?* In this, I've opened myself to myself and the word 'mystery' becomes "flicker, flow" with 'wonder,' its creative kin.³⁹ After all, a dot is potent with potential, as "the pivot of the norm," and "the termination of return."⁴⁰

³⁵ The desubjectification of the sick (most explicitly within the architectures of western medicine, but perhaps more insidiously, within the social and political spheres), is what Chen refers to as "de-animation." Chen, *Animacies*, 23.

³⁶ Language is a technology of culture that has the capacity to produce "biophysiological consequences and somatic materialities," including chronic and acute illness. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 161. Medical studies and scholars like Jackson confirm this, what I, and I suspect many other sick people already know. Though I approach questions on the nature of being and the mattering of matter through the lens of my own porous body—one made 'sick,' I believe, via cumulative stress caused by the many ambient or immaterial structures of culture such as patriarchy—neither sociogeny nor epigenomics are the focus of this text. Rather, understanding the origins of my illness in these ways is an important impetus for my turning to immateriality's sphere to cull from it a healing strategy in return, one based in rumination and deep feeling. For more on the capacity of immaterialities to produce both chronic and acute illness, see authors Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson to name only a few.

³⁷ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 8 (emphasis added).

³⁸ Lispector, ed. Tobler, and Moser. *Água Viva*, 17.

³⁹ Nelson, 4.

⁴⁰ Chevalier and Gheerbrant, trans. Buchanan-Brown, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, 305

But the most important word in the language has to be but two letters: is. Is.

I am at its core.

I still am.

I am at the living and soft centre.

Still.

— LISPECTOR, *Agua Viva*, 21

The Möbius Strip: An Ontological Reorientation

An all-too-near awareness of a certain living-deathliness resides at the core of chronic illness. “[L]iving through illness’ seems, at least at first, to confound the narrativized, temporalized imaginary of ‘one’s human life,’ for it can constitute an undesired stopping point that is sporadically animated by frenzied attempts (to the extent one’s energy permits) to resolve the abrupt transformations of illness that often feel in some way ‘against life.’”⁴¹ I imagine that something similar is true of the experience of recovering from severe, acute illness, but in this, I am fortunate not to know for certain. Slowly, I would allow for greater lucidity in increasingly longer durations. I would begin to wonder, *if being sick is a battle that must be won as I am told, what the fuck am I supposed to be ‘fighting’?* Sorting out ‘the sick part’ poses an obvious problem regarding many autoimmunities.

Becoming chronically ill brought me into a profoundly intimate relation with my visceral and ontological being. Becoming bed-bound meant I could be present to it. Prompted by a sense of “wakefulness” affected by their own experience living with chronic illness, Mel Y. Chen notes that “for those with the privileges of food, care, and physical support,” the ‘pause’ that being ‘sick’ creates, becomes an opportunity to meditate on “the conditions that underlie both illness and wellness.”⁴² Though perhaps not what I would have expected to feel so many years ago, like Chen, for this spacetime I am, oddly, grateful. Peering into the stuff of my being has brought me to *wonder*, a halting sensation so encompassing as to contain within it a healing capacity. I will attempt to offer a transportive meditation in the section that follows, but for now, I am priming myself via/for an ontological reorientation:

⁴¹ Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies*, 20.

⁴² *Ibid.*

My body feels small; my spleen is enormously inflamed. *Are my ribs out more on this side?* I ask my partner, pointing at me for his stage right. The answer is obvious though: I am not tolerating me. The medical term sounds gross.

My bed sheets are soft; they're recently new! 'Pink, *pale* pink, blush even,' I thought to myself when I picked them out from only two other colour options at Costco with my mother, 'my favourite.' They fit nicely over a memory foam mattress, so named not with the sleeper's body in mind but because it's supposed to remember its own shape: perfect flatness, no deviation, perfect for horizontal time. Soon, my body will associate the memory of a symptom with the symptom itself: splenomegaly, anaphylaxis.⁴³

It's time. It's been several days since my last visit. 'Visit,' *how nice that word sounds*. The patient cuff has to be snipped. Next is a provisional alert bracelet around my left wrist. It's red with white lettering, impersonal, though loud in its all-upercase proclamation: A L L E R G Y. Its form is a ring around me of demarcation and protection, protecting me from busy hospital personnel who might otherwise forget to consult my chart; protecting them, in turn, from the risk that is treating patients like me: liability. I'd forgotten that it was there. Tyvek is so soft, like satin. It gets softer when worn, when touched; *I'm still tender*.

I work a fingernail underneath a line of zigzag-shaped perforations that mark the end of the bracelet. One millimetre at a time I will relieve the sticky part from the band, intact, like peeling an apple in one long strip; the same trick we'd use to pass-back down the line our pre-worn wristbands in our late teens, on our way to the next party—V I P apparently—without getting caught. I work carefully, a welcome diversion.

My body is wearing its shape into the mattress. Horizontality is becoming concave, dipping into itself. I've settled in. I can't remember when I got here, but bed remembers me, our holding pattern.

⁴³ Chronic illness that is caused by exterior culture can turn the body against itself in the form of repeating cycles of auto-manifested symptoms. Flashbacks to extreme illness events such as anaphylaxis and the real-time panic that those memories elicit, have a tendency to manifest the past event in the present. "[S]ensory fragments of memory intrude into the present, where they are literally relived." Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 66.

I'm starting to hate the pink of my sheets. If I can figure out a way to rally from here, I'll be an 'armchair activist,' though 'memory foam,' or 'mattri-vist' would be more accurate.⁴⁴ I will need to find a new location, or at least another position to lay in. *Being* is getting me nowhere; I will need a new strategy. If I am to save the bed for a future when I am healthy (?), I'll need to spread myself out, to reach out, to make my body connect with other parts of the mattress' surface, to move—to the extent that I can—*horizontally*, yes, *stolonically*, as bermuda grass “feeling around.” Having become captivated by the strategies that grasses use to “grow and remake the world,” Deboleena Roy notes that stolons extend new shoots across the surface of the ground “constantly reaching out, in search of connections.”⁴⁵ As foragers, their strategy is that of *feeling around* horizontally in order to root new terrains. Sharing resources along the way, stolonistic strategies are worldly and intimate: erotic.

But I hadn't felt grass in days. Weeks. And I did not yet have the words to know, in words, what I'd begun to know from being in intimate relation with me as I had never been before, with my illness: my *becoming*.

“*Becoming*, Deleuze and Guattari called this flight: becoming-animal, becoming-woman, becoming-molecular. A becoming in which one never becomes, a becoming whose rule is neither evolution nor asymptote but a certain turning, a certain turning inward, *turning into my own / turning on in / to my own self / at last...*”⁴⁶ As I try to give words to the strategy for being (both ill and well) that I now call *feeling with-*, I am reminded of Roy's ethic through encountering similar language from the field of psychiatry. Describing *mirror neurons*, or those structures of the brain's so-called empathy centre, Bessel van der Kolk reveals our capacity to “feel into” each other, so as to better *see*.⁴⁷ And in turn, Kolk's *feeling into* calls to mind Lorde's powers of the

⁴⁴ A variety of pejoratives derived from Lorde's so called 'mythical norm' that are lobbed at differently-abled bodies even from within socio-political movements that seek to dismantle it. Anna Hamilton discusses both entrenched ableism in progressive movements and the socio-political origins of illnesses including autoimmunities in her longform essay: Anna Hamilton, “No Rest for the (Already) Tired: Feminism Must Center Chronically Ill Women,” in “Sickness” issue, *Bitch Media*, June 7, 2015, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/in-sickness/feminism-must-include-chronic-illness>. In an offering of levity for myself and for my reader, I am extending the 'armchair activist' metaphor to its absurd extremes in the creation of two of my own: *memory-foam* and *mattri-vist*.

⁴⁵ Doubling as an ethic for encountering the world and a transdisciplinary method of knowledge production, Deboleena Roy describes her *stolonistic strategy* as “foraging.” By feeling around and extending her thinking across disciplinary lines—science, gender studies, philosophy—Roy propagates new erotic knowledges. Roy, *Molecular Feminisms*, 4, 5 & 25.

⁴⁶ Lucille Clifton, quoted (in italics) in Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 53

⁴⁷ Van der Kolk looks to the molecular body to support the molar body's healing process via human-to-human empathic interactions. Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 58.

erotic: an immaterial power rooted in neurophysiology; a *sharing, between* bodies; kin-making as healing strategy. The circle is made full.

Meanwhile, I've lost sight of me erotically. But now I want to be present. The erotic is the glue that holds the points, the dots, the moments, the cells, and molecules and atoms of me together, makes them-us legible to each other so as to make room for feeling around in-, for feelings that are other than bioelectrical, for feeling into ourselves and each other. "I want to emphasize that emotion is not opposed to reason."⁴⁸ The erotic makes us molar, makes us whole. And yet, it seems to me that feeling into- can be practised *intrapersonally* too, as in into our bodily stuff. At the tissues, cellular, molecular, and atomic levels we are porous, an infinity of holes, port holes, portals. "The epidermidis is only the most superficial... indication of where an organism ends and its environment begins,"⁴⁹ Bennett looks to John Dewey for this insight. Then she adds her own: "In a world of vibrant matter," it's "not enough to say that we are 'embodied,'" but "rather, *an array of bodies*," as much dependent on our surroundings for *wholeness* as we are *exposed* to it.⁵⁰ Porosity is but one facet of our *becoming*.

I've managed to unstick the loop from itself—A L L E R G Y V I P (!!)—exorcising the medical cuff from my body. I flatten the bracelet out so that it speaks our language, the bracelet, the bed, and me. Then, I give the strip a lengthwise twist to reform its loop, Möbius.⁵¹ Like the human body (a torus), a Möbius strip is a single-sided topology. I strain to trace a finger along its surface, upside down, then backwards as if mirrored, and around again: an ontological rupture. Only after two full motions, turning, turning (me) around its track does my finger return to its starting position.

The bracelet is remade, stranger now, and so am I.

⁴⁸ Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 64.

⁴⁹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1934), 59 quoted in Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 102.

⁵⁰ Bennett, 102 & 112.

⁵¹ The discovery of the Möbius strip in 1858 led to the development of a new branch of mathematics called *topology*, a field, that in turn has come to inform both bio- and quantum physicists as they attempt to sketch the nature—and indeed the poetics—of matter within our bodies and the universe. David Gunderman and Richard Gunderman, "The Mathematical Madness of Möbius Strips and Other One-Sided Objects: The discovery of the Möbius strip in the mid-19th century launched a brand new field of mathematics: topology," *Smithsonian Magazine*, *The Conversation*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/mathematical-madness-mobius-strips-and-other-one-sided-objects-180970394/>. As topology's progenitor, the Möbius has in many ways inspired and given shape to this text.

A Möbius' half-twist is inherently *creative*. It creates possibility in me, offers a line of flight, of escape from the presumption of fixity that masks my becoming. It demonstrates *auto-reorientation*.⁵² Where the torus offers a glimpse of what an ethical encounter with self and world might look like—living from within outwards—this once-twisted strip resonates in me as illustrating the vertiginous process of ontological reorientation, and all of the barfy and blissful feelings that this might stir.

Lately, I think about animacies and ontologies all of the time. I consider these in relation to my daily experience of illness and relative to unravelling presumed hierarchies of being so as to create more horizontal 'spaces of relation.' And so, it was a surprise to learn, of myself, that ontological reorientation cannot be attained as a fixed position, mode of knowing, or way of seeing.

Countless litres of saline solution were administered by doctors unable to deduce the originating location of my symptoms. This was before we knew that the 'location' was *all of me* and *nowhere specifically*, as with autoimmunity. I became interested in matters that pose dialectical problems. I became interested in salts; I still am. Salts cure and kill, soothe and corrode.⁵³ Plastic tubing would sketch the relation between us, saline and me, two distinct bodies becoming one and many, for a time. And for a time, my body would quiet.

Circles drawn in salt are thought to hold mystical significance as demarcating spaces of magic and protection,⁵⁴ not unlike my bracelet. I recently spent several months casting solutions of copper sulphate—a sapphire blue and poisonous salt—into a ring-shaped mould. It was a tentative collaboration in crystallisation⁵⁵ between me and the bodies of this toxic matter. Finally,

⁵² From the branch of mathematics called topology comes the concept of 'orientability,' a means of distinguishing objects from one another that share other characteristics, such as the shared character of a two-sided ring and a one-sided Möbius strip to have a hole in their middles. The term holds a different meaning in this field than it does in philosophy. In fact, a Möbius strip is considered to be *nonorientable*, in that its surface orientation shifts depending on the vantage of encounter.

Gunderman and Gunderman, "The Mathematical Madness of Möbius Strips and Other One-Sided Objects," <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/mathematical-madness-mobius-strips-and-other-one-sided-objects-180970394/>

⁵³ Magnesium sulphate, or Epsom salt, is the 'saline' part of a saline solution in medicine. Yet, even this medicinal salt is dialectical, used to make explosives, to light fires, and to extinguish them. Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (New York: Walker and Co., 2002), 296.

⁵⁴ Salt carries a *mystical significance* as evidenced by its longstanding appearance in literature and other media of popular culture throughout the centuries.

⁵⁵ Salt molecules are not inherently crystalline, rather *crystallization* is the bonding process where crystals are built as electrons are shared between molecules. In the field of organic chemistry, crystallization—or in the case of my collaboration with copper sulphate, *recrystallization*—is referred to as a 'purification' process. M.J. O'Neil ed., *The Merck Index: An Encyclopedia of*

as I removed it from its mould, I accidentally snapped the ring in half—*shit(!)*—and immediately re-submerged the two pieces in a solution of itself. Soon the ring was *whole*, again.

It is of course advisable for beings such as me to move cautiously among such matters, though, however ‘toxic’ copper sulphate *is*, certainly, *to me*, the salt *is*, undeniably, *self-healing*. I was shocked. Though not by the salt ring our collaboration had made and made anew. Rather that I had forgotten to take note of my human lens in the manner of my approach, linguistically, conceptually, ontologically. The crystalline blue ring reminded me of möbius motions: *around and around again*, ontological reorientation *as a practice*. Following this thought back to Roy’s blades of glass—her stolonistic strategy—I begin to feel in me that a rethinking of how I-we orient ourselves towards such seemingly ‘inconsequential’ matters as salts and cells can have great socio-political import.

I begin to realize that there are other, more flexible ways to see the world that neither rely upon nor reify molar modes of inquiry and knowledge production. By adopting an “ontological flexibility,” I begin to see matter’s various formations as becomings, thus creating in and around me new “zones of proximity.”⁵⁶ Now, in the presence of this blue salt ring as within my illness’ flare, I begin to know deeply and beyond the cerebral—*erotically*—the shared capacity of matter to e/affect and be e/affected by other formations, other bodies: “*radical*” interconnectivity.⁵⁷ Some of these contribute to the accumulation of traumas that lead to illness. Others complete us. And so, I feel it keenly: a responsibility to auto-reorient myself again and again, to become more attentive to “the extent to which all bodies are kin... inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations,”⁵⁸ the “inseparability” of ontology and ethics.⁵⁹ Though, it “*is difficult* from our

Chemicals, Drugs, and Biologicals, 14th edition (New Jersey: Merck, 2006), 102. It’s worth noting that while the word ‘purification’ and its various conjugations carry a slew of medical and medicine-adjacent connotations in our imaginations, the same word has also been wielded to provoke some of humanity’s worst atrocities.

⁵⁶ Deboleena Roy’s *zones of proximity* is related to Gilles Deleuze’s *zones of indiscernibility*, similarly developed to think life and matter beyond the human. In addition to its implications on the nature of being, Roy’s *zones of proximity* attends also to inter- and cross-disciplinary collaboration as a way of proposing an “experimental togetherness around shared objects of perplexity.” Roy, *Molecular Feminisms*, 39 & 7 (emphasis added).

⁵⁷ Jane Bennett highlights somatic-worldly *interconnectivity* (and *interdependence*) as follows: “Vital materiality better captures an ‘alien’ quality of our own flesh, and in doing so reminds humans of the very *radical* character of the (fractious) kinship between the human and the nonhuman.” Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 112.

⁵⁸ *Idib.*, 13.

⁵⁹ For Roy, the onto-ethical relation has been so clear as to prompt her to create the strand of applied philosophy that she calls *molecular feminisms*. In the chapter of her book titled *Biophilosophies of Becoming*, Roy points to other scholars who highlight the “ethico-onto-epistemological” relation including Debashish Banerji, Karen Barad, Gilles Deleuze, Barbara McClintock, and Baruch Spinoza to name just a few. Roy, 54-56. Highlighting this imperative is also the aim of Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*.

vantage point as humans to summon such a sense of proximity to something as elemental as grass,” or salt, “unless we are prepared to learn how to live and play on a more level, more equal...immanent field,” Roy notes. She continues, “ontological univocity levels this playing field, which in turn is an ethical manoeuvre.”⁶⁰ Perhaps *flight*—imagining the possible, the what else that exists in and around us—is only feasible when we shut our eyes and ears to our human precepts, as far as this is possible.

However, hypervigilance to the body’s interior dimensions and the constituents of its assemblage can trigger symptomatic activity. I find that my visitation of specific neural pathways and lymphatic systems for example, can open them up to autoimmune responses—unintended, and frankly undesired effects of my intra-action. Just as a somatic hypervigilance may not always be productive (or healthy) for the project of living from within outwards, a *hyper-attentive feeling with-* may not be prudent. “We may become more used to jumping into flight, but that doesn’t mean we have done with all perches.”⁶¹

Horizontality is a strategy that works, and works for me. Or, at least it seems to me a good starting position for curling myself as cuff, as salt ring, as portal; to train myself in auto-ontological reorientation as möbius, as a practice; a good starting position to begin turning inwards, for feeling into my body so as to feel around for connections that connect me with me erotically as in feeling with my illness. While I feel around for meaning in these ways be it in my body or in the studio, I often experience a “strange combination of delight and disturbance,”⁶² harmony within dissonance: *wonder*. Lispector calls it “grace,”⁶³ others, “awe.”⁶⁴ I dare not define the word with any more specificity for doing so runs the risk of dulling the lucidity that it elicits. Suffice to say, and say it as Lispector does so well, in that moment, “[t]he body is transformed into a gift. And you feel that it’s a gift because you experience, right at the source, the suddenly indubitable present of existing miraculously and materially.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Roy, *Molecular Feminisms*, 55-56, (emphasis added).

⁶¹ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 54.

⁶² Bennett, xi.

⁶³ When wandering thought, guided by feeling, obliterates a thinker and rebuilds her anew, more knowing, more aware, and less fearful, and all in an instant, Clarice Lispector calls this *grace*. “It was a sudden sensation, but so gentle,” she writes. Lispector, *Água Viva*, 79.

⁶⁴ Neurosurgeon and director of the Stanford Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, James Doty, highlights cosmological awe’s ineffable quality. Melissa de Witte, “The Power of Awe and the Cosmos,” *Stanford News*, September 6, 2022, <https://news.stanford.edu/2022/09/06/power-awe-cosmos/>.

⁶⁵ Lispector, 80.

To *feel with* my illness, I must first attempt to *feel into* my body, deeply. Once on the inside and sharing erotic space with my soma—tissues that cannot be sorted as either ‘sick’ or ‘well,’ but rather each their own, as me, totally—I can begin to *feel around for* the molecules and atoms of me, for my becoming, for new lines of flight that help me to learn, and relearn again, the world as infinitely connected and ontologically flexible. I can elect to *feel in-* as in *fall*, into the smallest dots of me, towards univocity. And I will, imminently.

But if I hope to understand in order to accept things—the act of surrender will never happen. I must take the plunge all at once, a plunge that includes comprehension and especially incomprehension.

— LISPECTOR, *Agua Viva*, 61

The Dot: Becoming, Imminently

As a turn of phrase, concept and sensation, *cosmic vertigo* encompasses much of humanity, of living. It is an existential tumbling so intense that it registers *in the body* as wavering, sinking, falling, melting, deep horripilation. It describes a longing to see the universe and the inability to hold it, immeasurably whole, in our mind's eye; a capacity to curiosity, to ask 'the big questions' on cosmologies, origins, and mind, but to find ourselves a bit lost amidst even the partial answers that we find; it reflects our enduring search for the utmost beauty and the finding of its expanse so grand as to abut our sense of horror. Humbling and yet affirming, the experience of cosmic vertigo can leave us with a "sense of purpose and connection, and in some ways, happiness."⁶⁶

When I am in pain, early or mid-flare, I shift into pathological time, horizontal time, slow-time. From this position, like Roy's stolons, I can feel around me in search of connections. And I can pause, to witness each point or dot that is the now, and the now, and the now that is also this cell, and this cell, and that molecule and atom of me, all being and knowing their own logics and desires, suspended energetically so as to be apart but also *to hold together*⁶⁷—*tenderly*. "The oblique life is very intimate,"⁶⁸ Lispector divulges with a rhythm intoned by whisper, I imagine; hard to describe. Like she, I too "want the inconclusive" and feel a "diffuse desire for marvelling."⁶⁹ And so, I turn and wander on in-. The infinitesimal stirs me as the cosmological.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ James Doty quoted in Melissa de Witte, "The Power of Awe and the Cosmos."

⁶⁷ *Special relativity*, one of Albert Einstein's most famous theoretical discoveries, tells us that matter and energy are one in the same. Matter is energy and energy is matter.

⁶⁸ Lispector, ed. Tobler, and Moser. *Água Viva*, 61.

⁶⁹ Lispector, ed. Tobler, and Moser. *Água Viva*, 10.

⁷⁰ In *Beauty and Revolution in Science*, James W. McAllister notes that "the invocation of a model" serves a human aesthetic preference for symmetry, mirroring, and repetition capable of tracking across seemingly disparate areas of study and matter, thus garnering acceptance for a proposed theory. "Entities of the analogy's source domain, the solar system, are mapped onto the entities of the target domain, the atom: the sun is mapped onto the atomic nucleus, and the planets are mapped onto electrons." James W. McAllister, *Beauty & Revolution in Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 44-5. Furthermore, and as James Doty notes, the "power of awe works in both directions," macro or micro, cosmological or "molecular minutiae." James Doty quoted in Melissa de Witte, "The Power of Awe and the Cosmos," <https://news.stanford.edu/2022/09/06/power-awe-cosmos/>.

Feeling with my illness is a falling-into the biological stuff of my being, a scoping into the many wondrous formations of soma, the universe within. It means a tumbling-toward the chaos of infinite closeness, and distance, and difference; the “great potency of potentiality.”⁷¹ It is a meditation of visiting by means of envisaging that which exists beyond the senses by enduring the near-vomit-inducing awareness of extreme smallness as it is met by the absurdity of measure. *Feeling with-* is a falling in-, *falling for flight*. It is a practice of weathering *atomic* vertigo and emerging on the other side of it by focusing on the dot. After all, the dot contains the circle, the sphere, the torus, the Möbius, and more; it “symbolizes the residual state after the removal of volume, the *center*,” it is “the source of meditation” itself, *and* its goal.⁷² I begin to sense its imminent arrival in me, or mine into it: *wonder*, velocity’s suspension.

I am ready to rewire (again), though this time, with intention. I am a thin tyvek band. I am twisting möbius my state of being—that is, the state of being hypervigilant to the inside and out-, propagated in me by my fear of me, and of illness’ varied triggers unknown—into an act-ive/of envisioning molecular me. Soon I will experience the nauseating sensation of knowing deeply that there is essentially no delineation between my insides and the world at the level of the molecular, *or* the system.

Now, I am within a single point. I am indeterminate, mysterious here, a dot expanding though not as “arrow of light pointing into the future,”⁷³ but as circular emanations that stretch out time, wide, to a thinness that I cannot describe. I am suffusing as an *abstract line*. It is here in this non-space that I imagine to have “no barriers...where a person can scatter their thinking-feeling.”⁷⁴ Deleuze calls this horizontal space that has no size or duration, the ‘univocal plane,’ a plane of pure *immanence* he says, of becoming, possibly and also certainly, *imminently*.⁷⁵ It is also the *center*, as symbolized by its spatial manifestation, the dot, the “storehouse from which flow the movements of the one towards the many, the inner towards the outer, the immanent towards the manifest...and all the processes of emanation and divergence,

⁷¹ Lispector, 20.

⁷² Chevalier and Gheerbrant, trans. Buchanan-Brown, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, 305.

⁷³ Manguso, *The Two Kinds of Decay*, 165.

⁷⁴ Lispector, ed. Tobler, and Moser. *Água Viva*, 82.

⁷⁵ Deleuze’s concept of *immanence* means that which is *becoming from within*. As described by Roy, “this concept puts forth the idea that all becomings exist beside or with other becomings upon a horizontal plane of immanence.” Roy, *Molecular Feminisms*, 208. This concept is closely tied to ideas of ontological univocity.

and being the place from which they originated, to which are directed all processes of return and convergence...’’⁷⁶

I sense matters’ announcement here to be unlike that of pain—even one that is on the move—and more like a choral vibration or atonal hum. The nausea I felt moments ago has ceased, and I feel calm, collected, connected. I am in awe, grace. I pour myself, as torus into its core, into this feeling that emerges from its center. As wonder touches the atoms, molecules, cells, and tissues of me, the stress of pain, the fear of its continuance, of eleven, and the cycle of self-blame begins to dissipate. I train my focus to hold onto and be held by it—*healed* by it, as in allaying my flare’s eruption—to live *on* from within it.

In seeking this sensation out I am learning to lean in, to go deeper, to feel with my body and its illness, knowing that I’m close by embracing the many perplexities that I encounter along the way and weathering the vertigo that precedes it. What is at stake here is not the psychosomatic *curing* of chronic illness through the experience of wonder, though I have found wonder to be healing in many ways. As a healing strategy, one that my personal identity, interests, and somatic reality have primed me for, the particulars of *my feeling with-* are not necessarily universalizable. Combining a molecular-erotic approach with that which is uniquely meaningful to a given individual, *feeling with-* resists the standardization inherent to western medicine. I believe that this is part of its power. *Feeling with-* is an ethic for encountering ourselves, our bodies, what ails us, and each other in the world. As an applied biophilosophy, it offers a chance at creating new lines of flight around the matters of- and that matter the world.

‘Sick’ is one adjective that attaches to my being. It requires attention, attending to. But, my being must not be nounced. *Sick* is also a line of flight, an opening unto the possibilities of feeling with it; a turn to wondering that wanders towards molecular, atomic me-you and beyond, as torus towards its center; a telescoping so far inwards that we might re-emerge with a vantage that sees outside of ourselves, might see each other and our porous bodies—molar *and* molecular—more

⁷⁶ In their poetic entry on the symbolism of the *center*, Chevalier and Gheerbrant seem, at least to me, to be writing as if in conversation with Deleuze and Guattari on the concept of *univocity*. Chevalier and Gheerbrant, trans. Buchanan-Brown, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, 173.

fully and compassionately.



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