

SOLIDARITY WISHES: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL
SOLIDARITY, SOVEREIGNTY, AND STALLED STATES OF
DESIRE

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ABSTRACT

Solidarity Wishes argues that political solidarity is prone to getting stuck inside of stalled states of desire, what I conceptualize as “wishes,” for contemporary Canadian and American settler neoliberal subjects. This project illustrates how solidarity wishes commonly act as rhetorical, strategic, and performative psychological devices. I theorize that an ethics – or mentality – of sovereignty that ideologically structures many of these subjects’ social, political, and institutional lives is largely to blame for solidarity’s trapping within wishes. By centering an analysis of political solidarity through the framework of desire I illuminate how solidarity wishes and their expressions can be harvested by both individuals and groups to achieve something other than solidarity itself, a practice I liken to the psychoanalytic concept of “substitutive satisfaction.” Furthermore, as a meditation on solidarity as an object of desire, this dissertation queries what happens in the affective spaces between thinking and doing, feeling and experiencing, wanting and getting. I analyze examples from politics, popular culture, personal experience, academia, and activism to make my arguments, and I rely on queer theory, feminist theory, philosophy, and psychoanalysis as my theoretical frameworks. This dissertation gestures toward the political possibilities of rescuing political solidarity from these ambivalent subjective orectic states of wishes. It defends the theory that solidarity, in its most basic sense, is nonsovereignty manifested in a feeling toward another subject, a feeling that can, and hopefully will, ignite into productive solidarity practices. *Solidarity Wishes* argues that subjects must embrace their interdependency and adopt an ethics of nonsovereignty in order to transition their stagnant solidarity wishes into genuine desires for sociopolitical change and feasible practices toward transformative justice.

DEDICATION

Solidarity Wishes is dedicated to Michael Sutherland Young, obviously!

It's obvious, because, if you know him, you are familiar with how familiar he is with what it takes to sustain loving and mutually nourishing relationships. If you know him, you know how supportive he is of me and of all those to whom he commits. Dedicating a project that concentrates on how subjects can best belong to each other in nonsovereign and generative ways, to someone like Mike, is a no-brainer.

For the twelve years we have been together I've only known him to be doggedly compassionate. His self-reflexivity prevents him from going stale and defaulting to selfishness. He's constantly bettering himself, and therefore his world. He's a sage of "togetherness," a seasoned pro at living a life of integrity that centers the labor and nuance of relationships in place of lazy egotism and cruel self-promotion. His preferred position is one of radical vulnerability and radical care. No one's taught me more about how to be with others. I'd be nowhere fast without him.

Solidarity Wishes analyzes the layered concept of sovereignty from within a variety of contexts, but it's been most difficult theorizing this concept at the personal level, what I refer to as pragmatic sovereignty, or self-sovereignty, in this dissertation. If you know me intimately, you know I struggle with intimacy. Throughout these pages I advocate for subjects to hone nonsovereign modes of thinking and living in order to survive and thrive within the straight-jacketing and debilitating effects/affects of neoliberal capitalism, and yet, as Michael could surely attest to, I can be a real cactus sometimes. Several years ago a seven-year-old I used to babysit gave me a golden sequined dress-up crown and I kid you not that I wore it for a couple of years around our apartment, particularly on evenings when I was feeling most like a neurotic princess. I would prance around our kitchen in often just underwear and this crown, doling out decrees. In retrospect I gather my crown phase was not a completely blissful experience for Michael. He deserves a raise for surviving it.

I may have lost track of my crown, but I can admit that I still crave control. I require loads of solitude, though being alone often frustrates me. I need lots of help, but I also prefer to handle most things myself. I suspect this tug-of-war between playing sovereign and admitting that one couldn't possibly be sovereign is a common experience. Or, maybe it isn't? Maybe I'm the only one with a crown complex. Regardless, I would not have been able to wrap up this piece of my life without Mike being there for me when I needed him to be, and for making space for me when I had my crown on. A lot of people, for a variety of very valid reasons, start but do not complete their PhD. This is not surprising. I don't see how you could do it without a Michael.

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Michael, I'm grateful, but you already got a whole page. Enough is enough.

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---INTRODUCTION---

“OUR DEFAULT MODE”

All our stories are about what happens to our wishes. About the world as we would like it to be, and the world as it happens to be, irrespective of our wishes and despite our hopes. Our needs thwarted by the needs of others, our romances always threatened by tragedy, our jokes ruined by the people who don't get them. The usual antagonism of daydream and reality.¹

-Adam Phillips

I think sovereignty is a bad concept for almost anything. It's an aspirational concept and, as often happens, aspirational concepts get treated as normative concepts, and then get traded and circulated as realism. And I think that's what happened with sovereignty.²

-Lauren Berlant

How can we use each other's differences in our common battles for a livable future?³

-Audre Lorde

The Argument

Solidarity Wishes stages its cultural and philosophical analysis within a critical – mostly skeptical to be precise – curiosity about sovereignty. What if a subject's resistance to the truth of their nonsovereign reality is reflected in their troubled relationship to their solidarity desires? Posed differently, what if the most significant problem that Canadian and American settler subjects face today when enacting solidarity is a problem of delusional sovereign thinking? What if solidarity is prone to getting stuck inside of farfetched wishes as a means of protecting subjects' insecure senses of their sovereign selves? If sovereign thinking is at all responsible for preventing and negating solidarity, how might stuck solidarity subjects learn to move away from

¹ Adam Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery: On Curiosity and Other Appetites* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), XIII.

² Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt, “No One is Sovereign in Love: A Conversation Between Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt,” by Heather Davis and Paige Sarlin, *nomorepotlucks* 18 (2011), <http://nomorepotlucks.org/editorial/amour-no-18>.

³ Audre Lorde, “A Burst of Light: Living With Cancer,” in *A Burst of Light and Other Essays* (Mineola, New York: Ixia Press, [1988] 2017), 124.

an ethics of sovereignty to an ethics of nonsovereignty that prime them for practices pursuant of political solidarity? I use “solidarity subjects” to demarcate anyone who has a stake in nonsovereign modes of subsistence on this planet. Any subject that is subject to systems of neoliberal capitalism may be susceptible to solidarity wishes because such all-encompassing systems rely on the glorification of individualism, heroism, dutiful work ethic, and competition at the expense of potentially nonsovereign practices and feelings like solidarity.

I value solidarity, but romanticizing it is the last thing I want to do in *Solidarity Wishes*. A lot can happen to subjects under the rubric of solidarity, and surely not all that gets lumped within it is productive. There are, no doubt, ineffective and misguided solidarity ideas and practices in circulation. Hashtag solidarity, for example, is a frequently contested solidarity method, and I explore the gamut of its capabilities and limitations in chapter five. Neither does solidarity encompass all activism. It cannot describe every political act and every political feeling. Maybe (hopefully?) the best ideas about change and sociopolitical justice are yet to come. Thus, I am careful to not let my predilection for solidarity crowd out other useful ideas, practices, and tactics toward transformative justice. And I am not naïve to the fact of solidarity’s moral flexibility. As Barbara Ehrenreich comments, “[s]olidarity can embody so many things—fascism, religious fervor. I don’t trust it inherently.”⁴ Nor do I, and I explore this mistrust specifically in chapter two when I analyze “bad solidarities.” Nonetheless, I advocate for solidarity as a nonsovereign practice and ethic. “Whether we are confronting a pandemic, global warming, income inequality, racism or gender-based violence, solidarity depends on how we

⁴ Barbara Ehrenreich, “Barbara Ehrenreich is not an optimist, but she has hope for the future,” interview by Jia Tolentino, *The New Yorker*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/barbara-ehrenreich-is-not-an-optimist-but-she-has-hope-for-the-future>.

come together. It is defined by how we understand and enact our responsibilities to, and relationships with, each other.”⁵

I acknowledge that there are incredible variations on subjects’ senses of sovereignty and nonsovereignty within their worlds. In response to a draft of this dissertation, my doctoral supervisor, Meg Luxton, sagely observed that “even now, despite colonialism and capitalist penetration, there are people who have no relationship to sovereignty.” Touché. I acknowledge that not all of the world’s peoples live in hierarchical societies, are linked through some form of shared access to knowledge, or are dominated by sovereign thinking in the ways that I describe throughout this project. I am aware that there are still foragers on this earth who live unincorporated into a state, “where there is no concept of home but shelter and resources that are available to all,” as Luxton puts it. Hence, it is important for my readers to know that the critiques I develop and level against sovereignty are specifically targeted at Canadian and American settler societies – societies based on western European, North American sociopolitical formations from the 18th century on. Though I have limited my research scope in this dissertation to Canadian and American settler societies, in large part due to project feasibility, I do not want this move to suggest that indigenous cultures and communities have no relationship to the types of sovereignty I analyze throughout these pages. I am by no means an expert on indigenous culture and society, but my cursory knowledge suggests that non-settler societies have relationships to sovereignty and nonsovereignty that both resemble and contrast with settler societies. Thus, Indigenous critiques of sovereignty, as well as indigenous conceptions of

⁵ Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez, “What is solidarity? During coronavirus and always, it’s more than ‘we’re all in this together,’” *The Conversation*, April 13, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/what-is-solidarity-during-coronavirus-and-always-its-more-than-were-all-in-this-together-135002>.

nonsovereign relationality, in the diversity of forms they may take, is research territory I would like to embark as an academic sometime in the future.

It is also imperative that I note at the outset of this dissertation that the academic theories I employ to analyze solidarity and sovereignty within Canadian and American settler cultural practices, values, and norms are predominantly inventions of the societies they are being used to interpret. In chapter one when I explore and unpack the concept of sovereignty, I distinguish between forms of state sovereignty and forms of pragmatic sovereignty (or self-sovereignty). Pragmatic sovereignty is the model of sovereignty that I am putting into discourse with political solidarity in this project. This is the sovereignty that affects the human psyche and may be resultant of a subject's juvenile self-development. This is the sovereignty that can arguably be observed in all human beings, spanning settler and indigenous cultures, except, perhaps, in conjoined twins, whose sense of self may in fact be reflective of two selves. This is the sovereignty that is described by psychoanalysis and queer theory. This is the sovereignty that subjects internalize from living under systems of neoliberal capitalism. This is the model of sovereignty that Lauren Berlant has described as a "neoliberal symptom," the idea that "you're on your own, so you are sovereign, you are in control over your life."⁶ Yeah right!

Solidarity Wishes gestures toward the otherwise space of nonsovereignty, explores what that might look like for subjects interested in securing it, and ultimately, recommends it. Sovereignty, Berlant claims, is a "fantasy that neoliberalism sells to you."⁷ Assuming that is true, how do I address the calls for sovereignty that emanate from indigenous struggles, as exemplified in *The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*

⁶ Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," Online lecture, Skopje Pride Weekend, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xR7Iuf_jJIU.

⁷ Ibid.

(formerly Bill C-15), and through calls for independence, as witnessed within the Quebec sovereignty movement in Canada or the Hawaiian sovereignty movement in the United States? The immediate answer is that such endeavours do not reflect the model of sovereignty with which *Solidarity Wishes* is most preoccupied. This is not a value judgment of these movements and actions, which equate sovereignty with notions of freedom, independence, agency, equality, and self-determination for colonized peoples, but a recognition that sovereignty within such localized contexts operates as a political goal or aim, as opposed to a cultural mentality, the latter of which I am more interested in.

For me, sovereignty is a dirtier word than these examples suggest, a “bad concept for almost anything.”⁸ *Almost* anything. The sovereignty that I am coming for is a twisted ethos, a counterintuitive ethics that obscures subjects’ senses of their interdependency. And yet, the notion of sovereignty as a political pursuit toward self-determination is not entirely unrelated to the ethics of sovereignty that *Solidarity Wishes* argues is blameworthy for foreclosing solidarity for many Canadian and American settler subjects. Berlant is aware of the common critique that gets leveled against her conceptualization of sovereignty, which is that it negates indigenous struggles for sovereignty. It is not lost on me that similar critiques might be applied to my conceptualization of sovereignty. However, indigenous sovereignty and pragmatic sovereignty, though linked by the same signifier, are distinct concepts that are not mutually exclusive.⁹ I am critical of pragmatic sovereignty and its ill effects on neoliberal subjects, while also supportive of projects toward the attainment of indigenous sovereignty. The link between the two, as usefully observed by Berlant, is one of defensiveness.

The sovereignty concept is always a defense. It’s a defense of a jurisdiction. You don’t need sovereignty unless you have to defend yourself. So maybe we can think about

⁸ Berlant, “No One is Sovereign in Love.”

⁹ Ibid.

nonsovereignty as the a-priori...if you're raising sovereignty, it's because there is a military action going on trying to steal your life from you – you know – and that's true for liberals and it's true for authoritarians and it's also true for indigenous peoples whose, you know, traditional land and ways of life have been fracked by capitalist culture and nationalist culture too [Sic].¹⁰

A colonized people's quest for independence, self-determination, or safety is out of defense against some other sovereign force. Therefore, a critical conceptualization of sovereignty as a cultural ethics or mentality is different but connected – and perhaps even useful – to understanding localized pursuits of sovereignty for colonized peoples.

That said, I start this dissertation with a huge claim, which also feels like a wish: developing an ethics of nonsovereignty is conditional to the successful maintenance of human civilization. I told you it was huge. This claim may sound too ambitious for a doctoral dissertation, too bold to let float out front of one's research like this, yet queer, feminist, and psychoanalytic theory each in their own way describe how humans already carry on (and always have) in a myriad of nonsovereign ways, from renditions of love to politics. Even the practice of gossip has been argued to be an effective modality of nonsovereignty.¹¹ Thus, a universal ethics of nonsovereignty is not that incredible a goal for me to suggest that humanity, en masse, move toward. Part of my claim is that nonsovereignty already constitutes common subjective experience, whether anyone wants to admit it or not. There are already blueprints for it in circulation. Embracing nonsovereignty, therefore, is more about awakening subjects' perceptions

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See Judith Butler's analysis of Jose Esteban Munoz's penchant for gossip and her claims of its generative properties in Judith Butler, "Solidarity/Susceptibility," *Social Text* 137, Vol. 36, No. 4 (2018). Also, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conceptualization of gossip as a form of queer knowledge production and transmission (what she theorizes under the rubric of "virality") is relevant to this discussion. Sedgwick does not explicitly dip gossip into nonsovereignty, but her theorizing gestures toward the argument that gossip operates as nonsovereign relationality. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 23.

of their inherent interdependency than it is about conjuring some dramatic shift in behavior. Embracing nonsovereignty requires of subjects a great deal of self-reflexivity.

By “nonsovereignty” I generally mean practices of, or toward, decentralized power, though that is a simplistic definition of the concept. Nonsovereign praxis germinates from scenes of decentralized power or promotes them by moving subjects closer to them. An ethics of nonsovereignty might constitute epistemologies and methodologies for decentralizing power in order to generate more collaborative and less hierarchal modes of living for subjects. Living life in nonsovereign ways might look like living more collectively and dynamically, living so that power is manifested and deployed through processes that recognize individual vulnerability, susceptibility, and deservingness (whose conceptual distinctions I explore in chapter one) and foster commitments to practices of solidarity and mutual aid (which I will define and take up at length in chapters one and two). Nonsovereignty is in opposition to top-down governance and relationality that further and preserve individual, absolute, arrogant, and self-serving means. Civic solidarities, such as socialized healthcare and other types of social welfare assistance, are animated by nonsovereign thinking, although they are just the tip of the nonsovereign conceptual iceberg.

I am aware that my theorizing of sovereignty and nonsovereignty in this dissertation may promote an unnecessary dichotomous tension between these two concepts. While that is not my intent, I can admit that it is hard to avoid. I want to clarify that when I refer to nonsovereign thinking and practices as the “otherwise” in relation to sovereignty, I am not suggesting that all ideas and practices are either sovereign or nonsovereign, or that those ideas and practices that get labeled as such are static. For me, sovereignty and nonsovereignty, in their broadest senses of form, are mentalities. As such, they circulate and operate like cultural norms, and yet are even

more pervasive within a subject's lived experience to the extent that they themselves can operate as the very sites of propagation of norms. Regardless of its best classification, as a relational mentality, cultural ethos, or social operating system, *Solidarity Wishes* regards nonsovereignty as what Ross Gay identifies as "our default mode."

I suppose I could spend time theorizing how it is that people are not bad to each other, but that's really not the point. The point is that in almost every instance of our lives, our social lives, we are, if we pay attention, in the midst of an almost constant, if subtle, caretaking. Holding open doors. Offering elbows at crosswalks. Letting someone else go first. Helping with the heavy bags. Reaching what's too high, or what's been dropped. Pulling someone back to their feet. Stopping at the car wreck, at the struck dog. The alternating merge, also known as the zipper. This caretaking is our default mode and it's always a lie that convinces us to act or believe otherwise. Always.

Berlant identifies sovereignty as a fantasy, and Gay refers to it as a lie. Both descriptors make sense to me. Gay's "we" can be analyzed and debated, but I find his description of some subjects' interdependency within the realm of the mundane, or the ordinary, to be nonetheless useful. Nonsovereignty, as gestured toward within Gay's observations of subjects' "constant, if subtle, caretaking," is something that subjects are already adept at, though "we" only know this, Gay suggests, "if we pay attention."¹²

Solidarity Wishes brings sovereignty into discourse with solidarity by diagnosing a major problem for solidarity: wishes. I theorize solidarity wishes as ambivalent, unproductive, and sticky affective subjective states. I contend throughout this dissertation that while solidarity has the potential to be a productive nonsovereign tool towards the pursuit of transformative justice, it often gets stuck, does not work, or fails to materialize altogether. The following pages contain few empirical critiques of solidarity practices and efforts, although such work is important. *Solidarity Wishes* proffers few instructions for better solidarities. Rather, my major aim is to hold sovereignty to account. This is more a takedown piece than anything else. I follow Berlant's

¹² Ross Gay, *The Book of Delights* (New York: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2019), 135.

theorizing by interrogating the powerful ethos of sovereignty in order to illuminate its limits and its fallacies. Aligned with Berlant, *Solidarity Wishes* recommends that subjects work to deactivate sovereignty's hold on their lives and replace it with an ethics of nonsovereignty. "An ethics of nonsovereignty" sounds vague, I know, but the reality is that almost anything can function as nonsovereign, as nonsovereignty is more a relational and ethical framework than it is a defined set of practices.

The crux of the thesis that I develop throughout this dissertation is that the scenes of solidarity that contemporary Canadian and American solidarity-seeking settler subjects presently find themselves engaged in commonly function as wishes, and these wishes can trap solidarity desires. While solidarity has and continues to manifest successfully within different sociopolitical movements and is resultant of a variety of politicized actions, a cursory scan of contemporary Canadian and American culture reveals many instances where solidarity is stalled, ineffective, vapid, or absent altogether. *Solidarity Wishes* presents an argument that identifies this problem as a consequence of sovereignty and its distortions within the imaginations of neoliberal capitalist subjects. While a wish may keep a desire intact, it does nothing to help a subject progress toward the obtainment of an object of desire. In this sense, solidarity wishes bury solidarity desires alive. There are lots of things that subjects do or do not do that indicate their solidarity desires are functioning as wishes, and I track and examine a variety of these actions and inactions throughout the pages to come.

I have titled this dissertation *Solidarity Wishes* to reflect the ambivalence and hesitation that Canadian and American settler subjects carry regarding solidarity, and nonsovereignty, in general. As I will explain in greater depth in chapter four, solidarity wishes are not usually productive fantasies where the production of solidarity is concerned. Sovereignty, or sovereign

thinking, is the major culprit I deem responsible for trapping solidarity desires in wishes. Wishes are the scenes of solidarity breakdowns that I am examining within this critical cultural analysis. This dissertation's title encapsulates the current problematic state of solidarity desires for Canadian and American politicized settler subjects. Thus, *Solidarity Wishes* is a descriptive rather than prescriptive title. I do not champion solidarity wishes as productive states of desire for subjects, but due to what they signal about the solidarity desires of many Canadian and American settler subjects, I do believe they make for a productive title.

Loosely defined as a sense or feeling of unity, solidarity has been observed as manifesting as an action, a process, a practice, a goal, a virtue, a performance, and a performative. However, seldom has solidarity been studied as a desire. I intervene in solidarity's diverse critical conceptualizations across theory and praxis by contending that political solidarity often manifests in contemporary Canadian and American settler society as wishes, modes of desire in which a subject has internalized the lack of an object of desire to such an extent that little to no optimism toward said object is left in the subject's consciousness. I defend the claim that solidarity wishes do things for subjects, just not necessarily solidarity itself. Throughout this dissertation I identify, analyze, and theorize contemporary solidarity wishes of Canadian and American politicized subjects, and I define a solidarity subject as any living individual who either benefits from the solidarity efforts of others or seeks to act or to be in solidarity with others.

"Political solidarity," as conceptualized by Sally Scholz, operates as the major theoretical lens through which I analyze solidarity situations across this project.¹³ Scholz posits that any focused conceptualization of the elastic concept of solidarity will contain some overlap between

¹³ Sally J. Scholz, *Political Solidarity* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).

its myriad forms, and so in addition to political solidarities I pay some attention to civic, social, and parasitical solidarities as well to aid in my analysis of the full scope of political solidarity's limits and possibilities (as highlighted in chapters two and five specifically). Like Scholz, I am after a theory of solidarity that describes and promotes practices geared toward sociopolitical justice. Political solidarity is also the species of solidarity that presently animates contemporary culture. When activists enact solidarity in the streets or across social media platforms, when politicians incorporate solidarity into their rhetoric and policies, and when subjects sign petitions "in solidarity" or "out of solidarity" with another group or individual, political solidarity is the form of solidarity being summoned and exercised. All this to say, outside of a few academic disciplines, it is rare for solidarity to be intended to mean anything but political solidarity. Thus, when I mention solidarity in this dissertation, unless otherwise clarified, I am referring to political solidarity.

Scholz contends that more than one subject is always necessary for the existence of any species of solidarity and that not all groups inherently produce or practice political solidarity.¹⁴ Aside from these givens, there is much uncertainty around solidarity. What does it mean for subjects to feel solidarity and want solidarity versus to enact it? Does solidarity solely denote embodied action, or can it constitute virtual, digital, psychic, or affective events? Does it matter what moves a subject toward solidarity, as in ethics, obligations, and commitments? Are feelings of solidarity a prerequisite to or indication of transformative justice? It is unsurprising that when so much is at stake, particularly human lives and livelihoods, appetites for action are strong. This explains how the pressure to *do something* can build within communities in pursuit of meaningful sociopolitical change, a phenomenon I explore more thoroughly in chapter one. I

¹⁴ Ibid., 19.

suspect that much of the resistance to consider political solidarity in more ethereal terms, in the company of desire, affect, and motivation for example, is due to overpowering desires to materialize political solidarity. The promise of action to remedy inaction or inadequate action is a seductive force. But, as I insist throughout this dissertation, political solidarities invested in desire and affect need not be antithetical to getting something “done” where transformative justice is concerned.

What do solidarity subjects’ desires have to do with political solidarity’s success? This is the intervention this dissertation makes into the academic and activist discourse of the juggernaut concept of solidarity. As a meditation on solidarity as an object of desire, *Solidarity Wishes* queries what happens in the affective spaces between thinking and doing, feeling and experiencing, wanting and getting. What insight can be gained for subjects seeking transformative justice when desires for solidarity are reframed as active and generative subjective processes, and therefore valued as much as solidarity events like rallies and protests? What if the biggest challenge for politicized subjects to achieve political solidarity is to overcome the reality that political solidarity is something that they do not actually desire? Why might subjects not want political solidarity? Why might subjects feel they do not deserve political solidarity? What of political ambivalence? What of fear, exhaustion, and depression? Why might subjects who do not desire political solidarity, or transformative justice more generally, move toward the attainment of political solidarity, or at the very least, perform solidarity desires publicly? And what are the desires of the subjects on whose behalf political solidarity is being fortified for? What if they do not want political solidarity in a particular moment, or ever, with a particular group or individual that is attempting to produce it for/with

them? Can intentional nonsolidarities, what one might refer to as antisolidarities, operate as effective sociopolitical critical practices?¹⁵

Sometimes solidarity subjects can simultaneously function as benefactor and practitioner of political solidarity, and sometimes the benefactors and practitioners of political solidarity remain in distinct groups. Regardless, in this dissertation I recognize all involved as solidarity subjects. Due to the inequalities that some situations of solidarity exacerbate, solidarity subjects may experience objectification and other forms of oppression by the very people coming to their aid. Scholz analyzes this phenomenon under the banner of “the paradox of the participation of the privileged.”¹⁶ I speak to this paradox throughout the dissertation and address it directly with regards to my own privilege in chapter four. I recognize that there is a wide swath of interdisciplinary scholarship that describes how subjectivity can be compromised through constrictions to one’s agency, visibility, voice, and freedom to self-identify, but despite such forms of subjugation that some subjects find themselves subject to, there are still subjects to be found beneath these struggles, and I propose it is important that we can continue to theorize them as such.

Transformative Justice

I refer to “transformative justice” frequently throughout this dissertation as it is one of my central motivators for engaging with solidarity scholarship in the first place, and so it is important that I take the space to explain my use of this term. Transformative justice germinated from criminal

¹⁵ I want to express gratitude to Thomas Waugh, who in response to my presentation on *Solidarity Wishes* at the Sexuality Studies Association’s conference at Congress in 2017 at Ryerson University in Toronto, got me to think about “anti-solidarity” as a sociopolitical tactic. The question of whether an individual or group’s intentional actions geared towards the disruption or prevention of solidarity fall under the rubric of solidarity is compelling, and I explore this inquiry with regards to queer antirelationality in chapter three.

¹⁶ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 151-187.

justice reform. It is a response to the ways that Canadian and American prisons, court systems, police forces, political actors, and members of mainstream society deal with those who have been deemed “criminal.” At the beginning of her book on the subject, Ruth Morris sketches out the trajectory of thinking that led her and other activists and Canadian legal reformers to promote and develop this concept. She explains that many cultural commentators recognized the need to move away from a *retributive* criminal justice system that focuses on perpetrators and their punishment, toward a more *restorative* one that focuses on the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders. Though no doubt an important shift, she explains how this is not enough to establish a truly effective judicial system. A further shift to a system that enacts transformative justice is needed, one that “takes into account the past” and “recognizes distributive justice.”¹⁷

Transformative and distributive justice in the context of criminal justice reform includes an accounting of the sociopolitical circumstances that lead subjects to criminality in the first place, as well as engaging in community consultations for transformative solutions as opposed to empowering punitive institutions to play sovereign. Over two decades ago Morris made the following observations.

We live in a world where the CEO of Disney enterprises, Michael Eisner, receives over \$575 million per year in compensation, while 1200 workers in a Vietnam [sic] factory making give-away Disney toys earn six to eight cents an hour. Two hundred of them fell ill from toxic solvents, poor ventilation, and exhaustion in 1997. We live in a world where 450 billionaires have as much of the world’s goods as the poorest 50 percent of the entire world’s population (McMurtry p. 145). We live in a world where Native babies and Black babies die more frequently than White babies, and adults from those groups have a shorter life expectancy. The point is not that street crime and theft (the dominant types that fill our courts and prisons) are trivial, or justifiable, but that they are part of a much broader picture. Most of those who fill our prisons have not had the minimum UN standards for their childhood met. Surely there are some broader answers, answers that can use each crime as an opportunity to transform the lives of victims, offenders, and the whole community.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ruth Morris, *Stories of Transformative Justice* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press Inc., 2000), 5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

While the statistics Morris lays out have certainly fluctuated over the past 20+ years, the world continues to grapple with extreme income inequality, corporate corruption, a vulnerable proletariat, and systemic racism. In Canada and in the United States in particular, this is still the reality. And so,

[t]ransformative justice is a way of addressing an individual act of harm that relies on community members instead of the police, the law, or the government (also known as the state). It is a response to the racism and gender-based oppression that shape life of many people of color. Though models differ, all reject the involvement of the criminal-justice system, choosing instead to rely on community support networks and mediators.¹⁹

It is unsurprising, then, that many proponents of transformative justice, Morris included, are also prison abolitionists. Additionally, given the rise of Black Lives Matter in the last decade and its sustained global responses to antiblackness, police brutality, and systemic oppression, many proponents of transformative justice are also interested in abolishing and/or defunding police forces.

The appeal of transformative justice to *Solidarity Wishes* is not about specific criminal justice reform, but about a broader mandate to motivate changes toward sociopolitical justice through community-oriented, systemic, restorative, and nonsovereign means. In a virtual lecture Berlant gave in 2020 she reflected on her aims in *Cruel Optimism*, in which, she claims, she was moving toward an “anarchist model” or a “queer life-world model of reinventing the world.” Berlant believes that subjects “can reinvent the world from the relations on the ground,” and that one’s options are not limited to deconstruction, what she refers to as “[downing] a structure.” For Berlant “structures are expressed in our bodies and in our social relations,” and by adapting relational practices subjects can affect and amend the infrastructure of their societies. In other words, through altering micro interpersonal sociality subjects can affect their macro

¹⁹ Kim Tran, “Transformative Justice, Explained,” *Teen Vogue*, November 15, 2018.

sociopolitical climate. For Berlant, such a process happens by “trusting the ways in which [subjects] can build things,” the likes of which Michael Warner has described as queer counterpublics, and of which Berlant has taken up through the theorizing of heteronormativity.

And then we were producing work that was trying to think about how heteronormativity finds different kinds of creativity and objects, and that we can actually use its sponginess to make better worlds. And, I think, like [sic], this festival is an outcome of that kind of thinking, now twenty years old, to try to give us material to think with, for remaking social life, not just like taking down social life, but actually remaking it because people can’t just live in the negative, they have to be living by changing the way objects can work...²⁰

Ultimately, *Solidarity Wishes* uses transformative justice as a placeholder for a broad spectrum of progressive sociopolitical changes that subjects can achieve by holding their institutions to account, remaking these institutions, and culturally rewiring what is expected of such institutions.

Furthermore, *Solidarity Wishes* promotes queerness as one of the most productive tools that subjects can use toward the promotion of transformative justice. As Berlant further recounts,

...the argument that Lee Edelman and I had was...he thinks that there’s a structural reproduction that gives you this fantasy that you can change things, but fundamentally you can’t, and my view is you can change what an object can do. That’s what politics is, is putting objects near new things to be able to make new forms of life.²¹

There is a wealth of blueprints for better infrastructure to be found within queer social practices and values. Queer sex, queer theory, queer friendships, queer politics, queer ethics, queer (chosen) families – all can function as nonsovereign rubrics for the remaking of systems in order to better sustain subjects. Moving toward better life-sustaining infrastructure for subjects is what I mean by moving towards “transformative justice” in this dissertation. Transformative justice practices like mutual aid campaigns, which I explore further in chapter one, are evidence that

²⁰ Berlant, “Cruel Optimism.”

²¹ Ibid.

nonsovereignty is not hostage to utopia, fantasy, and academic theory, but is representative of social practices and values that can be channelled into a subject's life on the ground.

I want to stress that I am making a deliberate choice to theorize progressive social and political change under the rubric of “transformative justice” as opposed to “social justice.” While “social justice” is arguably the most common nomenclature that activists and academics presently use to describe the gains that they hope to achieve with their actions and research, I find the term a bit flat. It is ubiquitous in contemporary progressive activist and academic discourse, often sans definition, and lacking any explanation of what its utilizers expect of it. I believe “social justice” has lost its mojo, so to speak, mostly because it has become so common. Consequently, I have witnessed a stubborn assumption amongst those who utilize the term that its meaning is widely understood and agreed upon. In other words, it is a concept that appears to be taken for granted.

I address the staleness of “social justice” in *Solidarity Wishes* in two ways. First, whenever I refer to “social justice” I use the phrasing “sociopolitical justice.” I am of the mindset that social issues and politics cannot be cleaved where quests for justice are concerned. Additionally, “social justice” is often used in explicitly political conversations, and so the amended “sociopolitical justice” is simply more precise. When I reference “sociopolitical justice” in this work it is usually with regards to broad progressive politics – to the changes that are needed in politics and society to improve subjects' lives. And second, I replace “social justice” with “transformative justice” throughout this dissertation in order to revive social justice through a consideration of structural causes and nonsovereign revisions. The aforementioned carceral origins of “transformative justice” do not prevent the term from being applied to other realms, and my choice to use “transformative justice” as part of my analytical framework, as

opposed to “social justice,” is reflective of my initiative take such an idea and apply it in a different context. Such repurposing is indicative of scholarship’s nonsovereign potential and of activism’s experimental qualities. I am all for it.

My Wishes, My Methodologies

This dissertation has been written from my standpoint as a doctoral student within the gender, feminist, and women’s studies program at York University. Feminist theory, along with queer theory, philosophy, psychoanalysis, activist discourse, and popular culture is most responsible for shaping my thinking. In retrospect, there are many things I would do differently if given the chance to repeat my graduate school experience, but my membership to a feminist enclave of academia is not one of them. Women’s, gender, and sexuality studies departments have been my home during my time in higher education as both a student and an educator. Most of my teachers have been feminist and/or queer. For this, I could not be prouder and more grateful. While queer theory is undoubtedly the field of scholarship that I draw most heavily from in order to make my arguments, it is my feminist imagination that brought me to Canada, to York University, to Gender, Feminist, and Women’s Studies, and to this doctoral work on political solidarity in relation to sovereignty.

Lola Ulufemi begins *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power* with the following conceptualization of feminism.

Feminism is a political project about what could be. It’s always looking forward, invested in futures we can’t quite grasp yet. It’s a way of wishing, hoping, aiming at everything that has been deemed impossible. It’s a task that has to be approached seriously.²²

²² Lola Ulufemi, *Feminism Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 1.

I share these beliefs with Ulufemi about feminism's potential. While I believe my queerness most fundamentally defines me, it is my feminism that has most motivated me to write *Solidarity Wishes*. Ulufemi claims that feminism expanded her world. "[She] saw in it, conflicting theorists and activists, all giving their ideas about the way the world should be. Perhaps most memorably, it released [her] from the desire to comply with the world as it is."²³ *Solidarity Wishes* is about my own resistance to the status quo that Ulufemi is referencing. She hopes that her book encourages her readers to "think about the limits of this world and the possibilities contained in the ones we could craft together."²⁴ I hope that *Solidarity Wishes* accomplishes the same for my readers.

When I began to conceive of *Solidarity Wishes* one of my major aims was to classify political solidarity as a tangible tool and practice. I assumed that after I had analyzed the use of solidarity throughout a variety of sociopolitical contexts, I would then be able to promote a particular breed of political solidarity for those interested in replicating it. I fantasized that activists and academics alike would take such knowledge and apply it to their own unique pursuits toward transformative justice. I expected to gain insight into whether political solidarity is a noun (some state of being one can eventually reach or a stance from which one can position themselves) or a verb. And if a verb, whether it is transitive or intransitive.²⁵ In other words, does it necessarily denote an action that promotes a type of unity and support with another individual or group? I also wondered whether one works toward, out of, in, for, or because of solidarity. Is it done or thought or felt? Is it even possible, or is it mainly a hopeful, reaching, agenda? And, if it is in fact reachable, how does one know when they get there?

²³ Ulufemi, *Feminism Interrupted*, 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁵ I want to credit such curiosity to Bobby Noble, my initial supervisor for this dissertation, who motivated me to think about solidarity along the lines of linguistics.

Once I started researching, I realized almost immediately that *Solidarity Wishes* is not about finding the right classifications of political solidarity practices, it is about trying to understand why subjects get stuck on route to them, or, why solidarity might be unthinkable in the first place for some subjects. It is about these culprit states of desire called wishes, and what they reflect about subjects' desires for political solidarity, and for nonsovereignty, in general. While wishes are not productive containers for solidarity desires, they reflect the reality of the state of solidarity for many Canadian and American subjects. In that sense, they are productive concepts. Initially I had planned to conduct interviews with progressive activists from a variety of sociopolitical campaigns and movements in order to explore solidarity desires, but when my research imperative shifted from classifying solidarity to understanding why it stalls, the project shifted from a qualitative venture to a much more theoretical one. Still, I needed examples, case studies, things to sink my theory-teeth into, so I decided to focus my research on popular culture, politics, and personal experience. I made this decision, mostly, because I was compelled by the space of the ordinary, and the affects it circulates.

Kathleen Stewart defines the realm of the ordinary as a “shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges, a scene of both liveness and exhaustion, a dream of escape or of the simple life.”²⁶ The ordinary, or the mundane, is useful to *Solidarity Wishes* because it is a space of the usual where subjects do a whole lot of their living and their feeling, sovereign and solidaristic feeling included. It is commonplace to consider feelings, emotions, and affects in tandem with extraordinary events like tragedies, miracles, or accomplishments. There is already established language and theoretical frameworks for considering a subject's orrectic life through the analysis of “extraordinary” events. Part of understanding a feeling is identifying its trigger. A

²⁶ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 1.

subject might wonder, “why am I feeling this way?” Extraordinary events have easily locatable triggers, or affective stimuli, and so subjects may be more inclined to consider the relationship of their feelings to such events than during moments where triggers are not easily identifiable. I do not mean to imply that the realm of the extraordinary is easier to bear for subjects, rather, my claim is that an extraordinary event like a sudden death of a loved one is likely going to provide for a context in which it is easier for subjects to recognize the connection between their feelings and their experiences than from within a more ordinary seeming experience like grocery shopping.²⁷

This begs the question of how to distinguish between the extraordinary and the ordinary for subjects. This problem could fill the pages of a whole study of its own. I summon this dichotomy in this project to highlight the affective spaces that may slip under a subject’s self-reflexive radar. I consider the ordinary to be one such space. I wonder whether Stewart had a similar observation that propelled her to write *Ordinary Affects*. Affects circulate through subjects even when they are not (or do not recognize that they are) living through the drama of *something* noteworthy. *Something* is always happening, despite the mythology of the ordinary that suggests otherwise.

Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences. They’re things that happen. They happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, and in publics and social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like something. Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they’re also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of.²⁸

²⁷ Shopping is a mundane activity for me, but I recognize that for others it may be experienced as anything but!

²⁸ Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 1-2.

Part of my claim about sovereignty and solidarity is that they both circulate as ordinary affects, or, to be more precise, are shaped by ordinary affects, whether subjects are aware of their prevalence in their day-to-day existences or not. To not pay attention to the ordinary in a critical analysis of the concepts of sovereignty and solidarity is to miss a lot of relevant and rich feelings. This was the major reasoning behind my choice to focus on popular culture, politics, and personal experience – all three are chock-full of ordinary affects.

This dissertation is about laying the groundwork and vocabulary for an analysis of desire within solidarity practices and feelings – desire that I suspect is tempered significantly by sovereign thinking. In neoliberal capitalist Canadian and American settler society, I have witnessed lots of hot air where solidarity is concerned, an overabundance of solidarity wishes flung into the affective atmospheres that fill up subjects' experiences. I wanted to talk about these solidarity wishes and better understand them as bouts of desire that reveal problems regarding the promotion of solidarity and other nonsovereign practices. Thus, this dissertation has shaped up into a theoretical project that uses cultural, political, and personal examples as case studies. It is an academic analysis of solidarity from within the contexts of politics, academia, and the ordinary, all with an eye to the overarching backdrop of sovereignty that I insist structures so many contemporary Canadian and American settler subjects' lives and desires.

While a considerable part of the research of *Solidarity Wishes* is academic, in the sense that my exploration of these polymorphous concepts of solidarity and sovereignty is historical, analytical, and philosophical, it is also incredibly personal. In addition to the anecdotes that I include throughout the dissertation, it is also full of my wanting, and I feel the responsible thing to do is to own that fact outright and up front. Like the solidarity subjects I think with and about

throughout these pages, politicized folk of all stripes, from founders of major activist campaigns and complex critical theories to indignant dissenting ordinary people, I too have solidarity wishes and desires. I wish for solidarity to incite profound social, political, and economic change for its practicing and desiring subjects – for it to be a feasible tool for those interested in manifesting equity and transformative justice within their own or others’ lived experiences. For me, I wish for solidarity to be a way of not only standing with but assisting those most disenfranchised and forgotten within the isolating and subjugating systems of neoliberal capitalism. These feel more like wishes than desires because of my skepticism of them as achievable aims.

Solidarity is a “risky endeavour,” as Natalie Kouri-Towe points out, because “our desire for solidarity can exceed our capacity to attend to how power circulates and is mobilized.”²⁹ And yet, despite such risk and regardless of my skepticism, I advocate for political solidarity as a valuable theoretical framework and means of achieving transformative justice. On a good day, political solidarity feels to me like an obtainable object of desire. On behalf of the good days, from a place of hope, this project proffers solidarity as an option for arriving at a better world for those left behind by sovereign thinking and neoliberal capitalism.³⁰ But I do not deny the bad days, when what I want – solidarity for instance – can feel distant and tucked away within farfetched wishes. Such wishes are largely products of my own insecurities. I want to be somebody. I want to do something that has results capable of bypassing my critical defenses as a long-time jaded graduate student. I want to feel productive. I want my research to feel

²⁹ Natalie Kouri-Towe, “Solidarity at a Time of Risk: Vulnerability and the Turn to Mutual Aid,” *Topia* 41 (2000), 190-197.

³⁰ Part of my critique of sovereign thinking and neoliberal capitalism in this dissertation is that, to an extent, such systems leave all subjects behind, or put differently, render all subjects precarious. Of course, and notwithstanding this universal and inherent precarity embedded in these systems, precarity is not equally distributed across all subjects. I get that. Nonetheless, both conceptions of precarity are important aspects of my critique of sovereign thinking and neoliberal capitalism.

meaningful, worthwhile, and important. And I want to get paid for it. I WANT TO GET PAID FOR MY WORK. Imagine that. I want all of this, but I often doubt that I will ever get any of it.

Solidarity Wishes hatched out of a desire to operationalize my theories of justice and stave off those feelings of futility that can come tethered to one's experience as an arm-chair academic, or as Luxton less disparagingly puts it, "scholar activist."³¹ I cannot help but wonder to what extent I am spinning my wheels inside of a wish like some of the solidarity subjects that I take up in these pages. Has the ivory tower acted as a refuge for me, a place to safely linger inside of my wishes for transformative justice to avoid the more revolutionary work of embodied action out on the streets? Have I subconsciously landed on solidarity because it is a trendy and honorable research topic? Do I actually desire solidarity beyond the page? If so, with whom, and why? What is in it for me? Will *Solidarity Wishes* enable me and the other academics who hopefully engage with it to enact solidarity, or are the mental gymnastics in these pages primarily applicable toward the fulfillment of my doctoral degree requirements? Can an assignment ever be radical?³²

³¹ Meg Luxton, "Committing Sociology: the Challenges Facing Activist Scholarship," in *Reading Sociology: Canadian Perspectives, 3rd Edition*, ed. Patrizia Albanese, Lorne Tepperman, and Emily Alexander (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2018), 129-133.

³² This question haunted me throughout the duration of writing *Solidarity Wishes*. When I was revising one of my final drafts, I decided to consult friends, family, and other thinkers in my orbit about this topic of "productive" and "radical" student output. I posted this to social media: "Dear relevant hive mind, I need your help: I am after examples of productive/successful (I know these are subjective descriptors but bear with me...) theoretical scholarship that germinated from an assignment - could be undergraduate or graduate work...In something I am writing I am thinking about whether an assignment can ever, truly, be radical in spite of its prescriptive qualities. I've always been skeptical of the ways in which formal education prompts thinking and shapes writing, yet I'm looking for examples of assignments that, nonetheless, made waves. Weren't some of Gayle Rubin's early influential pieces undergraduate essays? Am I making that up? Anyways, if you got any ideas, I'd love to hear them. Looking for citations in particular, so please send them my way." The discussions that ensued were rich. Many respondents gave me what I did not know I was looking for – affirmation. And many examples of significant scholarship that started out as undergraduate or graduate assignments were unearthed. I learned about books, articles, journals, careers, and perspectives that germinated out of thinking and writing from within the boundaries of various educations. Initially, this post was an attempt to round up a reference or two of radical student works. The generous thoughts and citations I received, however, more than adequately answered my question. So, can assignments produce radical work? Yes! That is, apparently, the point of them. This post and the conversations that followed are "public" on my FB page, and therefore accessible. See Gary Lee Pelletier, "Nerd Alert / Academia / Queer Studies /

My graduate school experience has been no picnic. The drama of two grueling labor strikes at my host institution (Covid-19 helped to prevent a third), chronic depression, the growing pains of a 12-year-old relationship with my partner, nagging debt, a drawn-out immigration application, and all the fun that this global pandemic has brought with it have colored this past decade. Alas, I am making it out alive, but as I lick my wounds, I am not totally convinced it was all worth it. I feel used (and not in any queerly erotic, pleasurable, way!). I struggle to describe what specifically I have accomplished. This despair goes beyond my personal experience. It reflects existential questions about the value of academia, and it is indicative of my increasing suspicion of the utility of higher education. I know I am not alone in this paranoia, but that awareness does little to soothe these dark feelings.³³

I suspect a lot of my ambivalence over choosing a career in academia stems from the stubborn yet influential dichotomy of theory versus practice, a dichotomy I go to battle with throughout *Solidarity Wishes*. What qualifies an action as a form of activism in the first place? Are such binary divisions between modes of thinking/feeling and modes of doing/acting worth anyone's time? Where do wishes fall along this spectrum of mental and physical subjectivity? What can desire accomplish? How? And for whom? Luxton seems less cynical than I am about the potential for academics to effect transformative justice, though, she is not unaware of the difficulties that such dichotomized sentiments can create for scholars and activists, particularly around issues of class and race, accessibility of knowledge, power relations, and within

Feminist Theory," *Facebook*, December 6th, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/gary.pelletier.90/posts/10101307706871926?comment_id=10101308337717706¬if_id=1638994428239668¬if_t=feedback_reaction_generic&ref=notif.

³³ David Kurnick productively unpacks such sentiments in his article on the existential career-crisis that appears to be plaguing a great many academics who act as "interpreters" as a means to make a living. In his article he also describes queer theory's relationship to what's been referred to as "method wars," what he defines as "disciplinary self-scrutiny." See David Kurnick, "Queer Theory and Literary Criticism's Melodramas," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/queer-theory-and-literary-criticisms-melodramas>.

collaborations between subjects that are inside and outside of academia.³⁴ However, despite the complexities that are inherent to the work of scholar activists, Luxton maintains that scholarship is indeed productive activism.

It's not easy -- but struggles to overcome the systemic inequalities that permeate contemporary society need all our efforts: political engagement with the issues, good scholarship that analyses those issues, thoughtful demands and political mobilising that brings together people from as many different constituencies as possible, and a determination to commit sociology despite powerful opposition.³⁵

I hope she is correct.

The Chapters

Political solidarity is the foundational concept from which *Solidarity Wishes* was written. Scholz observes that “there is something unique about the form of solidarity that emerges in opposition to oppression and injustice,” something that separates political solidarity from the other forms. Chapter one sets the stage for a theory of political solidarity through an examination of the concepts of “difference,” “desire,” and “sovereignty” and their interplay, while chapter two conceptualizes political solidarity and distinguishes it from other forms of solidarities. Scholz suspects that “[t]he most notable element [of political solidarity] is perhaps that moral commitment provides the source of the solidarity.”³⁶ While I think Scholz is accurate in this line of thinking, there are some grey areas of desire in the space between morality, commitments, and other motivations such as obligations and affects of guilt, sympathy, empathy, and ambivalence,

³⁴ In our conversations about this Luxton reminded me of the difference that experience makes. When she thinks of the utility of activism within academia, she is thinking from the standpoint of someone who has taught and been a part of university communities for many years. She recalled to me that when she started her undergraduate degree, she had no professors who were women or people of color. In her second year she recounted having a professor who refused to answer questions from female students. At that time the University of Toronto even had quotas about the number of Jewish and Black students permitted in its professional schools. She has seen firsthand how activism in the universities and in the world can change things. “Not enough,” she admitted, but change has clearly occurred. This is an important perspective that has helped me keep my cynicism in check.

³⁵ Luxton, “Committing Sociology,” 132.

³⁶ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 38.

all of which are worthy of critical analysis. I explore these conceptual distinctions in chapters one and two to respond to the problem of whether the unique backbone of all political solidarity is indeed moral intentional commitment. Save for this arguable exception of moral intentionality, political solidarity lacks a common conceptual scaffolding in both academic and activist discourses. It has no secure or widely agreed upon definition, criteria, or theoretical framework. Every aspect of political solidarity's existence has been debated and creatively imagined and re-imagined, from its meaning to its form, function, motivation, trajectory, value, and effectiveness. Such circumstances make for a juicy research concept. My major aim in these first two chapters is to arrive at a theory of political solidarity that *Solidarity Wishes* will be able to build upon and analyze through the framework of desire.

Chapter three delves deeper into political solidarity through the recognition that its deployment can entrench stale systems and bad politics that those in pursuit of transformative justice may be mobilizing against. I turn to queer theory to consider how politicized individuals caught in such a predicament reconcile their activism with the fact of their subjugation under the very systems they flout. Is political solidarity, like queerness, “an ideality or a figuration of a mode of being in the world that is not yet here?”³⁷ Will it ever be? Despite its extreme adaptability in both theory and practice, the very possibility of solidarity has been questioned by social theorists. With Jose Esteban Munoz's conceptualization of queerness in mind, I am led to wonder whether one can ever truly arrive at solidarity despite difference. And if political solidarity tends to present politics as a practice for bearing the here and now, what becomes of those subjects who want different systems? What about subjects who are no longer interested in trying out more of the master's tools, but would prefer to move out of his house altogether, or

³⁷ Jose Esteban Munoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 103.

kill two birds with one stone by burning down the house with him inside of it? Through an examination of the tenets of the queer antisocial thesis, a contentious theoretical spin off queer antirelationality, chapter three interrogates solidarity by questioning the value of politics and activism in general. Are there possibilities toward transformative justice that lie outside these conventional realms of relationality? How can political solidarity be reconciled by subjects who possess radical wishes for a clean slate of politics and new modes of subsisting on earth? Is political solidarity compatible with revolution? What is nonsovereign about queer antirelationality? Can antirelationality be conceived of as a type of antisolidarity? If so, is antisolidarity productive?

In chapter four I build up from the theory of political solidarity that I conceptualize in the first three chapters and turn squarely to desire. I contemplate the constitution and psychic origins of desire and frame political solidarity in terms of solidarity wishes. I home in on these modes of desire in which solidary-seeking subjects get stuck. I draw from psychoanalytic thinking as well as from popular culture in my investigation of the varied meanings of wishes. *Solidarity Wishes* aims to frame desire as a generative force for solidarity-seeking subjects, distinguishing it from wishes, which often conceal objects of desire that subjects have already forsaken. Affects like ambivalence, hopelessness, fear, unsusceptibility, and undeservingness that wishes often are inhabited by motivate subjects to maintain the status quo – to idle in the disfunction of the present. Therefore, I conclude chapter four with the argument that justice-seeking subjects need to rescue their desires for political solidarity from the confines of their wishes, and intentionally transport them to a new psychic plane of greater hope and possibility in order to effect material results.

Chapter five expands upon the possibilities of politics and activism by turning to the virtual. It queries what digital activism can do for solidarity, as well as what digital activism can do for politics in general. I focus on the hashtag in this chapter because it provides fertile ground for solidarity-seeking subjects at the intersection of desire and nonsovereignty. Working towards political solidarity through embodied actions like marches and rallies may look different and feel different to solidarity subjects than digital activism, but what of the results? Are both modes of sociopolitical action – digital and analog – equally effective, and how should subjects go about such an evaluation? What is the value (if any) of this digital/analog distinction in academic analyses of activism and sociopolitical change and transformation in the first place? The prominence of the hashtag in contemporary mainstream culture and activism, as well as the omnipresence of Covid-19, highlight the importance of transmission. In addition to contagion, in this rapidly digitalizing and globalizing world, transmission also describes the quality and frequency of connectivity. Transmission is a way of thinking about how humans are getting through to each other and getting through to each other – effectively – seems necessary to the development of useful modes of nonsovereignty. The hashtag has provided human subjects with some incredible means of transmission in this here and now. The hashtag is a productive case study for this dissertation because it, along with the broader virtual realm of the internet, can act as a host to stagnant solidarity wishes while also providing a productive infrastructure for cyborgian subjects to enact political solidarity and other nonsovereign practices.³⁸

Solidarity Wishes concludes with a review of the project and of the major concepts used to construct its arguments about solidarity: difference, desire, sovereignty, and queerness. The

³⁸ By “cyborgian” I am referring to subjects who navigate their sociopolitical contexts with a heavy reliance on technological – often digital and/or virtual – tools. In chapter five I extensively engage with Donna Haraway’s work on the concept of the cyborg to aid in my analysis of solidarity wishes, desires, and practices that traffic online.

major claim of the project, which is that sovereign thinking inhibits solidarity desires within the psyches of Canadian and American neoliberal settler subjects, is reflected through an analysis of some cultural examples. Solidarity, difference, desire, sovereignty and queerness are boundless and influential concepts that are not confined to just one realm of human existence. The psychological, the social, the political, the cultural, the relational, the technological, the historical, the viral, and the theoretical are all realms through which this dissertation's arguments travel. I try to illustrate this vastness in the conclusion, where I make one final case for dethroning the sovereigns that flood many Canadian and American subjects' existences.

---CHAPTER ONE--- SOVEREIGNTY, DIFFERENCE, AND DESIRE

“We’re All Better Off When We’re All Better Off”

A discussion of nonsovereign ethics begs the questions of who or what, exactly, is sovereign in the first place, and what, then, constitutes sovereign thinking? Before I meditate on the shapes and possibilities of nonsovereignty in the first section of this chapter, it is essential that I provide a context for this dissertation by exploring the concept of sovereignty first. Like solidarity, sovereignty is a flexible signifier. The concept broadly refers to absolute power and those who deploy it. Sovereignty has taken on a generalized meaning in critical theory, particularly queer theory, as an ethos, an overall framework for understanding the structuration of the world and the subjects who hold it up. A generalized sovereignty, what I refer to as “sovereign thinking” throughout this dissertation, operates as a stubborn ethics for neoliberal capitalist subjects. Lauren Berlant regards sovereignty as an “inadequate concept.”³⁹ It’s also an insecure concept. Yet, despite its inadequacies and insecurities, Berlant claims it is an aspirational concept, and “aspirational concepts get treated as normative concepts, and then get traded and circulated as realism.”⁴⁰ While examples of sovereign power are easily observed in material form, as within the legal system for example, there is also a generalized sovereign thinking that functions beyond institutions and other authority figures, throughout a subject’s ordinary existence, in omnipresent and commanding ways. This is pragmatic sovereignty.

In addition to an ethics of sovereignty, the politics of solidarity are also coterminous with the politics of difference. That is, solidarity struggles commonly host or hide struggles around

³⁹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011): 97.

⁴⁰ Berlant, “No One is Sovereign in Love.”

difference. Solidarity's cited inadequacies around the handling of difference is the keystone to some critics' takedown of solidarity as an effective sociopolitical tool. On the other hand, some proponents of solidarity realize that the politics of solidarity are indeed tethered to the politics of difference, and that even though making good with difference in subjects' "common battles" is painstaking work, solidarity is up for the challenge. Sally Scholz is one such proponent, as evidenced within her project *Political Solidarity*, which has proved to be an invaluable resource for my own theorizing in *Solidarity Wishes*. The struggle to effectively handle and respond to difference within campaigns toward transformative justice is a compelling problem, but I share Scholz' hope in solidarity nonetheless, and I defend it throughout the pages to come.

I turn to desire in large part because of desire's potential to transcend identity and other faulty universalisms. Processes of solidarity that are rooted in genuine attempts to understand and respond to the desires of those whom solidarity is being procured for can help keep well-meaning sociopolitical justice practices from becoming further damaging to those already experiencing hardship. Keeping desire front and center in solidarity efforts helps to steer solidarity clear from the territory of charity and other self-righteous and demobilizing practices. Embracing desire leads to the acknowledgement that there is something to be gained for all solidarity subjects who find themselves banded together on behalf of a shared cause despite the varying degrees of difference, precarity, and privilege. Such a centering of desire within transformative justice movements can help maintain solidarity endeavours as mutual aid strategies, which emphasize and embrace interdependencies, as opposed to similarities, amongst solidarity subjects. When subjects fundamentally recognize that positive outcomes to their desires rest on their ability to collaborate and coordinate with differently desiring subjects, it follows that nonsovereign practices like solidarity gain more traction.

This chapter provides a conceptual foundation upon which I will build a theory of political solidarity in chapter two. “Sovereignty,” “difference,” and “desire” play a significant role in shaping subjects’ experiences of political solidarity. Each of the following parts of this chapter focuses on one of these three concepts. In each section I define the concept, contextualize it, and analyze it within social, political, and cultural examples. I elaborate on how each concept ties into *Solidarity Wishes*’ overall argument about the current stifled nature of political solidarity for Canadian and American neoliberal capitalist settler subjects. I conclude the chapter by bringing these three concepts into a brief conversation with each other around the topic of “anti-intellectualism.”

Sovereignty / Nonsovereignty

An examination of the concept of sovereignty necessitates an engagement with subjectivity. To be ruled by a sovereign is to be the sovereign’s subject, that is, subject to the sovereign. This designation of “subject” is counterintuitive to its current meaning in contemporary critical theory, in which subjection is tagged to objects, a mapping that is reflective of the ways that those with power who qualify as subjects objectify those who they have power over who do not qualify as subjects. Therefore, in today’s language of subjectivity, the king’s subjects are really the king’s objects. This discursive transition of “subject” from someone under the rule of the sovereign to someone with autonomy intrigues me. The concept of sovereignty, it seems, has been repurposed to say something about subjectivity. In a sense, it feels like liberal subjectivity has internalized the sovereign, and the defense of subjectivity has come to denote an antidote to subjection. In contemporary critical theory, a subject is someone who has sovereignty over themselves – their actions, their thoughts, their identities. This is, more or less, the present

definition of “freedom” that buoys the liberalism of mainstream Western culture. Theoretically, subjects think what they want, say what they want, and do what they want. Subjects are their own conscious corporeal commanders in chief.

It is this conceptualization of modern liberal subjectivity, which seeks to foster the freedom of the individual by protecting it against sovereign power, that I believe – paradoxically – is most responsible for fortifying contemporary subjects’ stubborn foundational commitments to sovereignty. In 21st century Canadian and American neoliberal settler society, individual subjects are the sovereign forces to be reckoned with. In a sense, everyone’s a monarch, equipped with the ultimate power to be and to act as one chooses. The problem is that aspirations of subjectivity built upon aspirations of sovereignty dangerously lead subjects astray from finding sustainable and cooperative ways to survive and thrive on this planet. Sovereign thinking limits resourcefulness by blurring vulnerability and dissuading subjects from honing potentially nonsovereign collaborative practices. A glaring example of the myth of sovereign thinking is the fantasy of some final solution to Covid-19.

The pandemic will end not with a declaration, but with a long, protracted exhalation. Even if everything goes according to plan, which is a significant if, the horrors of 2020 will leave lasting legacies. A pummeled health-care system will be reeling, short-staffed, and facing new surges of people with long-haul symptoms or mental-health problems. Social gaps that were widened will be further torn apart. Grief will turn into trauma. And a nation that has begun to return to normal will have to decide whether to remember that normal led to this. ‘We’re trying to get through this with a vaccine without truly exploring our soul,’ said Mike Osterholm, an epidemiologist at the University of Minnesota.⁴¹

Though written about the American experience, this excerpt from Ed Yong’s article, which predicts where post pandemic time will bring the United States, eloquently describes a position that can be applied to Canadian experience as well. Sovereign thinking reflects the allure of the

⁴¹ Ed Yong, “Where Year Two of the Pandemic Will Take Us,” *The Atlantic*, Dec. 29, 2020.

omnipotent power of the sovereign, manifested as the vaccine in this case, what Osterholm believes Americans are investing in at the expense of “exploring [their] soul.”

James Maskalyk, associate professor in the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Medicine and emergency physician, and Dave Courchene, founder of the Turtle Lodge International Centre for Indigenous Education and Wellness, eloquently speak to such an “expense.”

If humanity is to endure, the coming months must hold healing, not just of populations across the globe from the coronavirus, but of the Earth herself. As is true of many zoonoses (diseases that jumped from animals), this virus emerged from pressure humans put on a global ecosystem. A lack of healthy, natural habitat weakens the immune systems of animals, and the resulting sicknesses pass rapidly through them. Birds, prairie dogs, pigs, bats. With each infection, a chance for a virus to mutate into one that can sicken humans, and sometimes, global livelihoods. As such, a vaccine alone, no matter how effective, will not tip the balance toward health because COVID-19 is not a disease; it is a symptom of an exhausted planet. The renewal of a healthy relationship to our one shared mother, planet Earth, is the cure.⁴²

I do not mean to suggest that vaccines for Covid-19 are not worth investing in, but rather that the glint of sovereignty’s power in fantasies can deter subjects from productive nonsovereign plans and solutions. Renewing humanity’s relationship with its home planet, for example, is not something that any sovereign or degree of sovereign thinking is going to be able to accomplish effectively. There are no doubt countless circumstances and forces responsible for human subjects’ longing for the sovereign, which does not solely appear in person form, but can occupy ideas, practices, and values. Neoliberal capitalism, organized religion, hegemonic gender ideologies, hierarchical class-based societies, and supremacist racialized ideologies, for example, all promote sovereign thinking as a means to safeguard their institutional self-preservation. My hunch is that most subjects realize that they will never fully *be* sovereign, yet they continue to idolize the *state* of being sovereign. Granted my assumption is accurate, are subjects attracted to

⁴² James Maskalyk and Dave Courchene, “The real cure for COVID is renewing our fractured relationship with the planet,” *The Globe and Mail*, December 18, 2020.

sovereignty because it is comforting for human subjects to know that such absolute power exists, somewhere? Does the solace that subjects may find in the fantasy of the sovereign outweigh the unlikelihood that such power will ever be within their own individual reach?

Sovereignty, in its traditional place in political theory, has traveled from descriptions of the grandiose like mountaintops and God's power to its more common referent in political theory as the dominion of some supreme authority like a king or despotic ruler. This latter conceptualization of sovereignty has evolved into what is commonly regarded today as the power of "the state."⁴³ Berlant regards the concept of sovereignty as inadequate in large part because of all the "convolutions and variations" that such a long discursive life has dealt it, which is yet another example of how sovereignty parallels solidarity.⁴⁴ Both concepts have trafficked heavily throughout scholarly, religious, political, and popular texts. Both ideas have wavered and shifted in their translations, yet both ideas have survived through to the present-day under their original signifiers.

The relationship between these two juggernaut concepts of contemporary critical theory, sovereignty and solidarity, is of great significance to *Solidarity Wishes*. I believe that sovereign thinking is majorly responsible for foreclosing movement toward the literal resolution of solidarity desires, trapping them inside of subjects' ambivalent wishes. Therefore, in addition to difference and desire, any productive theory of political solidarity needs to be attuned to the workings of sovereignty in the lives and psyches of contemporary subjects. Sovereignty's centralized and supreme power is what appears to have persisted most along its shifting meanings, while the wielder of such power, the sovereign, continues to play musical chairs in

⁴³ Dieter Grimm, *Sovereignty: The Origin and Future of a Political and Legal Concept* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁴⁴ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 97.

contemporary scholarly texts. Sovereignty in political theory and philosophy today frequently refers to state power, specifically a government or leader's – often repressive – rule of its people. It also describes the power relations between sovereign states, or nations attempting to secure their independence, as witnessed within contemporary indigenous sociopolitical movements. As Megan C. Thomas explains,

This thinking about international relations has had to contend with what sovereignty means in a globalized world in which the power of the individual (sovereign) state seems to be compromised from without and within. The pressures of globalization and what has come to be known as neoliberal governmentality seem to have shifted power from state institutions to private ones. In these circumstances, it is not clear how meaningful is the sovereign power of the state. Relatedly, the advent of the European Union as a political unit raised obvious questions about the sovereignty of its member states.⁴⁵

The “without” that Thomas cites as a site of compromise of state power refers to historical episodes of competing sovereigns, like monarchies, feudal systems, and the Church.

This history reminds us that state sovereignty has never been seamless, uniform, or without contestation from other kinds of institutions. How, then, is sovereignty actually composed and secured? Sovereign power is produced in part through the recognition of other states, but my questions center around how states achieve sovereignty within their borders, and how closely that is related to the recognition and actions of those supposed to be subject to sovereignty.⁴⁶

Solidarity Wishes also focuses on “the recognition and actions of those supposed to be subject to sovereignty.” Thomas’ “within” gestures toward these subjects, the subjects subject to the sovereign, which illuminates another sovereign power increasingly theorized in contemporary critical theory, what is often referred to as “pragmatic sovereignty” or “self-sovereignty.” This is the within Thomas’ “within,” the version of sovereignty that *Solidarity Wishes* is primarily interested in. It is this version of sovereignty that manifests as sovereign thinking and seems

⁴⁵ Megan C. Thomas, “Proclaiming Sovereignty: Some Reflections from the Eighteenth-Century Philippines” in *Comparative Political Theory in Time and Place: Theory’s Landscapes*, eds. Daniel J. Kapust and Helen M. Kinsella (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 82.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

most detrimental to subjects' development of effective and potentially nonsovereign theories and practices of solidarity.

Pragmatic sovereignty is a social construct of selfhood. Like states and sovereignties, a subject's sovereignty is at risk from within and without. Borders can get fortified around human subject's bodies and ideas just as they do around palaces, embassies, and national boundaries. Did pragmatic or self-sovereignty evolve from theories of state-sovereignty? As Thomas asks, "[d]o these understandings [of sovereignty] derive from models of autonomy other than the model of the sovereign state or is their use of the idea of self-sovereignty to critique state sovereignty better understood in terms of a genealogical distance between the origin of an idea and its later use?"⁴⁷ Here, Thomas mentions the phenomenon of conceptions of self-sovereignty being often used as critiques of state-sovereignty. The moral primacy of individual agency and freedom within Kantian social and political theory has endured and is reflected in the politics that aim to protect the freedom of the modern liberal subject today. For Immanuel Kant, while state sovereignty could hinder individual sovereignty, subjects also could draw up social contracts so that state sovereign power could protect and foster individual sovereignty.⁴⁸ This is a tactic to which present proponents of neoliberal capitalism are certainly not strangers, as observed within the justification some of them give regarding governmental policies of deregulation and privatization. Alternatively, communist and socialist economies and governments are oft cited as repressive to the modern liberal subject by advocates of liberal democracies, and therefore considered to be ethically incommensurable with democracy altogether.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁸ Immanuel Kant, "Theory and Practice," translated by Ted Humphrey in his *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 61–92.

Solidarity Wishes is also interested in the relationship between a subject's psychic life and sociopolitical life, and I turn to psychoanalytic theory in this dissertation in order to assist me in the unpacking of this relationship, paying close attention to such a relationship's effects on a subject's sovereign thinking. Specifically, I am interested in what trends in contemporary sociopolitical activism reflect about subjects' desires, and vice versa. Psychoanalysis has much to say about the origins of individual desire: one's childhood, inclusive of the diverse circumstances of one's upbringing and development, reverberate across manifestations of trauma, compulsions, neuroses, and various appetites, which, according to psychoanalytic theory, follow subjects around for the duration of their lives. While I draw from Sigmund Freud and his framework of classical psychoanalysis, I also take stock in Jacques Lacan's renditions of psychoanalytic theory and practice. The "French Freud" is arguably the second most famous psychoanalyst to date with influential ideas that both significantly converge with and diverge from Freud's.⁴⁹

Broadly speaking, Lacan's ideas of what was helpful for analysands in the clinic centered around exhuming the truth of one's existence as opposed to finding the right consoling therapeutic methods. "The objective of psychoanalysis, for Lacan," as Mari Ruti explains, "was therefore not to overcome lack by strengthening the ego, but rather to work through, and gradually break down, the elaborate fantasies that keep the subject from effectively facing the challenges of his existential situation."⁵⁰ Ruti has a penchant for breaking down complex theories and ideas in nonreductionist but accessible ways. I particularly appreciate Ruti's take on the

⁴⁹ Todd Dufresne, ed., *Returns of the "French Freud": Freud, Lacan, and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁵⁰ Mari Ruti, "The Fall of Fantasies: A Lacanian Reading of Lack.," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 56, no. 2 (June 2008), 484.

broad foundations of Lacanian theory, which I cite here to highlight its important connections to the concept of sovereignty. Ruti continues:

Rather than addressing lack as a consequence of specific childhood traumas, abusive personal histories, or unfair and oppressive social conditions—as many psychoanalytic schools do—Lacan is concerned with lack as the ontological underpinning of human existence. Like many phenomenological philosophers, Lacan is interested in what it means for human beings to face their radical negativity or nothingness, and to wrestle with the recognition that their lives are built on unstable ground. To express the matter in more rigorously theoretical terms, Lacan endeavors to understand the implications of the fact that human beings, by definition, fail to reconcile the concrete phenomenality of being with the abstract ideality of Being, with the aspiration to attain absolute existential fullness.⁵¹

Regardless of how a subject's "radical negativity or nothingness" is defined, I find Lacan's concept of lack useful because I interpret "lack" as another way to describe vulnerability. Lacan's psychoanalytic prerogative is getting his patients to recognize their existential vulnerability, to understand "lack as the ontological underpinning of human existence" without getting lost in attempts to avoid or defeat it. "One might say that instead of regarding psychoanalysis primarily as a therapeutic method, Lacan envisions it to be a profoundly philosophical undertaking that has the potential to revise the subject's perception of the basic orientation of his existence."⁵² For most subjects I suspect this "basic orientation of [their] existence" is dominated by sovereign thinking through which one's vulnerability is disavowed as a means of – perhaps unconsciously – putting distance between themselves and their own mortality. Put another way, psychoanalysis illuminates how sovereign thinking may be an inherent defense mechanism of the damaged ego, possibly prompted by the toils of a subject growing up and realizing the necessity of their devastating dependence on others for sustenance

⁵¹ Ibid., 485.

⁵² Ibid.

and survival. Psychic sovereignty, therefore, may be largely responsible for priming subjects' appetites for pragmatic and state sovereignty.

This commitment to sovereignty has clearly persisted across many borders of space, time, and people, the shapes and identities of the sovereign having fluctuated between mountains, the divine, monarchs, states, and individuals. While what led human subjects to this current chronic commitment to pragmatic sovereignty is clearly complicated, I concur with Thomas that critiques of the various ideas of sovereignty contain "helpful conceptions for thinking about how sovereignty is secured, and insecure, at the same time."⁵³ Sovereigns, states, subjects, and psyches all must contend with both external and internal threats to their sovereignty. Insecurity, therefore, appears threaded throughout each of these conceptualizations of sovereignty.

Sovereignty, after all, is a fantasy misrecognized as an objective state: an aspirational position of personal and institutional self-legitimizing performativity and an affective sense of control in relation to the fantasy of that position's offer of security and efficacy. But it is inadequate for talking about agency outside of the power of the King's decree or other acts in proximity to certain performances of law, like executions and pardons. It is also a distorting description of the political, affective, and psychological conditions in which the ordinary subjects of democratic/capitalist power take up positions as agents. These states might best be redefined as only partially (that is to say fantasmatically or not) sovereign.⁵⁴

As Berlant suggests in the above passage, the concept of sovereignty does not ultimately do subjects justice. While quests for sovereignty may bring wins to oppressed peoples within the specific contexts of sociopolitical movements toward autonomy, independence, and equality, such endeavors are defensive, and are not typically designed to uproot or amend overarching systems. Sovereignty may not do much for the sovereign either. History clearly reveals that human sovereigns are seldom omnipotent or invulnerable. While the sovereign position (in

⁵³ Thomas, "Proclaiming Sovereignty," 87.

⁵⁴ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 97-98.

supreme ruler form) in Canadian and American settler society today may not hold as much weight as it did in previous eras (though I do not deny that some religious leaders, politicians, law enforcement officials, and celebrities are idolized as if they are sovereigns), sovereign thinking remains a dominant force within cultural consciousness, regardless of contemporary subjects' degrees of reverence or irreverence to the sovereigns in their midst.

Sovereign thinking can manifest anywhere, animating scenes from the political to the social, cultural, psychological, and mundane for human subjects. I am especially struck by how sovereign thinking infiltrates scenes of scholarship. The allure of the sovereign appears to electrify many an academic endeavor, generating worship, loyalty, and revenue for certain topics, concepts, theories, scholars, texts, and institutions, oftentimes at the expense of other perspectives and epistemologies. Much citational violence can ensue from academia's iron selective fist. Its sovereign distinctions of what is "scholarly" or not, by which I mean what is deemed publishable versus unpublishable, not only puts ideas but also livelihoods in jeopardy.⁵⁵

I cannot pretend to be above academia's sovereign styles. I have been neurotically awaiting the publication of Berlant's forthcoming book *The Inconvenience of Other People* for years now, a project that has been repeatedly referenced in other publications and presentations since, to my knowledge, as early as 2011. From everything I know about this project, it would prove useful to the construction of my own arguments. This gives me great anxiety. I am paranoid that that the moment I defend my PhD Berlant's book will be published, and my arguments in *Solidarity Wishes* will appear as tawdry and shallow versions of theirs (though

⁵⁵ My heart aches when I think about how much unpaid labor went into my most recently accepted-for-publication academic article. Additionally, the case of adjunct professor Thea Hunter, just one of many, exemplifies the debilitating sovereign chokehold that the academy can have on those in its grip. See Adam Harris, "The Death of an Adjunct," *The Atlantic*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/04/adjunct-professors-higher-education-thea-hunter/586168/>.

perhaps this fear is wishful thinking in and of itself as I consider them to be one of the most compelling theorists I have ever read, and so being measured against them – even disapprovingly – would be an incredible victory of sorts for me). I have had dreams of writing to Berlant and begging them for an advanced copy, though I have yet to act on this desire, I think, mostly due to feelings of shame and embarrassment. Berlant is – ironically – the sovereign I turn to for theories of nonsovereignty.⁵⁶

Activists are vulnerable to sovereign thinking as well.

We need ways of practicing wanting one another present and participating, not just going along with what one charismatic or authoritative person says. Most people have not gotten to practice this, since the institutions that run our lives, like schools, jobs, and governments, are hierarchical. Instead, we get a lot of practice either going along or trying to be the dominant person or people.⁵⁷

This “practice” that Dean Spade identifies is facilitated by the ethics of sovereignty that most institutions adhere to. The act of “going along” is easily observable in academic theory as well as activism. “It is glamorous to take a selfie with Angela Davis, but it is not glamorous to do weekly or monthly prison visits,” Spade chides.⁵⁸ And it’s not just that people get routinely worshiped, and sometimes blindly, but so do ideas and concepts, as Robyn Wiegman has illustrated in her important work on the relationships of certain academic disciplines to the critical concepts they staunchly defend.⁵⁹ Sovereign thinking infiltrates subjects’ optimistic attachments as well as its repulsions. Academics are particularly notorious for their worship of monsters through their critical scholarship, be it an oppressive economic system, a corrupt politician, an inadequate concept, or a difficult feeling. A wise colleague and friend of mine

⁵⁶ In the evening of June 27, 2021, I completed a first full draft of *Solidarity Wishes*. In the morning of July 28, 2021, Lauren Berlant died of cancer at a hospice facility in Chicago. I was certainly not alone in my feelings of devastation upon hearing this news. I respond to Berlant’s passing and address her predominance in this dissertation in an afterword that follows the conclusion.

⁵⁷ Spade, “Solidarity Not Charity,” 145.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁵⁹ Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

often wonders aloud to me, “why do we give neoliberalism so much credit” (the same could be asked of trauma as well)? Are there incentives to be gained by academics for doing so? Is it that progressive visionaries require sturdy, impenetrable-seaming walls to push up against to help generate their own ideas? It seems that academics and activists who are curious and hopeful about nonsovereign possibilities are as susceptible to the allure of sovereign thinking as anybody else. From within her golden frame hanging at the center of one of my office walls, Judith Butler is knowingly grinning down on me as I write this chapter. All hail.

As Michael Hardt suggests, “the tradition of political theory we inherit is fundamentally related to the role and decision making of the one, whether that one be the king, the party, the liberal individual, all of these.”⁶⁰ The modern liberal subject has preserved individualism, without which, it is assumed in contemporary Western culture, freedom would be lost.

But, even if we cede sovereignty to perpetuity as a fantasy that sustains liberty’s normative political idiom, we need better ways to talk about a more capacious range of activity oriented toward the reproduction of ordinary life: from the burdens of contemporary compelled will that fuel everyday employment and household pressures, for example, to the pleasures of spreading- out activities like sex or eating, aleatory modes of self- abeyance that do not occupy time, decision, or consequentiality in anything like the sovereign registers of autonomous self-assertion.⁶¹

I suspect these prescribed “better ways” to describe ordinary experience that Berlant alludes to are only accessible if sovereign thinking is dethroned from its default position in human consciousness.

Yubraj Aryal argues that subjects can construct nonsovereign identities through affect. He proposes that “[t]he formation of our identity is not only determined by the dominant power, but also by our capacity and strategy to work on our own creative self-formation (a new register)

⁶⁰ Davis and Sarlin, “No One is Sovereign in Love.”

⁶¹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 98.

without being swallowed up by the given power relations.”⁶² This line of thinking suggests that subjectivity is more than what is left of subjects at the end of their days under coercive sovereignty, what he refers to as the “given power relations.” Invoking Berlant’s ideas around “the political,” in addition to Michel Foucault’s and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theories, Aryal claims that subjects have agency amid sovereignty where their subjectivity is concerned. Non-sovereign subjects can “affectively constitute themselves in a different political register.”⁶³

There is much to unpack in this argument. First, what is this “different political register” and what is it a deviation from? It seems that sovereignty is the broad designation of politics and power relations that Aryal is theorizing against. Like me, Aryal takes up sovereignty as a generalized concept of sovereign power – “any form of power which works with the aim of control and domination of our body and thought.”⁶⁴ However, sovereignty, like solidarity, is a huge and elastic concept with many applications. My dissertation committee would likely cringe at Aryal’s unexamined use of “our” and “we” in his article. Canadian and American settler subjects, for example, have a very different relationship to sovereignty than subjects living under fascist rule. Sovereign power may be omnipresent in a variety of different contexts, but the sovereigns vary greatly across time, place, and theory. Furthermore, sovereignty and its effects have been elaborated in a variety of different ways, as I explored earlier in this chapter. Foucauldian theory, for instance, comments on sovereign power, as in power of the king, but it is also known for its conceptualization of disciplinary power, theorizing at the intersection of discourse and power.

⁶² Yubraj Aryal, “Affective politics and non-sovereign identity,” *Textual Practice* 34, 1 (2020), 68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2018.1508059>.

⁶³ Ibid., 67.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 68.

Regardless of the constitution of the sovereign power that subjects live with, Aryal makes the case that subjects have the power of strategic self-constitution, or self-formation. He points to gay identity and gay culture as one example of this sort of affective self-organizing. Gay cruising culture, for example (my example), can be a venue for “self-fashioning” (Foucault’s concept) that dodges total domination of sovereign or disciplinary power.⁶⁵ Again, it matters what the “given power relations” are within which subjects are trying to self-fashion or self-constitute.⁶⁶ Gay communality, not to mention cruising, looks different in Toronto than it does in Istanbul. Regardless of the sovereign power at play, one of Aryal’s takeaway points is that subjects can always find potential within the interiors of their affective lives. This is the space of “the political,” which Berlant constantly claims is a realm distinct from politics because of its capacity to circumvent it. As Aryal puts it, “[t]he act of self-fashioning, or the political, is not simply a destruction of dominant politics, but it is an art of not being governed.”⁶⁷

Aryal’s arguments about the subjective potential that can be found within affective politics and nonsovereign identities, as intriguing as they are, do not go far enough in their descriptions of what nonsovereign identity entails for, and requires of, subjects. He depicts nonsovereign identity as a subject’s anti-practice to sovereign domination. Affect theory supplies the vocabulary for how subjects can constitute their own subjectivity in the face of sovereign power, as an alternative to completely succumbing to sovereignty’s processes of subjectification. Though I consider self-constitution to be a valiant effort for subjects caught up in sovereign power, the nonsovereign subject in Aryal’s formulations appears to wield sovereignty by way of affective, almost meditative, self-control to combat the hegemonizing effects of sovereign power.

⁶⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982*, ed. Fredric Gros and trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 417.

⁶⁶ Aryal, “Affective politics,” 70.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

This does not seem that far off from the breed of self-sovereignty that neoliberal capitalism paradoxically promotes. There is more to the story of nonsovereign ethics and identities than subjects' successful resistance to being governed by sovereign power. A nonsovereign ethics is also about what subjects can accomplish together. The sovereign rule of one, whether that one is a dictator or one's own self, can be overcome by ethics and practices that value subjects' interdependency, vulnerability, and deservingness. Aryal gestures toward gay communality as an example of nonsovereignty, but he does not go far enough in describing why this example works and what is required of nonsovereign subjects in terms of cooperation, mutuality, and solidarity. As Aryal articulates, self-sovereignty can be put to good use by subjects, but as with all forms of sovereign power, it limits subjectivity in that it does not embrace the power of collectivities and collaborations – pluralism in general.

Queer theory is one place I turn to in *Solidarity Wishes* to help construct an ethics of nonsovereignty that is more than sovereign anti-sovereignty, but is also collaborative and solidaristic. Berlant shows how queer theory helps to achieve this aim by chipping away at sovereign thinking through the cultivation of alternative relations to incoherence.

Part of the reason I think that queer theory and love theory are related to each other as political idioms, is that queer theory presumes the affective incoherence of the subject with respect to the objects that anchor it or to which they're attached. One thing that is very powerful for me to try and think about is how we could have a political pedagogy that deals with incoherence. Where the taking up of a position won't be so that an individual can be coherent, intentional, agentive, and encounter themselves through their object, but that there would be a way that situational clarity can be produced without negating the incoherence of the subject. Training in one's own incoherence, training in the ways in which one's complexity and contradiction can never be resolved by the political, is a really important part of a political theory of nonsovereignty. But we still have to find a place for adjudication, or working out, or working for, or working over, which requires a pedagogy of attention, of paying attention to the different ways in which we engender different kinds of claims on the world, in our attachments or ways of moving or desires for habituation or aspirations⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Berlant, "No One is Sovereign in Love."

So, what on earth might “training in on one’s incoherence” look like? According to queer and psychoanalytic thinkers, sex is a great place to start because it can operate as a site of subjects’ decohesion. The perv in me is excited by sex’s utility here.

Berlant and Lee Edelman have explored together how fucking subjects are undone, illuminated as nonsovereign collaborators toward mutual pleasure in the scenes that sex stage.⁶⁹ And love, with or without sexual pleasure, is full of lessons on nonsovereignty that can be applied to various realms of experience from the social to the political. Love, for many subjects, is disorganizing and disorienting, yet nourishing. Berlant’s and Hardt’s assessment of love as nonsovereign breaks up the conflation of individual intentionality with sovereignty. Hardt explains:

When we engage in love, we abandon at least a certain type of sovereignty. In what ways would sovereignty not be adequate in explaining a social formation that was grounded in love? If we were to think of the sovereign as the one who decides, in the social relation of love there is no *one* who decides. Which does not mean that there are no decisions but, rather, that there would be a non-one who decides. That seems like a challenging and interesting question: what is a non-sovereign social formation? How is decision-making then arrived at? These are the kinds of things that require modes of organization; that require, if not institutions, customs, or habits, at least certain means of organizing the decision-making process. In a politics of love, one of the interests for me is a non-sovereign politics, or a non-sovereign social formation. By thinking love as political, as somehow centrally involved in a political project, it forces us to think through that non-sovereignty, both conceptually, but also practically, organizationally.⁷⁰

For Berlant, love showcases how one can be intentional and nonsovereign simultaneously, how one can be intentionally incoherent. Nonsovereign modes of living therefore, according to the models that both sex and love offer, need not sacrifice one’s subjectivity. Nonsovereignty generates greater potentialities for subjects by capitalizing from – messy and complicated yes, but productive – relationality. Political theories of togetherness like solidarity are therefore

⁶⁹ Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁷⁰ Hardt, “No One is Sovereign in Love.”

helpful in curbing the tyranny of the sovereign individual that underscores notions of freedom and defenses of the liberal individual subject. Such theories gesture toward nonsovereign possibilities on behalf of collaboration that are not at the expense of the individual's intentionality, agency, and freedom. Nonsovereign modes of living need not foreclose subjectivity.

Nonsovereignty is the broad space of the otherwise that I am recommending in place of sovereignty. Nonsovereignty does not negate an individual's freedom, but rather illuminates how individualism is only possible through cooperation. In response to one Tik Tok user's statement that "no, people should not be forced to pay for other people's healthcare against their will," Logan Grendel, an artist and cultural commentator, effectively articulates a version of nonsovereignty that I believe is worth investing in.

The really interesting question to me is: why would it be against your will to help out someone else with their healthcare, especially when we're talking about, you know, a few cents out of each check? I think that what you fail to realize is that everything that humans have done in history is because of cooperation and we've been fed all these lies about rugged individualism as if it's possible for a human being to do pretty much anything on their own, ok. It's just not possible. You didn't build the roads that you live on, you didn't build the car that you drive, everything is an act of cooperation. So, if you think it's taking something away from you to help someone else – you're a bad person. And I don't just mean morally and ethically, but practically, because the whole game of living is how much we can do for each other. We're all better off when we're all better off.⁷¹

"We're all better off when we're all better off" is a mantra that contrasts with what's become known as "the American dream," the belief that a strong work ethic, determination, and perseverance can take an individual anywhere they want to go. This is a fantasy purported by neoliberalism that can broadly be applied to Canadian society as well. The American dream is a

⁷¹ Logan Grendel, "the doctrine of selfishness is cancerous. Get well soon," *TikTok*, https://www.tiktok.com/@focusedoninfinity/video/6946657187636792582?lang=en&is_copy_url=0&is_from_webapp=v1&sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=7030115006491526661.

mythical derivative of what Grendel refers to as “rugged individualism,” which often manifests as selfishness. It is the allure of sovereignty at work. But what happens to the American dream when the dreamer contracts lung cancer or gets hit by a car?⁷² Sovereignty is simply not enough for subjects. Nonsovereign ethics and practices like solidarity are productive, in large part, because of how they navigate the concept of “difference” amongst subjects, a discussion I turn to next in the upcoming section.

Difference

Writer, activist, and justice trailblazer Audre Lorde’s hope for difference to function as a collaborative tool to facilitate mutually “livable” futures is *still* an alluring and tall order. In the quote of hers that I laid out at the beginning of this dissertation, which was published in a collection in 1988, Lorde does not mention futures in which subjects could mutually *thrive*. I suspect she is merely referring to the *bare minimum* of fostering social, political, and institutional conditions that would ensure vitality for all subjects on this planet.⁷³ In a nutshell, this is usually political solidarity’s agenda too. In the solidarity struggles that I have been following around within academic, activist, artistic, and otherwise politicized communities, “difference,” repeatedly, is what subjects inform each other that they are not getting right. While the term itself denotes an elementary idea, negotiating difference within communities that animate

⁷² Of course, collaboration and cooperation in a society do not necessarily equate to nonsovereignty. It is not lost on me that gendered, raced, classed, sexed, and otherwise hierarchical divisions of labor significantly contribute to sovereign relationality. In fact, citizens located within fascist states may choose to work together with their governments/dictators and other citizens. Such cooperation may be the result of coercion or desperation. Such cooperation may be the best of bad options for citizens. Such cooperation, though, is not nonsovereignty, it’s sovereignty at work through the iron fist of totalitarianism. This distinction is important. Nonsovereignty is not synonymous with cooperation or collaboration.

⁷³ She’s also – I’m almost certain – solely referencing human subjects. Subjectivity in my politics refers to life beyond the human species, but a proper defense of that stance would require another dissertation, and this one took long enough to write! Thus, in *Solidarity Wishes*, when I discuss subjects, I mean human beings.

sociopolitical movements is anything but straightforward work. It is worth noting that the emergence and use of the concept of difference within a variety of academic disciplines has a fascinating history, though beside my point.⁷⁴ I am more interested with what “difference” has come to indicate within politicized communities that operationalize identity in pursuit of socio-political justice. In queer, feminist, and BIPOC communities in particular, “difference” has come to reference more than the factual existence of differences themselves – that is interruptions to sameness across subjects in community – but a politics of difference. And such a politics of difference usually connotes struggle, specifically, the intersubjective struggle to do good with difference, to capitalize off it for some collective benefit like a mutually “liveable future.”

Co-editors Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman introduce their work *Feminism and the Politics of Difference* by describing the type of theorizing around difference that they and their contributors are attempting to resist and reform. The first edition of their collection was published in 1993, but the quandaries regarding difference and identity politics that it responds to seem just as confounding today in 2022. Gunew and Yeatman’s shared “major concern is to shift debates beyond the current preoccupation with binary oppositions that invariably absorbs alterity into the hegemonic and familiar,” a fancy way of describing their suspicion over dualisms of difference. Binary thinking, they contend, places subjects “merely in the business of juggling with traditional categories, privileging women rather than men, or some women at the expense of others, without changing the power structures behind such constructions.” Gunew and Yeatman argue that “such logic is homogenizing and universalist, built on the principle of exclusion and the tyranny of the familiar.” They suggest that poststructuralist theory, within which, they claim, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and postmodernism are subsumed, can “offer a means of

⁷⁴ Mark Currie, *Difference: The New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

situating the speaking subject, of defining the intersections and contradictions of competing interest groups.” They maintain that

[t]ogether with postcolonialism, loosely defined as a body of theories which offers a place to speak for those who have been excluded from Western metaphysics, poststructuralism gives us the tools to deconstruct these homogenizing categories so that it is possible to admit difference, not simply as the self-confirming other, but as the admission and recognition of incommensurabilities.⁷⁵

Through my research on various forms, theories, and practices of solidarity I have come to realize that subjects who are linked together through solidarity efforts that do not admit and recognize such “incommensurabilities” amongst themselves are doomed to fail. Or, put differently, effective practitioners of solidarity do not whitewash difference, but rather acknowledge and embrace it.

Sometimes difference motivates a preclusion of membership for certain subjects as a means of securing “safety” and/or resources for others, a logic oft contested, but commonly put into practice nonetheless within politicized communities, even so-called progressive ones.⁷⁶ Sometimes struggles around difference cause stasis in communities committed to sociopolitical justice by turning relations acrid and thwarting any movement forward.⁷⁷ A reviewer of Gunew and Yeatman’s collection makes a salient point about negative affective states like alienation that can germinate at the intersection of difference and solidarity.

Seekers of progressive social change may share a unifying vision of a society where difference is acknowledged and celebrated through non-hegemonic and inclusive social

⁷⁵ Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman, eds., *Feminism and the Politics of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁷⁶ See Julia Serano, *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2013). Serano divides her book into two sections. In the first half she describes and analyzes sexism-based exclusion within feminist and queer communities. In the second half she proposes solutions to such exclusion. Specifically, her commentary on the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (MWMF or Michfest) is a salient example of how the mishandling of difference can fracture a community and lead to devastating debates over membership.

⁷⁷ My colleague Ryan Conrad and I have termed this sort of damaging and impasse-making relationality as “acrid sociality.” We are specifically interested in the relationship of queerness to acrid sociality, about how and why queer communities may be particularly primed for such a style of relationality. We explore this concept in our co-written article “Here, Queer, and Paranoid! On Acrid Sociality and Collaborating Otherwise,” forthcoming in *QED: A Journal In GLBTQ Worldmaking*. I discuss our concept of acrid sociality in greater detail in chapter three.

structures. Yet such ideals are seriously damaged when we find ourselves in polarizing debates and painful exchanges from which we eagerly escape or retreat, alienated. Even in our alienation we are differently wounded and different in our resources and abilities for recovering.⁷⁸

While alienation and other hardships may mutually and profoundly affect members of the same community, the extent of the damage and access to coping mechanisms at said community members' disposal are not experienced as homogenous. Difference within communities indicates that various combinations of societal, psychological, and relational factors will make for infinitely unique subjective experiences.

The most recent example of solidarity to arrive at my doorstep, or rather my inbox, demonstrates the politics of difference quite vividly. In the spring of 2021 as a member of the steering committee of the Canadian Sexuality Studies Association (SSA) I brainstormed with other committee members about how to move forward with our annual conference after we received notice that the Black Canadian Studies Association (BCSA) would be boycotting Congress 2021.⁷⁹ The BCSA had made certain decolonial and antiracist demands of the Federation (the body that organizes the annual conference) after one of their members was a victim of racist profiling at Congress 2019. The BCSA determined that since the federation had not effectively nor expeditiously addressed these demands, it would boycott the Congress platform in 2021 and possibly host a virtual event on its own. After the BCSA announced this action plan, several other Canadian academic associations sent the BCSA statements of support and/or joined the boycott of the federation in solidarity with the BCSA, the SSA (my association) included.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Marti Bombyk, "Review of Feminism and the Politics of Difference," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 22, Issue 1, Article 14 (1995): 190-192, <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol22/iss1/14>.

⁷⁹ The Black Canadian Studies Association, "Statement Regarding 2021 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences," February 9, 2021. <https://twitter.com/BlkCdnSA/status/1359136941346816006/photo/1>.

⁸⁰ https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Y_19HKIQ_Mr9Ya7J3Cvm_r3wgZS9T0uyksmVtbsx_Ys/edit

This is a common path to solidarity for progressive organizations. An individual or group challenges, calls out, or otherwise resists an institution that they have become reliant upon, and other individuals or groups who are also tied (usually financially) to the same institution decide to follow suit and participate in the action. I do not doubt that this was the right decision for the SSA and other boycotting associations to make, yet the politics of solidarity that this example is steeped in do give me some pause. For one, academic associations like my own that have joined the boycott were aware of the controversy that occurred at Congress in 2019 and the ensuing conversations about race, colonization, and the academy that have been unfolding since, as exemplified in the following excerpt from an email that the chair of the SSA at the time sent to the federation on behalf of the steering committee, yet none of them initiated any such boycott of their own volition at that time.

The SSA adopted the theme of Anti-Black Racism and Decolonialism for our 2020 conference in direct response to the overt anti-Black racism against a student member of the BSCA at UBC in 2019, as well as a critical reflection on whiteness and settler logic that continues to dominate our interdisciplinary field of critical inquiry. Given the cancellation of Congress 2020 due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the SSA carried the theme of Anti-Black racism and decolonialism over to our meetings as part of the virtual Congress 2021. Our keynote speaker, workshops and events are reflective of this commitment, as are the individual papers we have been receiving in response to our CFP.⁸¹

I am not condemning these acts of solidarity, nor am I oblivious to the actions that associations like the SSA did take in the wake of the 2019 Congress controversy as exemplified above, but it is important to highlight that it was the very opportunity for solidarity itself that ultimately motivated associations like the SSA to boycott Congress 2021, rather than outrage over the federation's problematic practices in the first place.

⁸¹ Dan Irving's email message to Congress Conference Organizers, February 23, 2021. Irving was the chair of the SSA's steering committee for 2020 and 2021.

The politics of solidarity attached to this example gesture toward the differences between obligations and commitments, and how such motivators can affect subjects differently in different contexts. In common parlance, the terms “obligation” and “commitment” are often used interchangeably, but in situations of solidarity, these two concepts are differentiated. I explore the roles of commitments and obligations with regards to political solidarity in detail in chapter two, but I mention them here in order to raise some broader questions about solidarity on behalf of those subjects in its pursuit. When the SSA decided to boycott Congress 2021 in solidarity with the BCSA, I could not help but wonder whether my association was doing so out of an obligation to our colleagues in the BCSA or out of a commitment to Black resistance politics. If the answer is both then why did the SSA, or any other association, not boycott Congress initially?

I am not suggesting that it is inherently problematic that the desire for solidarity was what prompted the other academic associations to boycott Congress 2021. This, in fact, is how solidarity is ideally supposed to propagate. Rather, I am suggesting that solidarity desires are complicated and that the process of solidarity itself is not always a selfless act. In fact, as I dig into desire in the next section, it is a common opinion amongst those who promote mutual aid strategies that the most effective enactments of solidarity should be anything but selfless acts.⁸² It is extremely naïve to ignore how solidarity can benefit subjects who attempt to secure it in addition to subjects for whom solidarity is being sought. Even when the procurement of solidarity seems to benefit all subjects of a particular context, the diversity of such benefits can vary significantly. A solidarity desire may arise in a subject for reasons that have nothing to do

⁸² See Dean Spade, “Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival,” *Social Text* Vol. 38, no. 1 (2020). Spade argues that the fact that all solidarity parties have something to gain is extremely productive for campaigns seeking transformative justice.

with promoting sociopolitical justice, and by “promoting sociopolitical justice” I mean, helping, supporting, and sticking one’s neck out for others who are in need and/or in trouble because they are in need and/or in trouble. Solidarity desires can be motivated by far more selfish aims, such as the affirmation one receives for publicly taking a progressive stance, aka, being seen on the “right” side of history.

I honestly felt that boycotting Congress was the best choice for the SSA because I felt that my association did not have any other viable choice. This feeling is worth unpacking. In an era where the perfect storm of resistance and identity politics has met accessible and popular digital social media to create what many refer to critically and apprehensively as “cancel culture,” did my fear of being publicly shamed and called out as a bad ally to the BCSA motivate my solidarity? This example makes clear the reality that the politics of privilege can get tangled up in the politics of difference, significantly impacting how such instances of solidarity unfold. At the time the decision to boycott was made by the SSA the steering committee was entirely white. How did these facts play into the SSA’s steering committee’s decision? Does anything happen to the quality and effectiveness of solidarity actions when they are motivated by shame, guilt, fear, or narcissism? Do the circumstances and processes that lead an individual or group to act in solidarity really matter if the solidarity action itself is effective and helpful? One’s desire to be witnessed as progressive or sympathetic clearly comes from a different place than one’s desire to quietly yet ardently combat injustices by which they are not themselves victimized, but can these distinct desires elicit similar results?

This solidarity example showcases the sticky territory of identity politics and what foregrounds many critiques of it. Solidarity subjects might handle difference poorly and reinstall the same inequalities within communities that such processes of solidarity were procured to

respond to in the first place. Madhavi Menon's queer critique of difference in *Indifference to Difference: Towards a Queer Universalism* is an inciteful dissection of identity politics that reveals the stultifying ways that the politics of difference can be coopted to further constrict subjects as opposed to helping them toward intended projects of liberation. At the beginning of her project, she reminds her readers that Foucault has already illuminated through his critical analyses of power that "to talk about identity as a cause by which people get classified is to put the cart before the horse." Below, she elaborates further on this point.

For Foucault, even as identity has many real and often nasty effects, it is also itself an effect. Identity is the demand made by power—tell us who you are so we can tell you what you can do. And by complying with that demand, by parsing endlessly the particulars that make our identity different from one another's, we are slotting into a power structure, not dismantling it. We should never have to choose between good and bad identity, difference and universalism, but rather, our interrogation should focus on what subtends the demand for identity and difference. Critiquing identity politics, then, is not a dismissal of lived reality but, rather, a response to the oppressive demands that identity itself can make under the guise of a progressive politics. Oppression by identity also qualifies as lived experience, and we should not settle on a demand made by power without also taking seriously the consequences of that demand.⁸³

However, when academics and other cultural critics critique identity politics, defensiveness abounds. I suspect a lot of this defensiveness can be attributed to what Menon terms the "dismissal of lived reality" that is perceived to be inherent in such critiques. Menon's critique of identity politics is productive because she responds to this defensiveness with the wry wisdom that oppressive identity politics create lived experiences for subjects and therefore are worthy of critical analysis.

Queer theory features prominently in *Solidarity Wishes* partly because of sex and sexuality's penchant for undoing the sovereign subject. Along with Berlant, Edelman, José Esteban Muñoz, and a whole gamut of queer theorists, I find sex useful for thinking toward an

⁸³ Madhavi Menon, *Indifference to Difference: On Queer Universalism* (Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 2-3.

ethics of nonsovereignty. Menon finds sex singular as well for its discursive creativity around identity.

There is perhaps nothing like sex to bring us face-to-face with the failure of regimes of identity. There is also nothing like sex to make us violently insist on identity nonetheless. But it is not just sex—all manner of desire and fantasy is policed lest it lead to an acknowledgment of shifting identities.⁸⁴

Menon is interested in an antidote to identity-as-constraint. She wonders, “[h]ow might we resist such a universal regime of difference that fixes difference into identity?” And “[h]ow might we institute a project of antiphilosophy that opposes the certainty of identitarian knowledge?”⁸⁵ Both she and I settle on desire as the theoretical path forward. For Menon, desire allows subjects “to be indifferent to a regime of difference in which a body can be fixed in an identitarian register.” Indifference is the queer universalism that she is after, the queer universalism that she believes is possible. If subjects were to adopt a such a queer universalism of indifference Menon maintains that subjects “would no longer be surprised, for instance, by the homosexual desires of a straight man, or the linguistic fluency of a lower-caste person, or the Shakespearean pretensions of an un-Englishwoman, or the nonwhiteness of an Englishman.” And so, “[e]qually, we could allow ourselves to be surprised by the unexpected turns that desire takes in the world.”⁸⁶ While I find Menon’s project fascinating, I do not view all efforts to lean on difference as a basis of identity as unproductive. However, I do believe that desire is a more reliable category than identity for solidarities to root from and I turn to it now.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 21.

Desire

Though difference is increasingly examined in politicized communities via the relationship of identity to oppression, often through an intersectional lens, after encountering a variety of solidarity pursuits by subjects in search of transformative justice in my research, I have come to understand that mutual recognition and respect of subjects' desires are essential to the effective utilization of difference in what Lorde calls "common battles." Being "differently wounded," as Marti Bombyk terms it, refers to more than the diversity of inner foundational dramas that psychoanalysis reveals about its subjects. Differently wounded also refers to more than the distinct relationships between identity and oppression that intersectional analyses uncover. A community's multivariate wounds also denote the aggregate desires of its diverse subjects.⁸⁷

Solidarity is presently part and parcel of mainstream culture, and so are its politics. The example of the BCSA's boycott of Congress 2021 highlights the varied and often conflicting desires that solidarity subjects grapple with. Acting "in solidarity" has come to mean a variety of things, from public affective declarations like open letters and statements to co-actions like marches, boycotts, and rallies. In addition to solidarity's diversity of form, which race, class, gender, disability, and other points of difference significantly mediate, solidarity's motivations vary beyond the binary of the selfless and the self-serving. The politics of solidarity illuminate an incredible range of solidarity desires amongst subjects engaged in sociopolitical movements and actions. Therefore, in any productive analysis of solidarity, from conceptual to empirical projects, the unpacking of desire needs to be central. Desire is a worthy and useful sociopolitical analytic that can lead theorists and activists along a path that circumvents the same old

⁸⁷ Bombyk, "Review of Feminism," 190-192.

reductionist and despairing abyss of identity politics. Knowing what a subject wants is one of the best ways to know a subject. Psychoanalytically speaking, desires predate morality and other social conventions. Therefore, desire, in its most primal sense, can be likened to matter, in that it cannot be destroyed or created by subjects, but repressed, ignored, sublimated, discovered, acted on, or otherwise embraced.

When I discuss wishes throughout this project, I often am describing something specific, something unique in the language of desire that is distinct from needs, wants, dreams, fantasies, drives, and compulsions. In such moments I aim to be clear about the specificities of the form of desire that I am taking up, including whose reasoning – feminist theory, queer theory, psychoanalysis, philosophy, sociopolitical justice activist discourse, or popular culture – I am utilizing to make my arguments. A wish is where a subject keeps a far-fetched object of desire. Wishes are often psychic affairs, though their expression can constitute a social event for a subject. The unattainability that “far-fetched” denotes is a subjective designation that fluctuates according to a subject’s relationship to its world. As per its most capacious definition, a solidarity wish might describe any conscious, unconscious, and preconscious desire to join others in theory or in action, help others, receive help from others, or to realize that one is not alone in this life, nor is it possible to be, for if one were, survival would be a doomed deed.

Stalled projects of solidarity, such as the ones that get caught up in wishes, might be caused by subjects losing interest or hope in solidarity. Defeated subjects might resist solidarity feelings or stop trying to engage in solidarity practices. But what of subjects who do not actually desire solidarity, or never have? Are such subjects condemnable as sovereignty’s foot soldiers? Are such subjects selfish or evil? Are such subjects too preoccupied with their own survival, lives, and livelihoods that they cannot fathom focusing any of their precious energy toward the

fulfillment of someone else's desires or needs? Interestingly, such subjects may continue to perform their solidarity wishes as the path of least resistance in certain sociopolitical situations, or to secure some other nourishment beyond the attainment of solidarity itself, a phenomenon I explore in chapter four with the aid of psychoanalysis and expand upon in chapter five through the analysis of digital and virtual cultures. All this to say, contrary to what the seeming abundance of solidarity wishes amongst Canadian and American settler subjects suggests, I suspect that solidarity is something that many subjects simply do not desire, or, and perhaps more commonly, is something that many subjects do not know they *should* desire.

As witnessed through the rise of hashtag solidarity currently inundating the world wide web around a variety of causes, solidarity is circulating in cultural consciousness, yet sovereign thinking is still ubiquitous. Sovereignty's long-lasting and durable influence on human subjectivity, observed psychologically, sociologically, and politically, is rather extraordinary. Furthermore, the pervasive power of sovereign thinking is elucidated through the present Covid-19 pandemic, which continues to deal setbacks as well as opportunities for rebounds and expansions to the powerful operating systems of Canadian and American brands of neoliberal capitalism. Sovereign thinking occludes human subjects' perceptions of both their inherent precarity as well as the precarious conditions that differently define subjects' uniquely lived experiences. Sovereign thinking denies subjects the opportunity to reckon with their vulnerability and interdependency by thwarting self-reflexive, collective, and collaborative theories and practices like political solidarity. If subjects' desire for political solidarity is absent or waning, chances are that sovereignty has something to do with it.

Working toward an ethics of nonsovereignty is my prescription for improving subjects' production of such feelings and practices like political solidarity. However, sovereignty is deeply

ingrained in contemporary social and political life. So then, what is needed to instigate the shift to an ethics of nonsovereignty? Foregrounding desire in this discussion illuminates subjects' degrees of both their susceptibility to, and degrees of deservingness of, nonsovereignty. An analysis of susceptibility and deservingness in solidarity subjects is useful to my project because both qualities can affect one's appetite for solidarity and other nonsovereign practices and values. First, re: susceptibility, I turn to Butler (who turned to Munoz, who turned to Herbert Marcuse, who turned to Freud...) for help defining the concept. This lineage of ideas is important because it reflects the lineage of my own thinking in this project. When I first started analyzing wishes as stalled states of political solidarity for Canadian and American settler subjects, I too started with Freud through the consideration of desire. Butler uses Munoz' theorizing around utopia as a context within which she defines susceptibility. For Butler and Munoz, susceptibility is more than vulnerability, it is something a subject can and should intentionally procure. Vulnerability describes a subject's state, whereas susceptibility describes a subject's ongoing effort to never forget or deny their vulnerability, which keeps subjects primed for potential, open, and creative. Susceptibility, therefore, is aligned with the Lacanian psychoanalytic methods that I described earlier in relation to Lacan's concept of "lack." Such psychotherapy aims to get patients to admit, and maybe even embrace, their inherent vulnerability as human subjects on earth.

Don't we have to be susceptible to Utopia? If we are closed off, it can surely be denied. Whoever the "we" who gathered or summoned under that pronoun, we are perhaps already susceptible, given over to [Munoz' claim that sometimes we must seek out the utopian and other times it finds us.] Munoz's writing is meant to support and sustain that susceptibility. Perhaps we have the grammar wrong: maybe the structure of that susceptibility is the utopian, and that utopia is neither an object nor an aim. If so, then susceptibility is the capacity to catch the wind that comes from else-where, to give way to the protest that arrives damaged and dismissed in advance as impossible. What is deemed impossible within a given horizon turns out to be the potential to break apart the constraining force of that horizon, the constraint on intelligibility that it reiterates within

straight time. It is a site of rage, also of pleasure; it does not ask for recognition within the terms of the existing world; it arrives, unrecognizable, to force a reconfiguration of time and space.⁸⁸

For subjects who struggle to procure solidarity beyond what they mourn and yearn for in their wishes (or at least pretend to), a lack of susceptibility could be in large part to blame. An ethics of nonsovereignty recognizes the state of vulnerability that is inherent within subjectivity, and susceptibility is one way of describing a subject's openness to this reality.

Effective manifestations of political solidarity only occur when subjects have moved outside of themselves long enough to recognize and work toward the fulfillment of another's desire(s). I promote desire above all else as the path forward for developing an ethics of nonsovereignty because I find desire to be the most elastic and subjective force available within human relations. Building from ideas of love, freedom, the preservation of life, and the right to pursue happiness, to name a few, all run into trouble as ethical foundations for nonsovereignty because all these concepts seem impossible to universalize. For instance, preserving life seems like an ethically sound standard until suffering subjects express their desire to be euthanized to stop the debilitating physical or psychological pain they endure. And love, broadly speaking, seems to play the part of universal ethical foundation well until subjects come forward to express and describe the endless forms that love takes when they receive it or give it. A means of love for one subject might function as a means of torture for another. Hence, desire appears the best path forward to developing and sustaining any set of nonsovereign ethics for human subjects. Part of understanding desire is admitting that universalisms are simply incompatible with subjectivity, which is not to suggest that all collectivism, essentialism, and unity are futile, but that what is

⁸⁸ Butler, "Solidarity/Susceptibility," 14.

required of productive nonsovereign practices like solidarity is an ethics that both emboldens and humbles subjectivity simultaneously.

Therefore, an ethics of nonsovereignty is indeed compatible with subjectivity.

Nonsovereign practices facilitate cooperation and collaboration through susceptibility, which does not negate subjectivity but empowers and emboldens it. Yes, susceptible subjects are open to others in ways that may drive them to incoherence, but “incoherence” is not the disastrous state for subjects it may at first sound like. Incoherence caused by sex, as is argued by Berlant and Edelman, is a hopeful and productive state that keeps subjects supple and primed for potential.⁸⁹ In a world rife with both stale problems as well as burgeoning ones, sovereign subjectivity, what has been the vibe of patriarchy for centuries, is the last thing subjects need. Though it is worth noting that the move to nonsovereignty is not a brand-new effort. For subjects in pursuit of transformative justice, there has been progress made toward developing an ethics of nonsovereignty. This progress can be witnessed clearly in the “expanding use of mutual aid strategies,” which Spade argues “will be the most effective way to support vulnerable populations to survive, mobilize significant resistance, and build the infrastructure we need for the coming disasters.”⁹⁰ Mutual aid in Spade’s view is “a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and challenging political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable.”⁹¹ Mutual aid strategies consider both a repurposing of the master’s “tools” (like solidarity, arguably) as well as a complete demolition of

⁸⁹ Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013).

⁹⁰ Spade, “Solidarity Not Charity,” 131.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 136. Though written in his own words, Spade used Big Door Brigade’s theorizing on mutual aid to develop his own definition. Big Door Brigade is a website Spade created “to lift up the significance of mutual aid as a strategy for survival and mobilization, and he continues to maintain it.” See Big Door Brigade, “What Is Mutual Aid?” <https://bigdoorbrigade.com/what-is-mutual-aid/>.

his “house” (like neoliberal capitalism, arguably) as viable strategies towards transformative justice.

Spade cites the Black Panther Party’s survival programs, which included efforts to provide access to free food, medical care, and education, as touchstone examples of mutual aid strategies that “mobilized people by creating spaces where they could access basic needs and build shared analysis about the conditions they were facing.”⁹² The “shared analysis” piece is what makes many mutual aid campaigns so revolutionary. Shared analysis is what invites collective consideration of the power and reach of the systems that organize and dominate subjects, which can lead to their demolition and ensuing creation of better ones in their place. People in need are helped, but not at the expense of a critical analysis of the bigger picture, by which I mean the circumstances that brought people to these precarious positions they presently find themselves in. The Black Panther party’s programs were templates, well-functioning proof of what social welfare programs could look like if institutions such as governments recognized the need and re-shuffled their priorities. Shared analysis within mutual aid campaigns is what helps to keep nonsovereign forms of solidarity from drifting into the territory of sovereign practices like charity. This is not to argue that all forms of philanthropy are unproductive, but that the sovereign characteristics of charitable practices limit charity’s potential to improve living conditions for the subjects it aims to help.

Spade distinguishes the “reformism” of certain sociopolitical justice movements from the more revolutionary consciousness of mutual aid campaigns. As Spade sagely observes, “[s]ystems of domination produce routes for channeling dissatisfaction that are nonthreatening to those systems.” He continues:

⁹² Ibid.

We are encouraged to bring our complaints in ways that are the least disruptive and the most beneficial to existing conditions. Voting, filing lawsuits, giving money to causes we care about that are properly registered as nonprofits, writing letters to the editor, posting our views on social media, and maybe occasionally attending a permitted march that is flanked by cops and does not disrupt traffic are forms of dissent (as opposed to disobedience) that are tolerable and mostly nondisruptive for existing arrangements. Some of those things can be done as tactics within larger strategies for transformation, but taken alone they are unlikely to cause significant change to existing distributions of wealth and violence.⁹³

Concerned subjects are often put in the positions of having to seek leniency through legislative compassion from institutions like governments and corporations who administer change in very sovereign ways. Subjects beseech politicians and CEOs, and then for many of the ensuing reforms that “do provide any material relief, [they] provide it only to those who are least marginalized within the group of people who were supposed to benefit from the reform.” These “approved methods of expressing concern,” therefore, often bolster sovereign thinking. This is easily witnessed in Sara Ahmed’s research on institutional diversity initiatives, which I explore further later in this dissertation.⁹⁴ Reforms often “change only what the system says about itself, such as when institutions pass antidiscrimination policies but nothing about the behavior of participants or the outcomes of their operations change.”⁹⁵ In contrast, subjects working together through mutual aid campaigns are mutually susceptible (though to varying degrees of course) to the systems of neoliberal capitalism that disservice entire populations by emboldening sovereign political and relational practices. An intentional and realized susceptibility, as witnessed within the mutual aid campaigns that Spade describes, is a significant step toward fostering nonsovereign thinking and acting for subjects seeking transformative justice.

⁹³ Ibid., 134.

⁹⁴ Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁹⁵ Spade, “Solidarity Not Charity,” 132.

In addition to susceptibility, deservingness is another aspect of subjectivity that can help explain some subjects' inability to embrace nonsovereignty. Deservingness is closely tied to desire in that it can be conceived of as having an appetite for an appetite. Due to internalized forms of inferiority and punishment, undeserving-feeling subjects may not believe they are entitled to the nourishment they require. Undeservingness, therefore, may be what keeps some subjects as unsusceptible, closed off to more creative and more productive alternatives to their stagnant and unfulfilling present. What if "desire" was as worshipped and respected as "identity" currently is in campaigns for transformative justice? What would the centering desire within the purview of identity politics look like?

Currently, amongst politicized subjects in pursuit of transformative justice, there seems a real proclivity to digress from desire within solidarity endeavours by concentrating on the "needs" at the expense of the "wants" of those whom solidarity is being fortified for – the junction of "desires" and "rights."⁹⁶ In common vernacular, wants are often ranked below needs in terms of authenticity and urgency. A subject's "wants" are at a higher risk of being judged as vapid, less necessary to survival, and thereby their fulfillment considered to be non-emergencies in activist campaigns. I suspect the ways in which progressive activist pursuits are classed is most to blame for this denigration of certain subjects' wanting. This denigration is objectifying and belittling to those whose lives and livelihoods are being fought for. Wealthy people and powerful people are, in a sense, beyond survival. Since they seemingly already have access to more than what they require to stay alive, wealthy subjects' dedication to what they want over

⁹⁶ Sometimes activists must abide by the demands made by their financial donors, donors who may have a far less intimate and therefore realistic understanding of the situations of the people that they are attempting to help. But I want to contend that it is not solely donors who are to blame for the diminishment of desire of marginalized folks at the center of charitable campaigns. Many solidarity subjects get caught up in this cliché line of thinking of "beggars can't be choosers."

what they need becomes justifiable. This logic results in a form of classed entitlement that characterizes some subjects' wants as excessive and other subjects' wants as reasonable. It also has the effect of dichotomizing objects of desire for subjects as either in the camp of needs or in the camp of wants.

Objects of desire, as a result, float through culture pre-packaged and imbued with value judgements. Some combination of monetary value, sentimental value, and cultural value distinguish objects of desires from objects of need for specific populations. Such distinctions are not completely impractical. I am not suggesting that community workers start serving caviar at soup kitchens (or am I?). Rather, I am illuminating how certain objects of desire get coded with information about who is deserving of them. This straight jacketing of desire can wrong subjects in a variety of ways. First and foremost, universalizing objects of desire robs subjects of the specificities of their contexts and their needs. Their very subjectivity is put into check. Additionally, what is the purpose of distinguishing needs from wants in the first place? The etching out of the category of "need" from "want" looks mostly like a way to sustain the hierarchy of desire, and by extension, sovereign thinking.

When I was 21 years old, I was on foods stamps (social assistance) and living in New York City. My friend who worked at a grocery store complained to me on many an occasion about his welfare customers. His beef was with what these customers were buying with their food stamps. The story that he liked to tell when airing his disgust about the purchasing practices of people on welfare involved such customers purchasing lobster. This, to him, was unfathomable. What, exactly, did my friend consider to be the travesty in this situation? I suspect that he deemed lobster to be an object of desire and not an object of need. Even though various people were buying lobster, he was incensed over its purchase by only certain customers.

Welfare customers, whom he regarded as impoverished, and whom at his store were often neither white nor native English speakers, were the problem. I am guessing he felt such customers should have used their food stamps differently, passing up the lobster for bags of rice and cans of beans, addressing their “needs” as opposed to their “wants.” Such logic is filled with judgment and assumptions, as well as class and racial hierarchies. My friend’s perspective contributes to a discourse of undeservingness, a discourse that has helped codify survival into what Berlant has frequently observed as the “benchmark” of mobilization in progressive movements.⁹⁷ Debasement of what subjects want is puritanical in so much as objects of desire get regarded as frills, as vain, as extra. But not all subjects’ objects of desire are judged in this way, and not all desiring subjects are judged. How depressing: the suggestion that for *some* people being alive is fundamentally about staying alive. Does not everyone have the right to aim any higher, toward the experiences of joy or pleasure, for example?⁹⁸

In the frenzied states that contemporary predicaments leave subjects in search of transformative justice in, predicaments like breakdowns in economies, climate change, illness and loss, subjects may engage in the devastating circular firing squads of identity politics with peers and allies who let them down without fundamentally considering what they or others desire

⁹⁷ Lauren Berlant, “The Unfinished Business of Cruel Optimism: Crisis, Affect, Sentimentality.” Lynch Lecture, Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies, November 19, 2020, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://sds.utoronto.ca/news/for-lauren-berlant/>.

⁹⁸ The vegan in me needs to say something. I cited lobster, here, as an example of a value-loaded cultural object, but I do not condone eating lobster in most contexts. My childhood on the Northeast coast of the United States led me to attend many a lobster boil. My witnessing of lobsters crawling around in refrigerators and tanks before they were boiled alive left me with trauma that I still grapple with today. In fact, the United Kingdom has recently joined the growing list of governments that recognize crustaceans and mollusks as sentient beings and “[b]oiling lobsters alive could be banned if ministers act on a government-commissioned report that has found crustaceans have feelings.” See Helena Horton, “Boiling of live lobsters could be banned in UK under proposed legislation,” *The Guardian*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/19/boiling-of-live-lobsters-could-be-banned-in-uk-under-proposed-legislation>.

– without examining what brings them and others out to the streets or to social media in the first place. Holding other members of one’s community accountable is of course important, but if that becomes a primary focus of community members’ energy and resources, it may be so at the expense and avoidance of any meaningful systemic analysis. When subjects scapegoat each other while giving dominating systems a pass, communities are primed to become hostile, acrid, and impasse-making. Thinking about political solidarity along lines of desire expands the breadth of analysis beyond just critiques of solidarity actions, shifting the focus from empirical to interior studies of the subjectivity.

Conclusion: Solidarity and the Anti-intellectualism Trap

One thing that I hope I have succeeded in articulating in this chapter is the utility of digging deeper into the breakdowns of solidarity efforts, beyond their commonly attributed failures of botched activism, nihilistic despair, or identity politics gone awry. While activists’ methods can no doubt always be improved, and while the lessons subjects can learn about their commitments to procuring transformative justice are inexhaustible, my claim is that breakdowns in solidarity efforts can be traced back to a lack of desire for nonsovereignty in the first place, as witnessed in the struggles to embrace and foster difference within and amongst politicized communities. In this light, sovereignty is a limiting value that neoliberal capitalism is adept at promoting. Despite political solidarity’s theoretical and practical elasticity, of which I highlight in the next chapter, solidarity subjects are rarely analyzed as orectic subjects, and instead are primarily regarded as active (or not active enough) subjects, which has had the effect of further entrenching sovereign thinking.

When desire is not taken seriously by subjects in solidarity and other nonsovereign efforts, the prospects of reaching transformative justice are compromised. Therefore, desire is a crucial sociopolitical analytic within theories and campaigns toward the promotion of transformative justice. Beyond activism, aversions of desire can cause broader cultural problems. Anti-intellectualism appears to be one such stubborn symptom of this short thrifting of desire. The senses of urgency that presently come tethered to many contemporary sociopolitical justice campaigns have resulted in a predilection for action over desire. A productive solidarity statement in the current moment is one that comes equipped with “action statements,” which are promises by the individual, group, or institution publishing the statement about how it will fulfill or act on behalf of the feeling of solidarity it finds itself publicly disclosing. This is also about accountability. As Kouri-Towe usefully pointed out to me, “the prompt for people and groups to anchor their gestures and desires for solidarity in action follows from critiques over accountability.”⁹⁹ While it could be argued that action statements are intellectual practices in and of themselves, I mention them here to highlight the thirst for the pragmatic within sociopolitical justice activism. Additionally, I do not mean to argue that action statements are anti-intellectual. Instead, I am claiming that the admittance or affirmation of a feeling of solidarity is presently frequently deemed insufficient. Neither precarious subjects, nor those mobilizing on their behalf, may feel there is any time to spare on feelings of solidarity or theories of solidarity desire, or on any theory for that matter, which can pit action over and against thought in progressive movements.

I sympathize with precarious subjects’ urgent situations, and I understand how a focus on “doing” might come to supersede thinking. Still, I maintain that acting without careful

⁹⁹ Kouri-Towe, as stated in the external examiner’s comments, May 2022.

consideration of subjects' desires can short shrift the generative potential that subjects in search of transformative justice might be capable of, and even put the subjects that solidarity is being mobilized on behalf of in danger. I do not deny that the circumstances that precarious subjects often find themselves in allow them and those who operate on their behalf little space for creative thinking and strategic planning. One will not always know in advance when they will be fighting for their right to stay alive. My point is that there are narratives currently circulating in Canadian and American politics, across the political spectrum, that have contributed to sentiments of anti-intellectualism as an answer to the urgency and pressure of sociopolitical crisis. For those promoting transformative justice, such trends must be resisted.¹⁰⁰

Anti-intellectualism feeds off the theory versus practice dichotomy, portraying academics, scientists, and other "experts" as elitist, out-of-touch, and of the establishment. Populist politics have flourished around the world within such anti-intellectual and anti-elitist moods. These trends may help explain how someone like Donald Trump defeated someone like Hillary Clinton for president of the United States in 2016.¹⁰¹ Or, how someone like Doug Ford became the premier of Ontario, Canada in 2018.¹⁰² Though both victors are wealthy white businessmen who have capitalized off the established political systems, and therefore are arguably very out of touch with how most of their constituents live, anti-intellectual, anti-elitist, and anti-establishment politics featured heavily in both of their campaigns. Populist storms helped to sweep these two politicians into office. Such trends are observable not only in conservative politics, but within liberal politics and progressive transformative justice campaigns

¹⁰⁰ It's worth noting that such trends are not necessarily new, and cycle in and out of cultural consciousness across time and space. See, for example, Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), published at the end of the McCarthyism era in the United States.

¹⁰¹ Matthew Motta, "The Dynamics and Political Implications of Anti-Intellectualism in the United States," *American Politics Research* 46, Issue 3 (2018).

¹⁰² Shannon Proudfoot, "Why anti-elitism is such a potent force in the Ontario election," *Maclean's*, May 28, 2018, <https://www.macleans.ca/politics/why-anti-elitism-is-such-a-potent-force-in-the-ontario-election/>.

as well, regardless of the political affiliations and ideologies of the players involved. Slavoj Zizek refers to the rather militaristic injunction “to act” in progressivism today as a “pseudo-activist pressure.” With regards to anticapitalism, he claims that adopting an anticapitalist stance is not particularly difficult. But he wonders what such stances pragmatically suggest. What are the alternatives to capitalism and to status quo politics that are being proposed? What is the thinking behind the proposed doing? I very much agree with Zizek that less thinking is the last thing any sociopolitical movement for transformative justice needs.¹⁰³

Zizek described the Occupy Wall Street movement as “just a signal,” an important one no doubt, but a signal nonetheless that flagged an ill-equipped system. Such signals often manifest without specific solutions to the problems they cite, which does not mark them as inconsequential, but as part of a process. For Zizek, the Occupy movement was responsible for “clearing the table,” an essential first step. What is needed next is more thought and more interpretation, not less of it. Zizek elaborates:

Also, let’s not remember (sic) – and I’m saying this as some kind of communist – that the twentieth century alternatives to capitalism and market miserably failed...like, okay, in Soviet Union they did try to get rid of the predominance of money market economy. They price they paid was a return to violent direct master and servant, direct domination, like you no longer will even formally flee. You had to obey orders, a new authoritarian society...and this is a serious problem: how to abolish market without regressing again into relations of servitude and domination.¹⁰⁴

A sense of urgency need not motivate hasty action at the expense of sound analysis and thought, and more action need not mean less thought within social movements. Theory and praxis are not distinct methods where transformative justice is concerned but are interwoven into processes to bring about sociopolitical change. As Butler once put it in a response to a question about the

¹⁰³ Slavoj Zizek, “Don’t Act. Just Think,” Big Think, August 28, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgR6uaVqWsQ>.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

practical power of gender theory, “academic theories for the most part register what’s happening in social movements, they’re usually belated, they don’t prescribe what you should do, they’re not efforts to indoctrinate people, they’re ways of describing changing ways of living gender in the world.”¹⁰⁵ “Theory” and “action” are polymorphous concepts that are both part and parcel of transformative justice movements.

Academic theory is just one mode of thinking and acting, but a significant one no doubt, particularly for what I interpret Butler and Zizek to be both making a case for: the utility of academic theory’s reflexive properties. Theory can be a useful way of taking stock of activism, of assessing what is and is not working, and thereby providing intel for future actions. Butler’s observations on theory, however, are just as normative as they are descriptive because sometimes academic theory *is* in fact guilty of prescribing paths forward for communities in crisis from which the prescribing theorists themselves are quite removed. As an academic who does research on solidarity and other practices for working toward transformative justice, I am familiar with this problem. I am weary of the potential for my work to do the bidding of saviors and their corresponding complexes.

Though mutual aid strategies have immense potential to equip their practicing subjects with nonsovereign, nonhierarchical, and generative tools toward the promotion of justice, Spade cautions that their participants “must also be wary of saviorism, self-congratulation, and paternalism.”¹⁰⁶ His prescription for mutual aid campaigns to resist savior narratives is the fostering of shared analysis as well as self-determination. “Mutual aid is antiauthoritarian, demonstrating how to do things together in ways that that we were told not to imagine and how

¹⁰⁵ Judith Butler, “Renowned gender theorist Judith Butler at University of Brighton,” interview by Mark Devenney, Critical Theory in a Global Context Conference, University of Brighton, April 5, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84zpcxJdyOs&t=518s>.

¹⁰⁶ Spade, “Solidarity Not Charity,” 141.

to organize human activity without coercion.” Though, Spade cautions, subjects “bring [their] learned practices of hierarchy and (de)valuation with [them] even when no paycheck or punishment enforces [their] participation.” Nonetheless, he is optimistic that “experiences of being in groups voluntarily motivated by shared transformative principles and a sincere effort to practice them can build new skills and capacities.”¹⁰⁷ Such mutual aid strategies toward transformative justice are animated by an ethics of nonsovereignty, with the concepts of desire and difference both playing significant roles in their design.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 138.

---CHAPTER TWO--- POLITICAL SOLIDARITY

Why Bother?

My uncle once told me to steer clear of politics on Facebook because I would “never win.”

While the interaction left me a little disenchanted, I was mostly curious about what prompted this unsolicited advice from a man of few words and seventy-five years. To be “too political,” or even just “political,” are dispositions often regarded as afflictions or impositions that irk and even offend some people in Canada and the United States; that much I know, but I struggle to understand the crux of this transgression. What does “political” mean inside of an accusation that incriminates one as such? Why is politicization provocative? Lauren Berlant distinguishes “the political,” the “place where you’re always excited,” from “politics,” the “place where you’re always disappointed.”¹⁰⁸ My uncle seems tired of social media. Or, maybe he is tired of politics: the processes that citizens participate in to ensure that the social contract that is their government benefits and supports them. Politics within this rendition maintain the present political system, a system that may not work on everyone’s behalf, causing politics to feel like an abandonment to some and a means of cooperation to others. Politics, in this sense, are not radical, and they are usually distinct from political activism.

I am not saying that politics are incapable of ushering in radical change, rather I am distinguishing between political will and action that emanate within the system from that which emanate outside of it. In retrospect, maybe my uncle was not trying to criticize me, but protect

¹⁰⁸ Lauren Berlant, *Public Feelings Salon* (Response to presentations, Barnard Center for Research on Women, New York City, NY, April 12, 2011).

me.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps he is skeptical of politics because he has lost trust in the system and does not want me to waste my time. Perhaps he is more “political” than I thought and believes my time would be better spent storming the capitol, or, more pragmatically, engaging in community organizing to increase the pressure on existing power structures. Though I would truly cherish an uncle with revolutionary aspirations, perhaps his comments were simply a form of concern, a way of warning his sassy faggot of a nephew to be careful.

In this chapter I explore political solidarity as one tool subjects use to help fill the gaps that institutions such as governments leave wide open, a tool that can work both within the present political system and outside of it. As a potential mode of nonsovereignty, political solidarity moves us toward a world that we could all belong to, a world “deserving of our preferring....”¹¹⁰ By belonging I mean more than what is bestowed upon subjects through legal national citizenship. I am referring to a wider plenitude of feelings of association, identity, and membership that keep subjects yearning for some sense of belonging, and therefore personal security, what Berlant has long been theorizing since the publication of her national sentimentality trilogy.¹¹¹ This chapter contemplates the possibilities for staying attached to the political, despite the oft seeming hopelessness of contemporary politics. It wonders: why bother?

“And so you can’t really be against optimism —” because, as Berlant explains — “you can’t be against attachment, because living requires you actually to be attached to something.”¹¹² Political solidarities are inherently optimistic, as are all forms of attachment according to

¹⁰⁹ I want to credit my supervisor, Meg Luxton, with this intuitive and caring suggestion regarding the cause of my uncle’s behavior. This thought had not crossed my mind, and it is a useful one.

¹¹⁰ Berlant, *Public Feelings Salon*.

¹¹¹ Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991); Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997); Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008).

¹¹² Berlant, *Public Feelings Salon*.

Berlant. Hopefulness, however, is not a given byproduct of our attachments, which are susceptible to fatigue. Hence: "...optimism might not feel optimistic."¹¹³ Berlant splits attachments into "content and form." The "affects of belonging" (the form), which bind us to other people, ideas, things, events, fantasies, and so on (the content), are conditional to one's flourishing – to feeling as if we have made good use of our objects. Thus, the affects of our attachments are distinct from the objects of our attachments.¹¹⁴

In one sense, staying attached to the political is continuing the subjective struggle to belong. I am not merely referencing the work of appeasement or self-adjustment here, but rather the courage that some subjects require to continue to reach outside themselves, as themselves, toward other subjects. In her breadth of scholarship Berlant thinks a lot about how it feels to a subject to belong, or at least, try to belong. "Does belonging always feel like belonging, or does it sometimes feel like prison? Does it sometimes feel suffocating? Does it sometimes feel impossible? Does belonging feel like foreclosure when it's also the condition of your actual flourishing in the world?" Like Berlant, I am interested in "the relationship between the form of an attachment and the affects that get magnetized to that attachment," and in particular, "the relation between attachment to the world and the feeling of belonging to the world." To belong to this world, to any world, is to belong with other subjects, to find oneself "in the right and suitable place."¹¹⁵ The business of belonging is complicated, and sometimes subjects submit to each other in ways that muddy the lines between degradation and pleasure, agency and bondage.¹¹⁶ Sometimes subjects belong to each other in problematic yet perceivably sustaining

¹¹³ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1-2.

¹¹⁴ Berlant, Public Feelings Salon.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ See Jessica Benjamin, *Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

ways. Belonging does not always feel good, it “sometimes feels like prison” (and for more than 10.77 million people world-wide it IS prison...¹¹⁷).¹¹⁸

Political solidarity can help facilitate mutual belonging. Even when political efforts involve struggles of resistance, and of denying certain attachments, subjects are in the process of attaching to something else in their place, and so there is still optimism there. Part of the difficulty of finding productive nonsovereign practices for subjects is figuring out how to not lose oneself in a crowd or collaboration while coming to terms with the reality that incoherence is actually necessary to the maintenance of one’s subjectivity, or as Berlant puts it in terms of sex, “that sexualized attachment is possible precisely because desiring subjects are not only incoherent, but seek divestiture of the ego at the same time as they are looking for confirming reciprocity.”¹¹⁹ Divesting one’s ego while moving towards reciprocity seems like a tall order for subjects, but I believe it is possible. Sex, as interpreted by queer theory, has a lot to teach regarding nonsovereignty, lessons that can be applied to the social and political realms and how subjects learn to belong within them.

Finding productive solidarities and other useful nonsovereign practices can seem daunting in the face of today’s politicization of complaint, by which I specifically mean the disdain for those who speak up, or the turning of those who cite problems into the problem.¹²⁰ When subjects introduce “politics” into social settings through the citing of others’ or their own unrest, suffering, exploitation, or abandonment, feathers get ruffled. Solidarity work is no doubt

¹¹⁷ Helen Fair and Roy Walmsley, “World Prison Population List,” The World Prison Brief, 2021. https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world_prison_population_list_13th_edition.pdf.

¹¹⁸ Berlant, *Public Feelings Salon*.

¹¹⁹ Lauren Berlant, “Neither monstrous nor pastoral, but scary and sweet: Some thoughts on sex and emotional performance in *Intimacies* and *What Do Gay Men Want?*,” *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2009), 262.

¹²⁰ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

demanding work, but I interpret some of its challenging conditions as revelatory of a broad cultural aversion to criticality, which manifests in social allergic reactions to muckrakers of all sorts. These individuals get type casted as colorful and stereotypical subject positions, such as “PC police,”¹²¹ feminist killjoys, cranky queers, angry BIPOC,¹²² snowflakes, and mad crips,¹²³ to name some of the most infamous of these designations. Those who relentlessly remind us of the state of things, who challenge dominant paradigms and prevailing ideologies are often resented and made into the problem in and of themselves. Defensiveness and distrust of identity politics and political ideologies such as socialism and anarchism can eclipse the significance and urgency of the problems for which folks are raising awareness. These “politicized” individuals often cannot afford to quietly channel indignation into yoga. They require more than self-care tactics. They are in search of a political system that includes them. Silencing or degrading the plight of those who complain when they do not and cannot belong is an aversion to a mutual membership of this world, which is, according to Judith Butler’s conceptualization of ethics, unethical.¹²⁴

With his comment, my uncle was likely implying that I would be better off using platforms like Facebook solely as a conduit for trivial entertainment, and as a means to engage with friends and family. In chapter five I explore rhetorical, performative, and what Sally Scholz characterizes as “parasitical” solidarity initiatives that I am admittedly, aligned with my uncle, usually irritated by.¹²⁵ However, the existence of vapid forms of solidarity on social media need

¹²¹ Politically correct police.

¹²² Black, indigenous, and people of color.

¹²³ A slang term for disabled people that has historically been used disparagingly, but also taken up by some under projects of reappropriation. See Robert McRuer, “Crip,” *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle*, ed. by Kelly Fritsch, Clare O’Connor, and AK Thompson, Chico, CA: AK Press (2016), 119-125.

¹²⁴ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 99-121.

¹²⁵ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 46-48.

not quell an appetite there for social justice altogether. Hashtag solidarity, for example, is a digital phenomenon that I conclude is extremely productive despite its flare for the ostentatious. It is a privileged position to be able to control one's atmosphere in a way that prevents negativity from circulating within it. It is also an impossible luxury, as affect theorists such as Theresa Brennan, Sara Ahmed, Jose Esteban Munoz, Heather Love, and Anne Cvetkovich have all attested to in their scholarship. No amount of self-care or social maneuvering (like telling your cantankerous nephew to simmer down) is powerful enough to drown out the contemporary soundtrack of precarity.

Precarity is more than the impoverished conditions of some lives. It is also indicative of the philosophy that allows those with a bed, and a roof over it, to sleep at night, despite the knowledge that some are without beds and without roofs. Like solidarity, the philosophy of precarity includes what sustains it: the political, economic, and social systems that subjects continue to accede to or attempt to resist through collective action. Broadly speaking, solidarity can be a goal, method, or a common meeting place for those who wish to speak up and do something about injustice, an antidote to precarity. Additionally, solidarity is both a ubiquitous social phenomenon and adaptable theoretical tool, from labor movements in which it circulates to incite collaborative action to social settings like a family and civic settings like a nation. And so, this elastic concept can indulge a wide array of scholarly, political, and cultural pursuits. *Solidarity Wishes*, however, is interested in political solidarity, a species of solidarity rooted in desires for transformative justice.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Scholz' theorizing of political solidarity is foundational to this project. Though Scholz, a professor of philosophy, conceptualizes political solidarity primarily within the realm of social justice and progressive activism, other political philosophers might be more interested in the application of political solidarity to conceptualizations of democracy and governance. In *Solidarity Wishes*, however, I utilize "nonsovereignty" to do the work of processing subjects' general feelings of belonging that manifest within discussions of citizenship, democracy, and social contracts like governments. Thus, political solidarity, both for Scholz and for me, is a philosophical concept that is

“Political solidarity cannot be separated from a particular situation [of injustice],” Scholz argues, which makes conceptualizing it quite complicated.¹²⁷ But, doing so is a worthwhile project if we are interested in procuring and sustaining such solidarities. Scholz promotes a diverse and comprehensive understanding of solidarity to “open up the possibilities for personal and political transformation,” and her project realizes the power of social, moral, and political philosophy in order to do so.¹²⁸ The keystone of her theory of political solidarity is found within the concept’s unified, moral, and intentional imperatives. Having realized solidarity’s traffic in empirical studies and its corresponding dearth in conceptual projects, in *Political Solidarity* Scholz comprehensively builds a theory of what is arguably the most important sociopolitical concept of the 21st century.

In this chapter I engage with theoretical accounts of morality, ethics, and politics to weave together a theory of solidarity for *Solidarity Wishes* to build up from. First, I investigate political solidarity through an examination of its moral schema using Ashley E. Taylor’s framework of solidarity obligations and expressions.¹²⁹ What is political solidarity and what is it capable of? For whom? And what distinguishes it from other forms of solidarity and other concepts of collectivity? What are solidarity obligations morally capable of and how do they differ from solidarity commitments? And what role does desire play in both obligation-generating and commitment-generating solidarities? To speak to these questions, I critically analyze two solidarity actions and assess their efficacy. Assuming political solidarity’s moral disposition as supported by Scholz, *Solidarity Wishes* constructs its own theory of political

definitionally wedded to issues of sociopolitical justice and activism – what I refer to broadly as “transformative justice” throughout this dissertation.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 51.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 16.

¹²⁹ Taylor, Ashley. “Solidarity: Obligations and Expressions,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 23, 2 (2015): 128-145.

solidarity by centering desire as it manifests through conscious commitment, in contrast to the potential automaticity and impulsiveness of obligation. As a potentially productive mode of nonsovereignty, political solidarity is an intentional tool and practice subjects can use in their pursuits toward transformative justice.

Solidarity

Solidarity is a concept with a rich discursive life and history. The word originates from the French “*solidarité*” and is believed to have been first used in English in the 1840s.¹³⁰ Solidarity traverses peoples, movements, institutions, and theories. It circulates throughout academic, activist, and religious literatures. It is embedded both within mainstream and fringe cultures. It spans virtual (i.e., hashtags) and analog (i.e., a politician’s speech) mediums. Within politics, solidarity can function as a tool, a goal, and a practice, though it is not necessarily a progressive or benevolent construction, nor is it tied to any specific political ideology. It has been and continues to be practiced by groups as disparate as the Ku Klux Klan, Black Lives Matter, the Catholic Church, labor unions, and both right-leaning and left-leaning political parties and organizations. Both formal activists and ordinary citizens alike have a relationship to this amorphous concept. Calls to solidarity have been recently prompted around the world by a slew of stimuli: elections, mass shootings, police brutality, fascism, natural disasters, war, and a global pandemic to name a few. So, what, exactly, is solidarity? Why has it become so versatile?

Scholz observes that “[m]ost appeals to solidarity appear to be deliberate differentiations from unity, camaraderie, sociality, sympathy, or community,” and she wonders “what makes solidarity distinctly different and yet also allows it to be meaningfully used in such different

¹³⁰ Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www-oed-com>.

ways?”¹³¹ I believe there are two main answers to Scholz’ inquiry. The first is that solidarity has a rich etymology that reverberates across solidarity’s present-day circulations. Scholars with an array of disciplinary backgrounds have theorized and continue to theorize solidarity through a variety of frameworks, and subjects with a range of agendas have tried and continue to try to practice it. Sociologists and philosophers were some of the first intellectuals to incorporate solidarity into their work. August Comte and Emile Durkheim greatly contributed to solidarity’s “sociological roots.” Their works, as Scholz cites, “describe the cohesiveness or commonality of a group or population.”¹³² Labor unions and the Catholic Church are additional significant (and interestingly interrelated) players in the global history of the concept of solidarity as well as its continued applications.

The politics of difference has heavily contoured feminist theory and activism since the women’s liberation movement born out of the 1960s, and accordingly, solidarity has heavily trafficked through feminist scholarship and communities as a means to respond to this politics, assuming many revisions and shapes across the decades.¹³³ Though the field of feminist theory has contributed impactful critiques to solidarity’s legacy, the concept has overall been deemed a valuable practice toward securing social justice by feminists. Understandings of solidarity have wholesale shifted through feminism from a unity born and bred of commonalities to something

¹³¹ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 2.

¹³² Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 6.

¹³³ Maria O’Reilly, “Feminism and the Politics of Difference,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, 22 Dec. 2017, accessed March 15, 2018, <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-177>; Clare Hemmings, “Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation,” *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (August 2012): 147–61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700112442643>; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Gada Mahrouse, *Conflicted Commitments: Race, Privilege, and Power in Transnational Solidarity Activism* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014); Sara Salem, “On Transnational Feminist Solidarity: The Case of Angela Davis in Egypt,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43:2 (2018): 245-267, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/693535>.

politically earned: a product of allied resistance and shared commitments to a cause. BIPOC feminist scholars and activists long led the charge to interrogate solidarities formed through shared oppression. As bell hooks has argued, “The idea of ‘common oppression’ was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality.”¹³⁴ In addition to hooks, members of the Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Roxanne Gay, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie comprise an extremely short list of the many BIPOC feminists over the past fifty years who have critiqued the universal concepts of “woman” and “sisterhood” for their eclipsing of the differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability in campaigns for social justice.

The tendencies of universal concepts like “woman” and “sisterhood” to occlude recognition of the immense diversity of lived experience, and therefore lived oppression, amongst women and feminists, have led to the recognition of these concepts as a highly fallible means’ of procuring solidarity. As hooks has claimed, solidarity is more than unity.

Women must learn to accept responsibility for fighting oppressions that may not directly affect us as individuals. Feminist movement, like other radical movements in our society, suffers when individual concerns and priorities are the only reason for participation. When we show our concern for the collective, we strengthen our solidarity.¹³⁵

Though surmised by hooks in 1984, the feminist sentiment of avoiding reductionist solidarities to keep room for solidarities that recognize and take advantage of difference still rings loud a mere four decades later. Cut from 1984 to 2016:

In the midst of all the struggles we fight, the movements we build, the friendships and allies we make and the power structures we dismantle, building solidarity is one of the most important things we do to stay strong, motivated and fiery to continue our work.

¹³⁴ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 44.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 62.

Our activisms often overlap and it is solidarity that exposes us to struggles we never thought existed or needed a space to grow.¹³⁶

These words belong to Deepa Ranganathan, the senior communications and content coordinator at FRIDA: The Young Feminist Fund, a not for profit in Canada that “provides young feminist organizers with the resources they need to amplify their voices and bring attention to the social justice issues they care about.”¹³⁷ Her observations illustrate a solidarity that can honor difference without abandoning the “we.” Ranganathan’s claims about social justice activism maintain that solidarities that honor difference and passionately unify feminists are indeed possible. While I am inspired by such thinking, it is not lost on me that many feminists, and transformative justice advocates in general, are less confident in solidarity’s ability to carry out such functions. Scholars such as Butler have recommended the concept of “alliance” in place of solidarity as a more feasible practice. However, I do not think it is necessary or helpful to abandon solidarity for a new shiny concept. And so, *Solidarity Wishes* aims to reinvigorate solidarity by addressing its challenges head on.

In addition to its rich origins, the second primary reason I volunteer for solidarity’s polymorphous application in both theory and practice is due to the tremendous investment in it by a diverse range of subjects. Solidarity parallels sovereignty as an aspirational concept. Within politics, academia, social justice movements, religion, popular culture, and the everyday solidarity is imbued with a wealth of hope, regarded as a vehicle toward a variety of goals that are all interconnected through the belief that each of their attainments might contribute to making the world a better place. While immoral solidarities certainly exist, that is, solidarities practiced

¹³⁶ Deepa Ranganathan, “Solidarity: Binding multiple causes, identities, and struggle together,” *Young Feminist Wire*, June 10 2016, <http://yfa.awid.org/2016/06/solidarity-binding-multiple-causes-identities-and-struggles-together/>.

¹³⁷ See the organization’s website: <https://youngfeministfund.org/about-us/>.

by people with arguably immoral intentions, overwhelmingly solidarity is regarded by subjects as a progressive antidote to human injustice and suffering. Despite solidarity's skeptics, the concept continues to be trusted and practiced today by a wealth of different individuals, groups, and movements.

When Black Lives Matter Toronto staged a protest outside police headquarters in 2016 notices circulated across social media platforms that contained instructions for non-Black allies regarding how to engage in effective solidarity when attending the demonstrations.¹³⁸ The pragmatic advice given included suggestions for non-Black allies to stand behind or around Black activists at rallies, so that non-Black allies could lend their support and protection to Black demonstrators while also keeping Black bodies and Black voices center stage. And from what I could tell, non-Black allies in attendance were mostly adhering to these suggestions. I found this to be an energizing example of allyship. It revealed clear pragmatic desires of folks seeking transformative justice to make political solidarity into an achievable and physically possible thing. It was a fruitful example of what can be accomplished when those attempting to enact solidarity treat who they are attempting to enact solidarity for/with as the experts of their own situation, needs, and desires. Solidarity work is oft cited as difficult and complicated work, and I concur with such observations, but I believe that solidarity is achievable in the here and now if solidarity subjects' desires are realized, respected, and responded to.

As Scholz maintains, “[a]ny history of the concept of solidarity would be incomplete,” but I have offered some “relevant historical touchstones” of solidarity in this section to help readers tune into the frequency of this massive contemporary idea.¹³⁹ In *Solidarity Wishes* I rely

¹³⁸ The Facebook group page on which I had initially observed this document has since been taken offline. Unfortunately, I did not archive the materials at the time, and so these observations are based solely on my notes.

¹³⁹ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 6.

upon Scholz' "taxonomy for solidarity" to construct my own arguments around solidarity and desire. Scholz draws from Kurt Bayertz' four uses of solidarity to construct four categories of her own: civic, social, political, and parasitical solidarity.¹⁴⁰ According to Scholz, all solidarities can be subsumed into one of these four forms, or species, of solidarity. Whatever the form, Scholz contends that all solidarities possess at least three characteristics, though these characteristics manifest differently across different forms of solidarity: meditation between the community and the individual, unity, and positive moral obligations.¹⁴¹

Squiggles and Safety Pins

One evening in 2014 I came home to find a rainbow sticker on the front door of my shared home in Toronto. My partner and I, our two cats, our dog, and our beta fish lived on the first floor, another couple and their two cats resided on the second, an artist occupied the basement, and our landlady ruled from the top floor. We – two queerdos in a relationship – had been living there for almost two years when this safe space amulet of sorts appeared.¹⁴² I am not sure and I never asked what motivated it, but the sticker showed up at a time when the mainstream media was swarming with "gay issue" stories. The battle to legalize gay marriage in the U.S. and the preparations for Toronto to host World Pride were front and center in the news. Although gay marriage is not my favorite cause and gay pride is not favorite party, I was soothed by the rainbow squiggles. For whatever reason, my landlady decided to recognize my queerness that

¹⁴⁰ Kurt Bayertz, "Four Uses of 'Solidarity,'" *Solidarity* Volume 5, Ed. Kurt Bayertz (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 3-28.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁴² A queerdo is, quite simply, a queer guy. If you are scratching your head, wondering whether it is a formal English word, I can assure you it is not, but I like it anyhow. I am particularly fond of the word because of its combination of "weirdo" and "queer." I am a weird queer. I am not just queer as in faggot or cocksucker, I'm queer as in critical, indignant, and original. I ain't your mother's gay homonationalist brother! I'm a queerdo. So is my partner. And so, this word, despite its slang designation, works.

day by turning our shared home into a space whose front door claimed to welcome me in all my gay glory, which, quite simply, felt good.

Two years later, on November 8th, 2016, a man who has been diagnosed from a distance with various mental illnesses by a variety of professional physicians, and who lost the popular vote by almost three million, was elected to the office of president of the United States.¹⁴³ He rose to power taking advantage of a democracy dominated and controlled by corporate interests and preoccupied with nationalist and racist nostalgia. Within the first few days of office this president and his administration incited fierce resistance and motivated political solidarity across an incredible range of Americans and global citizens. I want to home in on one of these manifestations of solidarity that had sprung up in response to this surreal turn of political events, which, like the squiggles, operates defensively on behalf of vulnerable populations through the collaborative efforts of strangers. Safety pin solidarity (#safetypin) in the U.S. was inspired by citizens of the United Kingdom who donned safety pins in response to racist and xenophobic acts of violence that proliferated in the wake of the UK's successful referendum vote to leave the European union. An American living in England at the time unintentionally started the movement with two tweets.¹⁴⁴ Shortly thereafter, UK citizens began to post safety pin selfies to social media. And then about five months later, as the world watched the results of the American presidential election chillingly embolden racist, sexist and xenophobic nationalist sentiments and acts, safety pin solidarity began to spread.

¹⁴³ The list of commentators who have speculated on Donald Trump's mental health is extensive, but here are two pertinent examples: Justin A. Frank, *Trump on the Couch: Inside the Mind of the President* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2018) and Bandy X. Lee, *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017).

¹⁴⁴ Elena Cresci, "Britons urged to wear safety pins in solidarity with immigrants," *The Guardian*, June 29, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/29/britons-urged-to-wear-safety-pins-in-solidarity-with-immigrants-safetypin>.

The squiggles and the safety pins both arguably encompass what Scholz terms the “highlights” of political solidarity: “individual conscience, commitment, group responsibility, and collective action.”¹⁴⁵ Transformative justice, or liberation, is political solidarity’s *raison d’être*, and so it manifests in response to situations of injustice, oppression, social vulnerability, or tranny, and in the form of opposition against something that is human in origin.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, political solidarity has “a different impetus, social structure, and moral content than civic or social solidarity.”¹⁴⁷ Civic solidarity is “the idea that society has an obligation to protect its members through programs that ensure that adequate basic needs are met.”¹⁴⁸ Broadly speaking, it refers to “the relationship between citizens within a political state,” and in particular between citizens and their government.¹⁴⁹ Welfare states, therefore, are embodiments of civic solidarity, which have in large part evolved this way on behalf of working class movements and years of struggle by unions. The perceived failures of capitalism in the 1930s and the fear of the spread of communist ideas to indignant working-class movements no doubt also played a role in the construction of Canadian and American welfare states. Social solidarity, however, “is a measure of the interdependence among individuals within a group,” such as families and public gatherings, and therefore is a broader concept than civic solidarity.¹⁵⁰

Summarizing civic, social, and political solidarities’ major distinctions, Scholz explains:

[Civic solidarity] entails positive duties, as do all forms of solidarity, and those duties largely pertain to how best to protect citizens against the vulnerabilities that would inhibit their ability to participate in civic life. Surely there are some social bonds between citizens as well, but the moral structure of civic solidarity does not emphasize these bonds so much as the bonds between citizens and the state. In that sense, it is political,

¹⁴⁵ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 33.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

but ‘political solidarity’ employs yet another normative structure and a broader notion of the ‘political’ than merely state systems.¹⁵¹

In civic and social solidarities, “morality issues from the pre-existing bonds” within solidarity groups¹⁵², while political solidarity “reverses the ordering between social bonds and moral obligations found in social solidarity and civic solidarity.”¹⁵³ Political solidarity, first and foremost, entails a mutual commitment to a cause or reaction to injustice; it may also include obligations generated between those within the solidary group, but such obligations are always secondary to the primary mutual commitment to a cause. Scholz classifies these three forms of solidarity as altogether separate from “parasitical solidarity” – a solidarity imposter that is defined as “the rhetorical use of solidarity that aims to tap into the associated feelings without the moral obligations.”¹⁵⁴ So, the squiggles and safety pins, depending on the motives of their users, could also function as modes of parasitical solidarity. In this next section I consider the moral obligations that parasitical solidarity shirks, and political solidarity upholds.

Moral Mechanisms of Solidarity

Both the squiggles and the safety pin may operate as what Taylor identifies as “expressional solidarity”: a “species of solidarity” that is manifested through commitments (what she also refers to as “expressions”) and applied *towards* other groups as “form[s] of social empathy.”¹⁵⁵ Taylor counter-distinguishes expressional solidarity from “robust solidarity”: solidarity that is manifested through obligations and applied *within* groups – the type of solidarity commonly associated with members of labor unions today. Taylor’s borrowed term, “robust,” indicates

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 33.

¹⁵² Ibid., 41.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 36.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹⁵⁵ Taylor, “Solidarity: Obligations and Expressions,” 129.

solidarity that enables *collective* action.¹⁵⁶ Taylor's primary objective is to blur the rigid distinction and prove that solidarity is both robust and expressional: both obligationally generative – resultant of the desire to act on behalf of and from within a group of which one is a member, and committedly generative – resultant of the desire to act on behalf of and outside a group of which one is not a member.

Like those who wear the safety pin, my landlady's act of solidarity was likely on behalf of a commitment, and although such a commitment could very well have been incited by guilt or empathy, such feelings are not obligations. My relationship with my landlady was quite superficial, and so I do not think she would have felt obligated to put up that sticker on behalf of friendship. Therefore, the squiggles and the safety pin exemplify expressional – not robust – solidarity because of the *unidirectional* nature of the relationship between me and my landlady and between the safety pin donors and those *for whom* safe space is being fortified. In contrast, Taylor argues that robust solidarity requires four *bidirectional* conditions: mutual recognition or identifying with the group, mutual trust, mutual disposition to empathy, and a joint interest.¹⁵⁷ While she argues that these four conditions are universal for all solidarities, it is the nature of the relationship between involved parties that accounts for the different species of robust (bidirectional) and expressional (unidirectional) solidarity. Although I could make creative arguments for how some of these mutual conditions existed between my landlady and me, all four of them were not present in our relationship; the most glaring of which was the fact that my landlady was not queer identified.

¹⁵⁶ Thomas Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 68.

¹⁵⁷ Taylor, "Solidarity: Obligations and Expressions," 139.

While there is much overlap between Scholz' and Taylor's theories of solidarity, there are some important distinctions regarding the intentions and desires of solidary actors. Scholz adeptly defends the claim that "every form of solidarity shares the general characteristics of being a form of unity that mediates between individual and community and entails positive duties" – though she admits – "different forms of solidarity differ a great deal in how they motivate and manifest these characteristics."¹⁵⁸ Taylor's project takes up the motivations and manifestations of different forms of solidarity by distinguishing solidarity obligations from solidarity expressions (aka: commitments), while also disrupting their dichotomous relationship. Theorizing solidarities by analyzing their obligation-generating and commitment-generating capabilities, however, suggests consideration of the agency and morality of the actors involved. Folding Taylor's theory of solidarities within the categorical framework that Scholz constructs begs some very important questions. How might varying degrees of consciousness across those linked through instances of solidarity affect the outcome of solidarity efforts? Can solidarity exist in the absence of purposeful and conscious intentions? How might one measure the successful creation of political solidarity? How does one ascertain whether they are engaged in it? What of automatic, instinctual, resentful, indignant, hysterical, guilty, self-serving and coerced efforts toward unity? What of solidarity efforts toward the promotion of injustice? Do such efforts qualify as solidarity pursuits?

Taylor does not contest Scholz' claim that all solidarities entail positive or moral duties, but she draws an important distinction between moral obligations or duties and moral relationships.¹⁵⁹ Thus, according to Taylor, "clearly immoral" groups like the KKK can be classified as solidarity groups because of their positive duties or obligations to their bigoted

¹⁵⁸ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 20.

¹⁵⁹ Taylor, "Solidarity: Obligations and Expressions," 144.

peers. Likewise, such groups can also engage in solidarity expressions toward other groups. The KKK's public support of past President Donald Trump is one such example.¹⁶⁰ Since recent scholarship on solidarity overwhelmingly analyzes the concept through empirical explorations of left-leaning movements or otherwise in relation to agendas of sociopolitical justice, it is easy to misconstrue solidarity as solely a tool of progressive politics and deny its adaptability as a phenomenon of the social. To accept that solidarity is not a concept wedded to any specific type of moral content is to acknowledge the concept's potential toward generating both oppressive and liberatory ends.

Putting morality aside, what is the role of intentionality where solidarity is concerned? Taylor explains that "while expressional solidarity usually involves voluntary association, robust solidarity groups do not always involve voluntary associations, but are still motivation-generating."¹⁶¹ Therefore, at first glance, robust solidarity – obligation-generating solidarity – appears defective, or incomplete, due to the absence of conscious purposeful intentions. But Taylor interjects that robust solidarity can also generate commitments. "[I]n involuntary [solidarity] groups," she explains, "one is motivated because one values the group's joint interest, regardless of how one became a member." She elaborates:

If it is possible for an individual to stop valuing the interest, either through dissolution of the group or a change in one's personal values, then one could leave the group. Many [solidarity] groups have this exit capacity. However, membership in groups like the nations or the families in which we are raised are rarely ever relinquished. It is outside the scope of this project to explain why there are some associations and their related values that individuals seem unable to give up. I simply observe that one is motivated to act in accordance with involuntary [solidarity] bonds because one identifies with the group in a strong enough manner that one cannot cease to value its executive interest.

¹⁶⁰ Charles Bethea, "What a White Supremacist Told Me After Donald Trump Was Elected," *The New Yorker*, August 17, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/what-a-white-supremacist-told-me-after-donald-trump-was-elected>.

¹⁶¹ Taylor, "Solidarity: Obligations and Expressions," 142.

I appreciate Taylor's work to distinguish solidarity obligations from solidarity commitments, while simultaneously de-dichotomizing them. Both Taylor and Scholz show how obligations and commitments can motivate solidarity separately or collaboratively; as cousin contraptions of desire, one is usually not too far behind the other. However, what Taylor identifies as the theoretical terrain that she was unable to embark on – the question of why there are “some associations and their related values” that one is unable to abandon – is exactly the problem that must be examined in order to move toward a theory of political solidarity that is more seriously attuned to desire.¹⁶²

Bad Solidarities

It's not fun to think about solidarity in terms of the KKK but doing so reminds subjects that solidarity is ultimately hinged on desire and the inherently optimistic upkeep of subjects' attachments to other, not necessarily benevolent, subjects. Considering solidarity in the context of the KKK begs consideration of who and what helps guide subjects' intentions, as well as the degree of agency subjects have in their relationships with such forces. I seriously doubt the effectiveness and sustainability of political solidarities that are constructed through automatic involuntary obligations to one's solidarity peers (and according to Scholz, definitionally, such solidarities would likely not qualify as political solidarities). While many solidarity groups may indeed have an “exit capacity,” whether individuals feel they can safely and successfully rescind their group membership is a different issue.¹⁶³ It seems plausible that a group like the KKK, from which hate and violence is routinely enacted toward those outside the group, is predisposed to emotional and/or physical coercion of its own group members to stay them.

¹⁶² Ibid., 143.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 142.

In addition to immoral groups manipulating their membership, subjects are also living alongside and within social, economic, and political systems that make resistance to certain institutions, groups, practices and ethics seem futile, or more specifically, fatal. When faced with adversity, subjects may participate more ardently under neoliberal capitalism's rubric to reap the rewards offered by its economic policies and practices, as opposed to interrogating their desires and/or looking for new ways of realizing them. Resultantly, subjects can become ensnared in attachments that Berlant has theorized as cruelly optimistic. Subjects remain steadfast in their orientation towards their objects of desire, which really are "cluster[s] of promises [they] want someone or something to make to [them] and make possible for [them],"¹⁶⁴ even though they come to realize the "compromised conditions of possibility" of such attachments.¹⁶⁵ Berlant explains:

What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives, might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being; because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.¹⁶⁶

Sometimes subjects remain in solidarity groups or upkeep particular associations because of the coerced or cruel nature of their attachments. And the stakes in such circumstances can be material, as well as affective. Subjects might feel that they would not be able to bear the dissolution of their abusive relationship even though they recognize the abuse the relationship inflicts upon them. Subjects may feel that they could not bear a breakup because their attachment to their partner is as financial as it is emotional.

¹⁶⁴ Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 93.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

In the case of neoliberal economics and politics, cruel attachments (“form”) can conjoin with harmful objects (“content”) to make the project of living “the good life” utterly impossible.¹⁶⁷ As Butler purports, neoliberalism discursively appropriates notions like freedom and responsibility.¹⁶⁸ “Responsibility” can function in a variety of ways to promote different solidarities, albeit civic and social solidarities. Familial responsibilities, such as the duty some may heed to care for ill-stricken loved ones, or civic responsibilities, such as the duty some may heed to come to the aid of one’s fellow citizens who may be under attack through war or legislation, can be powerful affective motivators. Senses of responsibility can fuel both solidarity obligations, but in situations of political solidarity, being pulled by the tide of an obligation is not enough, at least according to Scholz’s taxonomy of solidarities. Neoliberalism politically distorts the character of responsibility via an eclipse of communal with individual properties – the shift from an ethics of sympathy to self-sufficiency – and plunges those it is claimed to reward into precarity. As Butler argues:

For if, according to those who value the decimation of social services, we are each responsible only for ourselves, and certainly not for others, and if responsibility is first and foremost a responsibility to become economically self-sufficient under conditions that undermine all prospects of self-sufficiency, then we are confronted by a contradiction that can easily drive one mad. We are morally pushed to become precisely the kind of subjects who are structurally foreclosed from realizing that norm. Neoliberal rationality demands self-sufficiency as a moral ideal at the same time that neoliberal forms of power work to destroy that very possibility at an economic level, establishing every member of the population as potentially or actually precarious, even using the ever-present threat of precarity to justify its heightened regulation of public space and its deregulation of market expansion.¹⁶⁹

Ultimately, neoliberalism and the civic, social, and political policies and practices it promotes, such as the reduction of the welfare state and the enhancement of individualistic work ethics,

¹⁶⁷ Berlant, *Public Feelings Salon*.

¹⁶⁸ Butler, *Notes Toward*, 14-16.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

undermine the concept of solidarity by working toward its obsolescence, while counterintuitively, and rather sadistically, priming its actors as those with the most to gain from interdependency. Solidarity that is enacted on behalf of an obligation within systems of neoliberal capitalism may help some subjects stay afloat within these systems but will do little to dismantle the debilitating status quo. Therefore, a shared commitment to something beyond obligations of familial responsibilities and civic duties is necessary for the promotion of truly productive political solidarities.

Neoliberalism is animated by a culture that worships and rewards (or at least promises to) the lone-ranger (aka: sovereign) efforts of individuals, from heroes to CEOs. And so, considering the nature of such an influential and all-encompassing economic, political, and social system, it seems paradoxical that solidarity can describe the trapped togetherness that oppressive systems and coercive groups facilitate, while also describing the efforts of moral groups and individuals seeking social justice. Scholz recognized that a more nuanced classification of solidarity was necessary nearly a decade ago, and her book *Political Solidarity* helped to fill this conceptual gap. In it she realized the need for a theory of solidarity that did not shy away from moral and political imperatives, but that pushed the concept passed the philosophy of “objective” group cohesion and dynamics. While sociologists and political scientists have worked with social and civic solidarity, Scholz noticed philosophers’ avoidance of any “sustained theoretical defenses of political solidarity,” its moral imperatives in particular.¹⁷⁰ And so, throughout her book, she uses examples from various sociopolitical movements to support her arguments. Her aim was “not to defend these movements as justifiable forms of solidarity or even to explore the solidaristic

¹⁷⁰ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 11.

potentialities of social injustice, but rather to defend and in some sense rescue solidarity as a moral and political concept.”¹⁷¹

By “bad solidarities” I do not only mean solidarities animated by immoral subjects (who would judge what is immoral anyways?). Rather, I am more interested in the bad solidarities that do not work, or worse, moral-intending solidarities whose functioning further contributes to oppressive power dynamics. Like many progressive tools, solidarity has received its fair share of criticism from within, from others interested in working toward transformative justice. One such critique parallels the binary thinking that I explored in chapter one in relation to anti-intellectualism. This critique is resultant of an unintentional conflation of critiques of bad activism with critiques of solidarity feelings as not enough, or not good enough. Consequently, desires for solidarity get kyboshed – desires often within one’s own solidarity group. In a world where “doing something” about injustice is on the rise as a promoted ethic of dutiful democratic citizenship, feelings of solidarity are increasingly criticized as shallow and antithetical to acts of solidarity. “Acts” of solidarity, not solidarity “feelings,” are what are often cited as the productive forces responsible for inciting transformative justice. Although queer, feminist and psychoanalytic thinkers are answering to this critique of solidarity feelings as not enough, or not good enough, via a promotion of the political productivity of affects, feelings, emotions, and moods – particularly negative ones – on the ground the disempowerment of solidarity feelings is still potent. Anti-intellectualism’s symptomatic promotion of “doing” at the expense of “thinking” is a similar brand of undue dichotomizing. One of *Solidarity Wishes*’ aims is to construct a theory of political solidarity that transgresses such binaries and values subjects’ desires.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 12.

Alliance, Solidarity, and Ethical Responsibility

Butler has expressed losing faith in solidarity.

My sense is that we have too often presumed that we must identify with those with whom we ally. But if we insist on identification in this way, we tend to reproduce communitarian politics, allying only with those who are already similar to us, and refusing to confront those whose views and whose lives may well seem quite different.¹⁷²

This critique is not ground-breaking. Butler herself, a mere three decades ago through the publishing of *Gender Trouble*, joined the ranks of critical race and socialist feminists who were responding to the havoc that concepts like the “universal woman” were reeking through its quelling of difference via “progressive” political maneuvers. Gay and lesbian politics have been critiqued for producing similarly exclusionary effects, as evident within the myriad critiques of formal equality, particularly of gay marriage as the penultimate gay rights issue.¹⁷³ In the spirit of such critiques, Butler supports the concept of alliance, which she maintains must be an “expanding coalition” in which “we presume we are not the same” as our co-members. “This is as important” – she suggests – “for producing a multi-racial and cross-generational alliance as it is for bringing in people who have been de-politicized for a long time or whose politics have in many ways differed from one’s own.”¹⁷⁴ Here, Butler is usefully addressing a major pitfall of identity politics, the forced forging of unity out of categorical sameness. Butler suggests that alliances can avoid this pitfall by focusing beyond identity as the common denominator of togetherness and taking into consideration the varying degree of political stakes for different

¹⁷² Judith Butler in interview by Jean-Philippe Cazier, “Acting in Concert: a conversation with Judith Butler,” *Verso* (March 6, 2017): Accessed December 20, 2017, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3121-acting-in-concert-a-conversation-with-judith-butler>.

¹⁷³ While the critiques of gay marriage are extensive within sexuality studies literature, *Against Equality*’s edited collection effectively highlights the diversity of arguments in circulation. See Ryan Conrad, ed., *Against Equality: Queer Revolution, Not Mere Inclusion* (Edinburgh, Oakland, Baltimore: AK Press, 2014).

¹⁷⁴ Butler, “Acting in Concert.”

subjects. The belief is that alliance might be better suited than political solidarity to address these varying political stakes.

Alliance, a term that describes our attachments to those who may be radically different than us, is a useful and important concept. Though Butler offers up her theorizing around alliance as a substitute for solidarity, I am not convinced that we need to evacuate solidarity, particularly political solidarity, just yet. *Solidarity Wishes*, in a nutshell, is about confronting and understanding subjects' desires for solidarity in order to reinvigorate solidarity as an indispensable political concept. Butler's recommendation of alliance is wrapped up in important critiques of bad solidarities that I do not wish to dispute. Political solidarity, however, as theorized by Scholz, has many parallels to Butler's conceptualization of alliance. First and foremost, political solidarity is inseparable from and therefore always tailored to an instance of injustice. It is this dedication to a cause that ties everyone together and motivates action within situations of political solidarity, as opposed to social familiarities and group commonalities that motivate solidarity action within manifestations of social and civic solidarity. Like an alliance, this mutual commitment to a cause unites individuals in political solidarity across differences and despite the diversity of motivations, methods, and short-term goals. As Berlant sagely puts it, "you don't have to like the people you have solidarity with; you just get to be on the same team, and have the project of making the world better."¹⁷⁵ Like alliance, political solidarity can function pragmatically, preventing difference from ruining the party or the protest, and capitalizing on it instead to reach a common goal or address a shared issue.

As I explained in the introduction, my interest in solidarity wishes surely reflects within it my own personal desire to find a dependable theory and tool for the promotion of transformative

¹⁷⁵ Bea Malsky, "Pleasure Won: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant," *The Point*, Issue 13, February 21, 2017, <https://thepointmag.com/politics/pleasure-won-conversation-lauren-berlant/>.

justice. It is my hope that political solidarity is effectively applicable to the here and now through both its motivation-generating and obligation-generating components. Although Taylor fails to recognize Scholz's version of political solidarity as doing so, the common cause or substantive goal of political solidarity is not approached without an effort to support those who struggle within solidarity relations in the meantime. This meantime space is what Scholz refers to as "formative goals."¹⁷⁶ In instances of political solidarity, this meantime space is filled with obligations that are resultantly generated between those who mutually commit to a cause.

Social solidarity emphasizes the bond between members as ontologically prior to moral obligations but political solidarity underscores the importance of a moral commitment to a goal as the creation of and driving force for any bonds that form between participants.¹⁷⁷

Therefore, Scholz's theory of political solidarity helps to prove Taylor's primary point about the moral mechanisms of solidarity; that is, solidarities can exist as both obligation generating and commitment generating entities, albeit with different emphases of significance across different forms of solidarity.

Eve Sedgwick coined the concept "nonce taxonomy" in *Epistemology of the Closet* to describe how subjects transgress the restrictions of the limited categories by which they are ordered and signified socially. "A tiny number of inconceivably coarse axes of categorization have been painstakingly inscribed in current critical and political thought: gender, race, class, nationality, sexual orientation are pretty much the available distinctions," which of course, as Sedgwick implies, are inadequate for subjects who want to develop a strong cognition of who they are in relation to their world.

[E]verybody who survives at all has reasonably rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy for mapping out the possibilities, dangers, and stimulations of their human

¹⁷⁶ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 190.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

social landscape. It is probably people with the experience of oppression or subordination who have most need to know it.

Sedgwick, here, sounds ahead of her time as her unpacking of nonce taxonomy prescribes a way around overly reductionist identity politics that run the risk of flattening subjects, particularly oppressed ones, into “coarse” social categories. Rather, “difference” needs to lead to tools and practices that help move solidarity groups and alliances forward. Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* was published in 1990, and this critique of identity politics still circulates today in 2022. Nonce taxonomy, “the making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world,” is what politicized subjects rely on when they reach a point of struggle at which their sociopolitical movement, agenda, or philosophy fails to consider their meantime needs that arise en route to a common goal or commitment.¹⁷⁸

As a concept related to nonce taxonomy, intersectionality came to fruition ala Black feminisms and Kimberle Crenshaw’s theorizing over thirty years ago to bring more nuance to oppressed subjectivity from within a legal theory framework.¹⁷⁹ Intersectionality has been heavily relied upon over the past three decades to theorize how to combat the essentialist and hegemonic overwriting of difference within feminist and other progressive movements. Intersectionality and nonce taxonomy alike summon creativity where subjectivity is concerned, and this dissertation suggests that the best method for politicized subjects to stay open to such creativity is to stay attuned to the desires of one’s solidarity peers. Desire is a social movement

¹⁷⁸ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 22-23.

¹⁷⁹ Crenshaw first introduced the concept of intersectionality here: Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* Vol. 1989, Is. 1, Article 8, <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>.

analytic that can help to prevent subjects' handling of difference from becoming static, overly simplistic, and prescriptive.

Political solidarity's emphasis on the mutual commitment to a cause (which, again, does not foreclose peer obligations in the meantime) as its foremost signifier is what keeps political solidarity in line with Butler's theorizing of alliance, for a commitment to a cause does not require any prerequisite commonalities amongst its participants. One difference, however, between Butler's conceptualization of "alliance" and Scholz' conceptualization of "political solidarity" is that the cause – the substantive goal – is more characteristically static for Butler, while context-specific for Scholz. For Butler, a "shared condition of precarity situates our political lives, even as precarity is differentially distributed."¹⁸⁰ Under the dominating political and economic systems that order subjects' lives, "no one escapes the precarious dimension of social life..." and so overcoming and/or eliminating precarity can be seen as the consistent substantive goal that grounds all subjects' alliances. Much of Butler's scholarship in her extraordinary corpus to date defends precarity as "the joint of our nonfoundation" – the vulnerability that threads all subjects together by the "fragile and necessary dimensions of [their] interdependency."¹⁸¹

Butler claims that a generalized precarity grips subjects through the hold that they have on each other's lives, as a collection of "bodily beings who depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance and who, therefore, are at risk of statelessness, homelessness, and destitution under unjust and unequal political conditions."¹⁸² As Hannah Arendt suggested through her concept of "forced cohabitation," subjects do not choose who they cohabit this earth with and so

¹⁸⁰ Butler, *Notes Toward*, 96.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 118.

it is only logical for genocide to be deemed unethical. Expanding upon Arendt's theorizing, Butler illuminates how precarity grips subjects by the specificity of their here and now as well: through the "organization of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions." As a socially interdependent species, precarity renders subjects inherently vulnerable, while the logics of neoliberal capitalist systems renders subjects politically vulnerable. Butler extrapolates:

Whether explicitly stated or not, every political effort to manage populations involves a tactical distribution of precarity, more often than not articulated through an unequal distribution of precarity, one that depends on dominant norms regarding whose life is grievable and worth protecting and whose life is ungrievable, or marginally or episodically grievable, and so, in that sense, already lost in part or in whole, and thus less worthy of protection and sustenance.¹⁸³

And so, it follows that in addition to abstaining from violence like murder and genocide, a subject's ethical responsibility must include a "commitment not only to the other's corporeal persistence but to all those environmental conditions that make life livable."¹⁸⁴ Global or human solidarities are often critiqued for their universalisations. Yet, all humans do share common ground, quite literally. What's more universal to humanity, to all species, than planet earth? Earthlings are not a star-touring group at present, despite the popularity of the *Star Trek* enterprise, and so earth is the only ground on which all subjects walk together. Though I do not have the space to defend this point further in this dissertation, a commitment to maintaining such common ground, an environmentalism of sorts, jives well with Butler's accounts of subjectivity and ethics. If I had to promote such a thing as global solidarity, I would probably nominate the environment for the universal cause.

¹⁸³ Butler, *Notes Toward*, 119.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

Some practical difficulties arise within considerations of ethics that are grounded in precarity. How can subjects mobilize and build solidarity in response to precarity? How might subjects signify precarity in order to build movements in response to it when the concept is wrapped up in the human condition in such complicated ways? A protest slogan like “dump Trump!”, for instance, does something that “dump precarity!” cannot. The problem, here, is beyond any articulation of clear and tangible goals for progressive sociopolitical movements, it is also about the nature of difficult knowledges. The philosophy of precarity says existentially extraordinary things about the human condition, and such philosophical revelations are not accessible to all, particularly in chaotic times of crisis. Furthermore, how do we ensure that a subject’s political praxis accounts for the theoretical distinction between generalized precarity, the precarity embedded in our human condition – as illuminated by Arendt’s concept of forced cohabitation and Butler’s translation of such philosophical accounts – and its more specific forms, as in the dominating and restrictive systems that order a subject’s uniquely lived existence?

How subjects ensure that the philosophy of precarity does not overwrite difference and distinctly lived oppressions is a fundamental challenge for *this* subject in the writing of this dissertation. For example, in instances of police brutality, Black people are obviously not on precarity-par with the offending (often white) police officers. Due to systemically ingrained inequalities that stem from differences such as class, race, sex, sexuality, ability, gender, and citizenship, some subjects are certainly more precarious than others. And so, what would a political movement look like that successfully reflects such nuances within its praxis? How do subjects build movements that recognize the precarious positions of all human beings while

simultaneously tending to those in most immediate need? How can subjects practice nonsovereign relationality while also dealing with injustice in the meantime?

Political solidarity is a useful sociopolitical concept because it can enable subjects to build alliances with little more than a shared cause or opposition to injustice, as it does not mandate any particular social commonalities or ways of relating among its participants. Using it, subjects can mobilize immediately to work toward better futures in response to a major problem, while tending to the suffering of others in the meantime, what Paul Farmer terms “pragmatic solidarity.”¹⁸⁵ Butler’s theorizing around alliance, drawing from moral philosophy, contains insightful ethical justifications for interdependency, as illuminated by both the general and specific precarious conditions of contemporary human existence. Considering such important scholarship, I defend political solidarity as a productive tool, one with the potential to be efficiently translated from the conceptual to the practical. One glaring problem is that arriving at a “shared cause” is not a simple task. I can admit that I am not entirely certain that totally shared causes even exist for subjects, and this ambivalence haunts *Solidarity Wishes*.

I used the squiggles and the safety pins as my examples in chapter’s analysis because they exist in the realm of the everyday. Scholz maintains that political solidarity is not solely of the realm of the experienced activist but is accessible to anyone through “mundane actions.”¹⁸⁶ The squiggles and the safety pins are small but significant acts, ones realistically at most individuals’ disposal. The 92-year-old Portuguese woman at the end of my street is probably not going to start a movement by putting up a gay pride flag in her window, but such an act just

¹⁸⁵ Here, “pragmatic solidarity” is a good thing, the name of the micro processes through which subjects can take care of each other in the context of solidarity initiatives and movements. “Pragmatic sovereignty,” however, in the context of this project is not generally a good thing, and it is probably the concept I am most critical of in this dissertation: the mentality or ethics that leads subjects to the disillusionment that they are sovereign. See Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 220.

¹⁸⁶ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 53.

might be radical. The simple action of hanging a flag could prove difficult in the context of her traditionally Catholic family and conservative husband and neighbors. In this seemingly mundane act of political solidarity, this woman makes herself vulnerable through her individual commitment to a cause of sociopolitical justice that is outside herself.

Who Do We Think We Are?

Although the squiggles and the safety pin are small gestures, I believe in their significance as acts of political solidarity. Yet, the intentions of such gestures are heavily debated amongst leftists presently in pursuit of transformative justice. For example, safety pin solidarity has been regarded as passive, complacent, inadequate, and has been identified as a feel good tool for white people that runs the risk of alleviating them from calls to further and greater action.¹⁸⁷ In this light, safety pin solidarity operates as what Scholz identifies as parasitical solidarity, which she claims is not solidarity at all, but a solidarity imposter that functions as “a rhetorical tool rather than a moral relation.”¹⁸⁸ In today’s current convergence of social media, identity politics, and neoliberal capitalism, one need not look far to find parasitical forms of solidarity, and for some the safety pin functions as such. As one unabashed tweet states: “We don’t need you to wear a #safetypin. We need you to do the work and educate yourself and your loved ones on white supremacy.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Derek Hawkins, “Safety pins: Solidarity symbol or emblem of ‘white guilt’?” *The Washington Post*, November 15, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/11/15/safety-pins-solidarity-symbol-or-emblem-of-white-guilt/>; Rasha Ali, “Safety Pin Wearers Receive Backlash From Social Media,” *The Wrap*, November 14, 2016, <https://www.thewrap.com/safety-pin-wearers-are-receiving-social-media-backlash/>.

¹⁸⁸ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 5.

¹⁸⁹ Ali, “Safety Pin Wearers.”

In a public online defense of the safety pin as a useful solidarity tool, which doubled as an attempt to listen to the concerns raised over it, Shelley Park – a professor of philosophy at the University of Central Florida – wrote:

To my Facebook friends of color: I hear you are unhappy and angry about safety-pin wearing. As you can see by my photo, I have been employing the symbol. I firmly agree that sporting a safety pin does NOT substitute for real political action. And yet I do believe that symbols and significations matter. This symbol seems a simple way for me--as a white person--to a) refuse to pass as someone content with the new-and-even-worse-than-normal status quo; and b) signal my solidarity with many vulnerable populations. I want a way to signify to the many strangers I encounter briefly during the day--walking down the street, across campus, standing in the grocery store checkout, at the gas station, etc. where I stand AND that if something racist, sexist, ableist, heterosexist or otherwise harmful occurs requiring my intervention I will intervene. With this said, I invite your responses and wish to better understand your concerns in order to learn from them. Thank you, in advance, for taking the time to engage. I love you and wish to stand with you in the ways that you need and want.¹⁹⁰

I appreciate Park's justification of her use of the safety pin because it responded to many important critiques without undermining them. Her words displayed her desire to further the conversation around activism and allyship initiated by #safetypin. Notwithstanding its criticisms, the safety pin is an individual's "commitment to conscience," and as such can operate as a productive practice of political solidarity.¹⁹¹ Regardless of the potential for subjects to enact performative allyship or virtue signaling, which are no doubt hollow, annoying, and arrogant practices, I concur with Park that "symbols and significations matter," and the safety pin has the potential to be not only a positive symbol of political solidarity, but a productive practice to manifest it.

With regards to the squiggles, my relationship with my living space changed dramatically after they appeared that day. My housemates were more interested in my relationship with my

¹⁹⁰ Shelley Park, *Facebook*, November 14, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/shelley.park.77/posts/10154857750304789>.

¹⁹¹ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 196.

partner, which deepened friendships all around. The sticker also sparked conversations about local acts of homophobia and resistance. My landlord, for instance, described to me how the neighborhood had had a smattering of racist and homophobic slurs tagged on a bunch of houses – ours included – just a few years before. She explained how these squiggles, initially, were part of a community resistance plan that was developed at a neighborhood meeting that she had attended. Furthermore, the rainbow sticker incited my straight housemates to reflect on their queer relatives and friends and even share stories of their own experimental sexuality or queerness. And finally, I liked coming home to a reminder of who I am, and a symbol of the commitment by those in proximity of me to make and protect space for the parts of me that are less celebrated and less enabled outside of home.

I am writing *Solidarity Wishes* in the context of a world that is engaged in – what Butler calls – a “war on the idea of interdependency.”¹⁹² One does not need a powerful imagination to identify some of the social, political, cultural, and economic forces that are contributing to the erosion of useful, conscious, and nonsovereign practices of togetherness today. Such forces are omnipresent and seemingly omnipotent: neoliberal capitalism, monogamy, hegemonic masculinity and femininity, heteronormativity, and white supremacy to name a few. Subjects are organized by value systems and institutions that squander the fruits of collectivity. Subjects, often consciously, continue to submit to such systems and institutions in some tragically misguided attempt to bolster their sovereign potential to win. And when they try to break free, they learn they cannot stop empowering their collaboration with these systems and institutions because their very lives and livelihoods are tethered to and dependent upon such investments. To truly dig in one’s heels and “throw sand in the gears of everything” would be to immediately risk

¹⁹² Butler, *Notes Toward*, 67.

one's thriving, and maybe even one's surviving.¹⁹³ Ethically speaking, how can subjects expect others to take such a risk if they cannot do so themselves? Risk, sometimes perceived, sometimes real, significantly contributes to the powerful pervasiveness of sovereign thinking within subjects' existences.

Embracing interdependency and adopting an ethics of nonsovereignty are two agendas that are beyond any individual effort. What's needed is a "collective political becoming," what Jose Esteban Munoz calls for in his to conclusion to *Cruising Utopia*, a project that I explore in greater depth in the next chapter.

Utopia in this book has been about an insistence on something else, something better, something dawning. I offer this book as a resource for the political imagination. This text is meant to serve as something of a flight plan for a collective political becoming. These pages have described aesthetic and political practices that need to be seen as necessary modes of stepping out of this place and time to something fuller, vaster, more sensual, and brighter. From shared critical dissatisfaction we arrive at collective potentiality.¹⁹⁴

Practices of political solidarity can reflect such agendas. Political solidarity is structured around a unified moral commitment. My belief in the concept is not intended to completely invalidate obligations as productive tools toward transformative justice, but rather to say something about the valuable work of mutual intentionality. The following chapters will delve deeper into desires for sociopolitical change as well as explore a variety of solidarity commitments. Of course, subjects' commitments and wishes do not always accurately reflect their desires. There are problems like the incompleteness of language, theorized and embodied contradictions, the slipperiness of affects, and the repressed state of the unconscious, which can prevent subjective attachments from reflecting what subjects really want. In this fevered moment of technological

¹⁹³ Frances Fox Piven, "Throw Sand in the Gears of Everything," *The Nation*, January 18, 2017. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/throw-sand-in-the-gears-of-everything/>.

¹⁹⁴ Munoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 189.

automation, digital high-speed panicked neoliberal capitalism, and seemingly widespread global political unrest (maybe this always seems to be the case?), subjects can get swept up in a world.

An emphasis on the intentionality of desire, as well as recognition of the space between wishes and obtaining objects of desire (a space I explore in detail in chapter four), can help strengthen subjects' solidarity efforts by enriching their understanding of their own relationship to nonsovereign ethics. Social justice requires more than the automaticity of obligations. Yet, in this moment of upheaval caused by Covid-19 and the looming catastrophic threats of climate change, many a subjects' trust in their political systems is frayed. Anti-establishment politics have been popularized as anti-politics altogether. Due to this "existing, widespread rejection of politics and politicians," Marta Harnecker calls for a "new political form that does not manipulate the social movements but rather puts itself at their service." For Harnecker, a political scientist and socialist thinker, a new politics is needed to help in the construction of a "new hegemony."¹⁹⁵ Although, "hegemony," smells of sovereignty. This exemplifies the great difficulty within resisting a sovereign mentality, for what subjects propose in its place is still likely going to be a product of their thinking under an ethics of sovereignty.

For a queer theoretical scholar like Lee Edelman, the problem of politics lies within this seemingly mandatory hegemony from which something is always excluded – a hegemony philosopher Slavoj Žižek calls the "master signifier" in the context of a "political intervention."¹⁹⁶ For Edelman, queerness is always "the locus of this exclusion," the negation of the social, and consequently, the political.¹⁹⁷ Thus, his breed of queer antisociality is not

¹⁹⁵ Marta Harnecker, *A World To Build: New Paths toward Twenty-First Century Socialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015), 11.

¹⁹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 374.

¹⁹⁷ Lee Edelman, "Interview with Prof Lee Edelman on State of Queer Theory today / No Future project, 2015 Summer School for Sexualities, Culture and Politics, September 21, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjTDLyKP2p0>.

symptomatic of political deficiencies within queerness, but rather it is resultant of queerness' inherent tendencies to illuminate difference: queerness as eye rolls, gut feelings, and question marks. In the following chapter I turn to queer antirelationality, a concept that has dominated the field of queer studies since its inception. I argue that "antisocial" is an inaccurate descriptor of the political thesis promoted by the likes of queer thinkers like Edelman and translated from the work of theorists like Leo Bersani. Nonetheless, the queer antisocial thesis joins a chorus of cultural reverberations – my uncle's advice included – that displays a distrust in politics, and often consequently, an aversion to cooperation and dependency. Political solidarity, however, is something people across the great variety of sociopolitical justice movements can work towards, raucous queers included.

As Butler observes, all subjects are "constituted in a sociality that exceeds [them]."¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, Alexis Shotwell adds, "[w]e are inescapably entwined and entangled with others, even when we cannot track or directly perceive this entanglement."¹⁹⁹ Human subjects are dependent upon a variety of infrastructures, such as social and political institutions, to persist. In the chapters to come I delve deeper into cooperative impulses, past the pragmatism of political solidarity practices and into the murkiness of psychical and affective desires for help and care. Berlant claims that optimism and trauma both "light up a part of [our] brain that makes [us] nonsovereign."²⁰⁰ In this chapter I took up political solidarity rather optimistically, while in the next chapter I turn to modes of negation and negativity, looking to queerness and its complicated relationship to trauma to facilitate the discussion. With Berlant, I am interested in the ways in which subjects both desire and reject nonsovereignty – the ways in which subjects are

¹⁹⁸ Butler, *Notes Toward*, 97.

¹⁹⁹ Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

²⁰⁰ Berlant, *Public Feelings Salon*.

inconvenienced by other subjects but also desire to be inconvenienced by other subjects.

Subjects' abilities to collaborate and listen are often blocked by the impasses their individual desires for sovereignty create. Thus, perhaps some subjects' politicization is deemed especially provocative because it interrupts others' fantasies of sovereignty. My uncle's father had escaped over the German border via a bicycle he hid in the bushes outside his university the day of his graduation, so the story goes, the day that Nazis were waiting outside the school doors to round up Jews who would soon emerge with fresh diplomas in hand. My uncle did not criticize any specific politic of mine that day he gifted me the unsolicited advice with which I opened this chapter. Rather, it felt like he was critiquing my general indignance. How is it that the son of a holocaust escapee could judge my politicization? Perhaps that is not a fair question. Regardless, my uncle left me wondering: who do subjects think they are that they can make it on their own?

---CHAPTER THREE---

OPTING OUT: RECONCILING POLITICAL SOLIDARITY WITH QUEER ANTIRELATIONALITY

Sticky Concepts

I am not an activist in the formal sense of the term, at least not right now, yet I am no less turned on by theories that can be embodied and practiced. While the theory vs. praxis dichotomy is, in some sense, a socially constructed barrier that many can and do overcome, it is difficult to build pragmatic vehicles for certain poststructural academic theories due to their high degree of abstraction. Queer theory is notorious for this style of theoretical construction. In *Queer Optimism* Michael D. Snediker responds to “this particular problematic of figuration – as syncope between theoretical and practical domains, literary and lived investments,” in his novel readings of the state of the field of queer theory.

One doesn’t really shatter when one is fucked, despite Bersani’s accounts of it as such; millions of persons who imagine their subjectivity as fairly cohesive and nonfictive do not necessarily feel melancholy, even if Butler claims melancholy as the cost of that cohesiveness. If these models of shattering and gender-melancholy seem less than practicable (or survivable) in lived experience, they’ve become ubiquitous in the no less lived (if differently lived) biosphere of the academy. The alchemy of such figurations demarcates an ever-fluctuating space between (theoretical) scrutiny and (ontological) practice. How to get from one domain to another, without the complex network of figurativity? How might one articulate what happens within the limbo of the figurative? To answer such questions would be tantamount to discerning how theory eventuates its own practical application.²⁰¹

How academic theory “eventuates its own practical application” is a puzzle I repeatedly return to in this dissertation, and it is also a wish – perhaps *the* wish – that frames the project. My seemingly far-fetched object of desire is that my doctoral work will result in generative and

²⁰¹ Michael D. Snediker, *Cruel Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 12-13.

meaningful effects for those in need of sociopolitical justice at the hands of those interested in producing transformative sociopolitical phenomena like solidarity. This hoped for object of a productive dissertation is not completely dead to me, but I suspect it is very much stuck in a wish because of how much I doubt my chances of ever obtaining it. In chapter four I distinguish between modes of desire like wishing and wanting and return to this foundational wish of mine through a framework of desire, while in this chapter I consider the content of this wish through a queer countercultural lens.

Queer theory, like many poststructuralist theories, has sharp claws. With an inherent criticality that's traceable to its inception, queer theory is effective at helping its subjects unlearn knowledges, practices, and values, particularly their orientations to the systems and institutions by which they are organized and sustained. Queer theory, therefore, is especially well-versed in the art of negation, as queer theorists and queer activists are adept at handling and harnessing negativity. The deconstruction, critiques, and sometimes punishing takedowns of culture, ideas, and other people (not just patriarchs, homophobes, and racists, but other queers) that queer theory facilitates for scholars can contribute to atmospheres of negativity, including nihilism, in addition to, no doubt, a great deal of productivity. Negativity is not just a probable effect, or affect, of negation, but can also manifest as a generative tool towards transformative justice. Though Snediker's project operates as an intervention that employs a literary search party for queer theory's supposed missing queer optimism, negativity has been one of queer theory's most valuable and generative contributions to poststructuralist thought thus far, and that, at the very least, feels optimistic, whether Snediker cares to admit it or not.

My attachment to political solidarity does not deny its nuanced critiques that abound in academic and activist discourse. I believe in these critiques and have much to add to them. Still, I

am not ready to abandon solidarity's potential. Solidarity is a lot like queerness in that both concepts are huge, elastic, exigent, boundless, subjective, sometimes oversimplified, and sometimes too ethereal seeming to embody or practice. Specifically, solidarity has many parallels to Jose Esteban Munoz's conceptualization of queerness on the horizon as a potential state that is never here, a way of being or surviving that can never be achieved, and a practice that subjects are perpetually striving toward.²⁰² And at the very least, both solidarity and queerness are sticky. According to Sara Ahmed this sort of stickiness occurs when objects are "saturated with affects as sites of personal and social tension."²⁰³ As previously explored with regards to sovereignty, concepts can operate as aspirational objects. Solidarity is an object I am stuck to because of my desire to be stuck to this world.

While chapter two contemplated the possibilities for staying attached to the political despite the oft seeming hopelessness of contemporary politics, this chapter considers a different and seemingly counterintuitive path towards belonging: "opting out."²⁰⁴ To do so I look to queer antirelationality and its tributary theory, the queer antisocial thesis. I utilize Leo Bersani's conceptualization of queer antirelationality, which has its roots in psychoanalytic thinking around concepts such as jouissance and self-shattering and theories to disruption to the Social Symbolic Order (a Lacanian term that I will unpack later in the chapter). It is worth noting here that the queer antisocial thesis was not spawned in direct response to Bersani's theorizing of queer antirelationality. In fact, the antisocial thesis did not manifest until Lee Edelman wrote his infamous and polemical take on antirelationality, *No Future*, in 2004.²⁰⁵

²⁰² Munoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

²⁰³ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 11.

²⁰⁴ Mari Rutí, *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory's Defiant Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

²⁰⁵ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

While the queerness of today's queer theory, today's queer activisms, and today's queers, is consistently traced to the early 1990s, it is an illusion of convenience that whole movements and their circulated ideas can be pinpointed to a clean origin – to a single point in time and space. Marc Stein describes this amorphousness of sociopolitical movements well in his introduction to *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*. Using the Gay and Lesbian movement as his research subject, Stein astutely shows how movements are complicated phenomena constructed from transient and capacious ideas, identities, and terminology.²⁰⁶ Despite some historians' best efforts to create clean categorizations, people, agendas, and affects live on and die off with no regards for the disciplining of timelines. It follows then that antirelationality – a certain combativeness and penchant for saying “NO” – is likely inherent throughout the histories of a variety of social and cultural pariahs and is not exclusive to sexual minorities. Nevertheless, queerness is often confrontational. Queers can be sassy. I explore the volatility of queer negativity and magnify the fine lines between negativity and nihilism, complacency, and the destruction of important queer social bonds. I examine what queer theory has to say about the possibility of taking down systems and relationships while also building better ones back up. Ultimately, this chapter taps queer negativity as a productive sociopolitical theory, contemplating how this abundant resource is compatible with nonsovereign relationality and how it can be harnessed as a means toward political solidarity.

Queer Fangs

Where does queerness get its bite? Is there a certain combativeness or negativity inherent in queer sexualities and queer politics? And, what about queer studies? Is it a bitchy field or a field

²⁰⁶ Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012): 1-12.

full of bitches? Surely, there is much to be historicized about queerness as both a theory and an identity. The story of queerness has varied geographical and temporal twists. Here, I want to meditate on the conceptualization of queer that hatched from both the streets and the texts in the early 1990s in Canada and the United States, a project of queer reappropriation and queer survival. In 1995 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner wrote an article in *Publications of the Modern Language Association (PMLA)* in which they were “invited to pin the queer theory tail on the donkey.” This work is a fundamental piece of the queer theory canon not because it elucidates what queer theory is but because it reflects an aversion to any stale categorization and institutionalization of the field: “Why do people feel the need to introduce, anatomize, and theorize something that can barely be said yet to exist?”²⁰⁷ At the time the article was written the term “queer theory” was not even five years old. The theoretical field is now over twenty-five years old, and this sentiment of disciplinary ambivalence has lingered throughout queer discourse to the present.²⁰⁸ Though Berlant and Warner claim that “queer theory is not the theory

²⁰⁷ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?”, *PMLA* 110 (1995), 343.

²⁰⁸ There have many examples of the contestations over “queer” as the main referent of queer theory since 1990, when Teresa de Lauretis and her colleagues organized a “Queer Theory” conference at UCSC, widely cited as the origins of the queer theory of today, and so while the following list is far from exhaustive, it contains some key critiques over the years. First, de Lauretis herself, after popularizing “queer” in an article then denounced the term a mere three years later (in a different article of the same journal!) as “a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry.” See Teresa de Lauretis, “Habit Changes,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6 (2–3) (1994), 296–313. For de Lauretis’ former article see Teresa de Lauretis, “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3(2) (1991), iii–xviii. In 1995 Henry Abelove wrote an article in which he licked his wounds over his students’ identity evacuation from “lesbian” and “gay” to “queer.” See Henry Abelove, “The Queer of Lesbian/Gay History,” *Radical History Review* 62 (1995), 44–57. Abelove wrote this piece in the same year that Berlant and Warner described the amorphousness of queer theory in their PMLA article “What Does Queer Theory Us about X?”, a characterization that may have contributed to Abelove’s suspicion of the burgeoning term. While many scholars have defended queer theory’s elasticity and durability over the last two to three decades, there has also been a great deal of wondering whether queer theory has run its course as an effective tool of scholarly interpretation. See Janet Halley and Andrew Parker, eds., *After Sex?: On Writing Since Queer Theory* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011); Michael Warner, “Queer and Then?,” *The Chronicle Review*, January 1, 2012, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/queer-and-then/>; James Penney, *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2014); Tyler Bradway and E.L. McCallum, eds., *After Queer Studies: Literature, Theory, and Sexuality in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). Regardless of these sustained imaginings otherwise, I see queer theory continuing to operate as a dynamic tool for scholars.

of anything in particular, and has no precise bibliographic shape” in what they identify as their “kind of anti-encyclopedia entry,” they nonetheless are clear about the significant role AIDS played in queer theory’s origins.²⁰⁹

AIDS activism forced the issue of translating queerness into the national scene. AIDS made those of us who confronted it realize the deadly stakes of discourse; it made us realize the public and private unvoicability of so much that mattered about anger, mourning and desire; it made us realize that different frames of reference – science, news, religion, ordinary homophobia – compete and that their disjunction is lethal. AIDS also taught us not to assume a social environment of community and of support for legitimate politics. Far from preexisting as sources of activism and critical commentary, communities of support hard to be created by a public labor.²¹⁰

Of course, queers had reasons for their rage, as well as motivation to find and form community prior to AIDS, but the rise of HIV undoubtedly emboldened such feelings.

The “queer” of queer theory itself was rescued from a derogatory past life, and now functions as a categorical haven for a variety of socio-cultural deviants. As Warner recalls,

When Teresa de Lauretis and her colleagues at the University of California at Santa Cruz organized a conference called “Queer Theory” in 1990, it was manifestly provocative. The term ‘queer’ in those days was not yet a cable-TV synonym for gay; it carried a high-voltage charge of insult and stigma. The term caught on because it seemed to catalyze many of the key insights of previous years and connect them to a range of politics and constituencies that were already developing outside academe, in a way that looked unpredictable from the start. At the 1991 Lesbian and Gay Studies conferences at Rutgers University at New Brunswick – the fifth to be held since John Boswell started the meetings at Yale University in 1987 and exponentially larger than its predecessors – the informal talk about ‘queer’ was almost as frisky as the cruising.²¹¹

To be queer thirty years later in Canada and the United States remains an ever-expanding and ever-morphing identity, one that continues to unify same-sex fucking/loving/caring/networking folks, as well as foster coalitions among those whose politics, desires, and bodies operate as critiques of normative culture through their mere existence. There are, however, spirited debates

²⁰⁹ Berlant and Warner, “What Does,” 344.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 345.

²¹¹ Warner, “Queer and Then?”

within the queer political imagination about how best to queerly engage with the present. Broadly speaking, some queers – including scholars, activists, and artists alike – wield accusations of assimilation on their community members, of selling-out to fit-in.²¹² Other queers condemn their peers for cynical, radical, and/or otherwise unrealistic politics.²¹³ Despite these commonly dichotomized two streams of queer critique, scholars from both lines of thoughts share many of the same values, politics, and theoretical frameworks. What is noteworthy is that any critique can lead a community to nihilism and complacency when played out to its nth degree. Critiques of queer assimilation, homonormativity, purity politics, antisocial queerness, and cancel culture in particular reveal how queer communities are not immune to internal discord. Such critiques have, despite their potential to damage intercommunal relations, helped to prevent the romanticizing of queer politics within queer theory and disrupt the congealment of queer linear progress narratives.

When “queer” first began to politically germinate in the early 1990s, rage and irreverence were valued as negative affective forces that enabled queers to disrupt the serenity of the “normal.” The mantra “let yourself be angry” from the queer nation manifesto that was circulated at the New York City pride parade in 1990, for example, was indicative of this loud ideal in early queer activism to liberate negativity: “They’ve taught us that good queers don’t get mad. They’ve taught us so well that we not only hide our anger from them, we hide it from each other. We even hide it in ourselves.”²¹⁴ As “bashing back” was a direct response to oppressive power structures and their creations, anger was a platform for the promotion of queer

²¹² Conrad, ed., *Against Equality*, 2014.

²¹³ See Shotwell, *Against Purity*; Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

²¹⁴ Anon. *Queers Read This / I Hate Straights* (New York: n.p., 1990).

subjectivity.²¹⁵ Preceding the queer activist call to bash back, Michel Foucault's precedential theorizing of reverse discourse provided queers, feminists, anti-racism advocates and postmodern thinkers of all sorts a method to bash back conceptually.²¹⁶ Since this model of productive negation was provided, queer scholars and activists have diligently worked to "depathologize negative affects so that they can be seen as a possible resource for political action rather than its antithesis," as observed by Ann Cvetkovich, which has included the reclaiming of negative identifications (such as fag, dyke, witch, slut, and queer itself) and reappropriating of negativity as productive praxis.²¹⁷ The burgeoning thinking around homonormativity and homonationalism; debates of antisocial vs. relational scholarship; paranoid and reparative critical styles of reading; calls to failure; queer appropriations of psychoanalytic concepts like *jouissance*, the death drive, and subject-shattering; critiques of mainstream "positive" affects/ideals of success, productivity, happiness, optimism, and hope; promotions of the sociopolitical potential of "negative" affects and concepts like depression, ugliness, stupidity, shame; and embittered relations between segments of the broader queer community over "victories" hailed as political wins for some and assimilationist distractions for others have all culminated into what Snediker has cited as a "queer-pessimistic constellation" and helped facilitate a so-called radical turn to negativity.²¹⁸

Given queer history, it is not surprising that queer theory (like many identarian fields) has embraced postmodern poststructuralist methodologies. Deconstructive theorizing is a helpful and cathartic way of unlearning. Queer antirelationality is arguably one such method of unlearning, particularly through negation – saying "No" to the social order. In *No Future* Edelman builds off

²¹⁵ Stan Henry, "Getting Angry, Bashing Back," *Outlook: National Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*, 1991.

²¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

²¹⁷ Ann Cvetkovich, "Public Feelings," *South Atlantic Quarterly; Special Issue: After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory* 106, no. 3 (2007), 460.

²¹⁸ Snediker, *Queer Optimism*, 4.

of Bersani's theorizations of the antirelational that he has rehearsed throughout much of his corpus.²¹⁹ Both Edelman and Bersani draw from Guy Hocquenghem's political conceptions, whose *Homosexual Desire* was first published in 1972 in the company of radical feminist works like Valerie Solanis's *SCUM Manifesto* (first appeared in 1968) and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*.²²⁰ You do not have to look far to find threads of anger, indignance, and antirelationality that span these works.²²¹ The antisocial thesis, which is still inciting major debates at the center of contemporary queer theory, congealed in response to Edelman's translation of Bersani's queer antirelationality. A field of thinkers engaged with Edelman's project so ardently that a line of thinking, what has been conceived of as a turn for the entire field, was established.²²² In essence, it is queer critique, in particular queer critique of *No Future*, which seems mostly responsible for the queer antisocial thesis.

A focus on the pervasive negativity that inhabits queer studies and queer politics, as brief as this synopsis was, illuminates the fallacy of any observed "turn to negativity." The combative queer object relations to heteronormativity that still color queer agendas today were foundational to early 1990s queer politics and queer theory. The logic of antinormativity, as Robyn Wiegman observes, is "both the central political term for a distinctly queer approach to the study of sexuality and the animating agency of its ongoing academic institutionalization."²²³ An

²¹⁹ Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995); Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?: and Other Essays* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

²²⁰ Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993); Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (London and New York: Verso, 2004); Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970).

²²¹ Lisa Downing, "Antisocial Feminism? Shulamith Firestone, Monique Wittig, and Proto-Queer Theory," *Paragraph* 41, Issue 3, (2018). In this article Downing suggests that it may be fruitful for some second wave feminist theory, such as Firestone's, to be read through a queer/anti-normative theoretical lens.

²²² Caserio, Robert L., Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean, "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006), 819-28; Judith, Halberstam, "The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies," *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 5.2 (2008).

²²³ Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 303.

understanding of heteronormativity has been collectively sought by a community of researchers in order to disrupt, diminish, and prevent such organizing forces of power—not procure them—in the name of social justice since the concept was popularized by Warner in 1991.²²⁴ And so “the allure of moving *against* appears to have had greater critical currency than the more intimate and complicit gesture of moving *athwart*.”²²⁵ “Athwart” is the road less traveled for many politicized queers, while “against” is well-trodden terrain. To me, this qualifies queer theory as an inherently negative field of study. And while “queerness” is a much broader designation than “queer theory,” it too has a history full of combativeness, agitation, resistance, and fighting back.

A Tale of Two Queers

In chapter two I defended Berlant’s characterization of the space of the political as the “promise of a good nonsovereignty,” and I briefly demonstrated how political solidarity is a useful tool for maintaining our attachment to the political realm – to hope – and toward the enactment of effective politics.²²⁶ Through Judith Butler’s theorizing, I used philosophical accounts of ethics to justify the very interdependency that systems of neoliberal capitalism necessitate yet deny. Alas, I fear my theorizing may have implied allegiance to dichotomous thinking that I do not condone. I did not mean to suggest that all who abstain from or negate politics are apolitical and asocial. Saying “no” has been characteristically and successfully practiced by a variety of politicized people from within a variety of movements. Martin Luther King’s “civil disobedience,” Idle No More’s hunger strikes, many a labor union’s picket lines, and Black

²²⁴ Michael Warner, “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet,” *Social Text* 29 (1991), 3–17.

²²⁵ Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, “Introduction: Antinormativity’s Queer Conventions,” *differences* 26, no. 1 (2015), 11.

²²⁶ Berlant, *Public Feelings Salon*.

Lives Matter's protests are just a few of the innumerable examples of palpable dissent witnessed in just this past century in the U.S. and Canada. But these forms of "No" are activist events, and as instances of activism they arguably maintain the present mainstream political system by responding to it by working to amend and improve it. So, what are the compelling ethical arguments to be made for opting out? Is "opting out" even possible for politicized subjects in search of transformative justice, and if so, what exactly is there to opt out of? If opting out is indeed something possible for subjects to do, then what are the best practices for achieving it? What are the methods for honing negation and honoring negativity that do not result in nihilistic burnouts?

Jessamyn Stanley is a yoga teacher who lives in Durham, North Carolina when she is not on the road giving talks, teaching, or promoting her writing. She is Black, queer, and fat-femme-identified. In interviews she has explained how becoming a yoga teacher, in addition to a warrior for body positivity, happened inadvertently. For her, yoga quickly became something more than a workout or career, but an outlet for mentorship and advocacy for people who do not fit the rigid proportions of acceptable bodies welcomed into yoga studios. "I'm just trying to create an environment where people feel comfortable enough to be themselves," she explains. "And that's all I'm trying to do as a teacher, and I think that's what I can give as a teacher." I am refreshed by Stanley's values and her frank way of communicating them. Though, one interview I found left me unsettled, and that feeling evolved into this chapter. Stanley explains:

There are many people who my teaching style does not resonate for them [sic]. And I think that's to be expected. There needs to be different kinds of teachers because there's not just one kind of person. I think it is a part of my truth to except that I'm not for everybody, and that's ok. If you can get to a place where you're cool with you, even if it's weird, you'll always be happy.²²⁷

²²⁷ There are many interviews with Jessamyn Stanley online, but the two that I drew from and used to make my arguments are no longer locatable. Thus, these references are based off my own transcriptions that I created early on in my research process.

I found these words disappointing, because, to me, they reflect a surrendering. Stanley seems to be implying that she is ok if people do not like her, or do not want to take her classes, because there is a variety of yoga instructors out there to fit a variety of student's needs. She's simply *one* of *many* options, and this perception of the state of things seems to bring her solace. Yet, the sentiment of her declaration, "I'm not for everybody," also reflects recognition of a precarious membership. She's in the yoga community, but out in its margins. I acknowledge that this is one interview and may not accurately reflect Stanley's values in their totality. I am not value-judging Stanley's outlook, nor do I expect a more radical philosophy from her. I am more so concerned with what Stanley's experience might exemplify about contemporary identity politics in Canada and the United States. Although she has courageously bulldozed her way into fitness networks, notably bringing students and supporters with her, the yoga community at large has not significantly changed, at least not enough to be something to which Stanley could unequivocally feel she belongs.

I find Stanley's example reminiscent of critiques of identity politics, and in particular, critiques that emanate from those sympathetic to identarian concerns. Prominent feminist theorists like Nancy Fraser and Wendy Brown, for example, suggest how identity politics operate methodologically towards transformative justice through the reinforcement of the liberal nation state and its oppressive dominating systems.²²⁸ Identity politic campaigns, such critics claim, act as recruiters for hegemonic social systems like neoliberal capitalism through fantasies of belonging and quests for inclusion. And, queer theorists and activists have long made likewise

²²⁸ Nancy Fraser, "Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition and Participation," in N. Fraser and A. Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, Eds. Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 7–109; Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (1993): 390–410, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/191795>.

arguments about the ill effects of equality campaigns, as glaringly evident in the successful campaigns for gay marriage in a growing list of countries.²²⁹ While the tug-of-war between inclusion into and destruction of the status quo is neither new nor isolated to feminist and queer politics, Mari Ruti shows in her comprehensive project on queer antirelationality how “the dawn of the twenty-first century has witnessed an escalation of the queer theoretical idiom of opting out.”²³⁰

In addition to Stanley, I want to consider David S. Buckel amid these musings over queer antirelationality. Buckel, a prominent gay rights lawyer, killed himself on April 14th, 2018 in what he personally referred to as a “protest suicide” over environmental concerns.²³¹ Both Buckel and Stanley have clearly expressed feeling “at odds with the world,” which Ahmed puts forth as the meaning of “revolutionary consciousness.”²³² Arguably, they are both practitioners of queer antirelationality, as both have engaged in the practice of “opting out” to varying degrees. I consult queer theory, keeping Stanley and Buckel lovingly in mind, in order to explore “opting out” as examples of generative negation and productive resistance toward sociopolitical justice. Though undoubtedly a renegade, Stanley, in some sense, contributes to the othering of herself. While Stanley believes she’s “not for everybody,” the bastion of so-called antisocial queers supposedly flips such scripts. Rather than kowtow to hegemonic norms, they have boldly determined that “everybody,” broadly conceived as the mainstream social order, or the status quo, is not for them. What can queers effectively do on behalf of such a stance? What does “opting out” look like? With Buckel in mind, is suicide ever a viable choice under the rubric of

²²⁹ See “Marriage Equality Around the World,” *Human Rights Campaign*, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/marriage-equality-around-the-world>.

²³⁰ Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out*, 1.

²³¹ J Oliver Conroy, “A lawyer set himself on fire to protest climate change. Did anyone care?,” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/15/david-buckel-lawyer-climate-change-protest>.

²³² Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 168.

queer antirelationality? To what extent can self-destruction be political? While I am sympathetic to Buckel's struggles with mental health, and I recognize the possibility that Stanley may diminish herself as a strategy to survive the periphery of the yoga community and to abate future disappointment, I am nonetheless interested in how the queer antisocial thesis could operate when it is put into intentional practice by queers like Stanley and Buckel, in ways that would not lead to their physical destruction or social exclusion. Is it possible for politicized queers to practice antirelationality and nonsovereignty simultaneously? These are the queer possibilities I explore in the remainder of this chapter.

Opting Out

Much contemporary queer theorizing around queer antirelationality is traceable to the Lacanian "act." This act, as accessibly defined by Ruti, is "a destructive (sometimes even suicidal) act through which the subject, momentarily at least, extricates itself from the demands of the big Other (the symbolic order) by plunging into the jouissance of the real."²³³ The symbolic order, or "big Other," is a psychoanalytic and philosophical concept. Jacques Lacan, building from Freud's theorizing of the symbolic, juxtaposes the symbolic order with "the Real." The symbolic order is "the world of words that creates the world of things," while the Real exists outside of language, and is therefore resistant to symbolization.²³⁴ The symbolic order that most of queer theory is arguably in one way or another critiquing is neoliberal capitalism – *the* system of all systems – and Ruti argues that such critiques have been effectively anticipated by Lacan's

²³³ Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out*, 44.

²³⁴ Jacques Lacan, "The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis," Bruce Fink, Trans., *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002, Original work published 1953), 65.

thinking. She claims that Lacan has been “building an ethical vision that is attuned to the concerns of contemporary queer theory....”

The vocabulary that queer theory uses to talk about neoliberal capitalism was not yet available to him, but what he calls “the service of goods” is arguably just another name for the ethos of high productivity, good performance, and pragmatic efficiency that underpins neoliberalism. Likewise, what he calls ‘the morality of power’ is just another name for hegemonic power in the Foucauldian sense.²³⁵

Antirelationality, or opting out of the symbolic social order, may be an effective vehicle for a subject to act out their unbridled desire. Ruti elaborates:

Lacan’s ethics of psychoanalysis, in contrast [to Aristotelian ethics], is an ethics of desire that opposes the master’s morality. More specifically, Lacan believes that if the big Other seeks to secure its authority by forcing (or seducing) us to accept the parameters of its desire, then the only way to oppose it is to mobilize frequencies of desire that retain a measure of autonomy from this (hegemonic) desire. This is why ‘guilt,’ in the Lacanian model, is a matter of having given ground relative to one’s desire: to cede on one’s desire, Lacan suggests, is to betray oneself as an ethical creature.²³⁶

If Lacanian ethics is about honoring one’s desire, then subjects who do not attempt to rescue their solidarity desires from their stalled wishes – subjects who make no attempts to realize solidarity in some metaphysical way – are arguably unethical, unless of course the non-fruition of solidarity desires is actually what these subjects want. Perhaps these subjects do not desire solidarity but are after something near it, such as the affirmation they might receive for publicly performing their desires for solidarity, as in the case of parasitical solidarities.

I explore the stultifying phenomenon of wishes in detail in chapter four and consider why some subjects who do not actually want solidarity may publicly express desires for it, but for the sake of this discussion let me recap: some subjects who remain stagnant inside of their solidarity wishes, according to Lacanian ethics, are acting ethically because they in fact do not want the object of desire (aka: solidarity) that is made explicit in their wishes. In such cases, wishes are a

²³⁵ Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out*, 45.

²³⁶ Ibid., 46.

deceptive front. What this Lacanian conceptualization of ethics illuminates for those interested in promoting transformative justice is that enticing others to “act ethically” pales in importance to what one’s ethics are. What seems to be needed above all else by sociopolitical movements dedicated to transformative justice is the development of a new ethics, specifically an ethics of nonsovereignty as I suggested in the introduction, an ethics that would enable desires for solidarity to more naturally possess subjects. Paralleling *Solidarity Wishes*’ overall imperative to center desire within conceptualizations of solidarity, here, I am centering desire within conceptualizations of queer antirelationality, which begs concern over the agency and durability of queer subjectivity. The field’s philosophical musings on the capabilities and limitations of the queer subject can incite frustration due to the difficulty of locating fleshy queers in some of queer theory’s highly abstracted theoretical discussions. I concurred with Snediker at the start of this chapter that putting stock into personhood as a conceptual framework within queer theorizing could lead to more grounded thinking and more practicable ideas. So, what pragmatic forms might queer antirelationality take in queer subjects’ lives?

Gay marriage is a useful site for understanding how queerness comes to function as an ethical tool of queer subjectivity. Ruti speculates, “if marriage has drawn so much critical energy, it is because it represents the very cornerstone of the system of biopolitical control – a system that valorizes productivity, good performance, achievement, and self-actualization – that queer theory has been so keen to destabilize.”²³⁷ As many queer theorists have argued, gay marriage dovetails splendidly with the current social order, a foot soldier of neoliberal capitalism. And as Bersani observes, “[t]he Christian shame tactic is undoubtedly much less effective than it was [thirty] years ago, and, all of the resistance to gay marriage notwithstanding,

²³⁷ Ibid., 25.

our insistence on having the right to marry has helped to make us more acceptable to straight people by allowing them to think that we have the same conjugal dreams as they do.”²³⁸ To opt out of gay marriage is to say “no” to the idea that gay marriage is a good idea, “no” to gay marriage as a life-mode (*the* life-mode) to fulfill one’s desire. To me, this looks like a clear manifestation of queer antirelationality. Ruti’s Lacanian perspective of queer relationality is that “social change demands subjects who are able to mobilize behind desires other than those dictated by the normal social order.”²³⁹ And yet, for queer subjects who do not desire marriage, for any subject who does not desire marriage, swimming against societal tides to realize some other relationship format may prove impossible. For subjects who cannot move past the drama of the clash of their own desires with those “dictated by the normal social order,” stuck-inside-of-a-wish is where they might remain.

How do subjects living within neoliberal capitalism, the gender binary, and white supremacy – to name a few hard places – act on desires that are not officially sanctioned by such totalizing forces? Most queers probably know via their own renditions of queerness that they can and do have desires that do not align with the Symbolic Social Order yet accessing them is nonetheless a difficult task despite such self-awareness. A desiring subject’s agency inside of the Symbolic Social Order is limited at best. So then, what are the possibilities for someone like Stanley? How can she carve out a place for herself and her queer practices within the mainstream yoga world? How can she belong when “belonging feels like foreclosure” despite also being the “condition [her] actual flourishing in the world?”²⁴⁰ Can queers opt out of politics, institutions, and norms while avoiding nihilism? Can Edelman, and those who subscribe to his version of the

²³⁸ Leo Bersani, “Shame on You,” in *After Sex?: On Writing since Queer Theory*, eds. Janet Halley and Andrew Parker (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 92.

²³⁹ Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out*, 20.

²⁴⁰ Berlant, *Public Feelings Salon*.

antisocial thesis and its accompanying practices of negativity, effect sociopolitical change? And, perhaps of most significance, can queers survive opting out? Can queer subjects bear the exile of the Symbolic Social Order in pursuit of their “unbridled” queer desires?

Buckel was sixty when he set himself on fire in Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York just off the main road that circles through the park. It was early Saturday morning when he left his brick home just prior to 6am, which he shared with his partner of thirty-five years, as well as with another couple with whom he co-parented his daughter. Before he died, he emailed a suicide note to various news organizations. He also printed it out and brought it along with him. Here’s one version of Buckel’s death as described in a *New York Times* article.

‘I apologize to you for the mess,’ he wrote in a note to the police, which was found with his letter in the shopping cart. He had stapled his business card to the letter, and left his identification on a lanyard nearby, to remove any doubt. He kept his cellphone with him, which was found in melted pieces by his body, along with a knife and some keys. Among the many unanswered questions about the death of David Buckel was why he had a folding shopping cart with him. There was no fuel canister in it, nothing but an empty black plastic bag — the kind he and [his assistant] filled with the rich new soil made on their compost site. The earth around Mr. Buckel was burned in a nearly perfect circle. The police said the ground was too scorched to tell, but it is possible that when he went to Prospect Park that day, he took some soil with him, hauling it in the cart. It is possible Mr. Buckel’s last moments were spent spreading it out, making a ring around himself, so the flames wouldn’t spread.²⁴¹

Buckel had led an impressive legal career. He argued significant cases such as *Brandon v. County of Richardson*, which inspired the 1999 film *Boys Don’t Cry*. During the last ten years of his life, he turned to environmental work and concerns. He ran a compost site in Red Hook on the Brooklyn waterfront. “He was captivated by the idea of community composting to reduce landfill waste and greenhouse gases...In just a few years, Buckel created one of the largest

²⁴¹ Annie Correal, “What Drove a Man to Set Himself on Fire in Brooklyn?,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/28/nyregion/david-buckel-fire-prospect-park-fossil-fuels.html>.

compost sites in the country operated without heavy machinery — using only solar power, wind power and the labor of volunteers.”²⁴²

Buckel is a complicated example. Here I am, oddly enough, wondering whether the suicide of a lawyer who was prominent in the movement for marriage equality falls under the rubric of queer antirelationality, after I just promoted queer resistance to gay marriage as a form of queer antirelationality. If Buckel in fact believed his death was a tool in the battle against the Symbolic Social Order, there are many who would argue that his life’s work in the pursuit of gay marriage rights had quite the opposite effect. The queer debates over issues like marriage are nuanced and the divisions they foster are complex. I believe Buckel thought his efforts toward the pursuit of marriage equality was good progressive work. I believe he felt the same about his environmental work. Although, there exists the possibility that Buckel’s shift to environmental concerns toward the end of his life was indicative of a turn to something that he believed could be more impactful in place of work that he had perhaps begun to lose faith in. Regardless of whatever the true nature of Buckel’s values and politics were on the day he killed himself, what is for certain is that his efforts to make the world a better place on behalf of those values and politics ended that day.

In his suicide letter Buckel describes looming environmental catastrophe and implicates his role in it.²⁴³ His words are guilt laden. He reflects on the definition and associated obligations of privilege. The letter is titled “a life giver” and the first sentence reads: “[e]nding a life of privilege can give life to others.” I’ve tried, but I just cannot sympathize with this claim. By

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ I acquired a copy of Buckel’s suicide note from a friend who worked with him at his compost site in Brooklyn. Considering Buckel’s own words, as well as the views of his friends and family in her orbit, my friend concluded that it would be appropriate for me to have a copy. I agree, though I do want to point out that his suicide note is not currently accessible in the public domain. I suspect this is due to his family not wanting to contribute to any glorification of Buckel’s suicide in the media coverage.

ending his life, Buckel also ended opportunities to continue to utilize his expertise, knowledge, and experience to better the world. He also left behind dependents in the forms of family, friends, and co-workers, no doubt hurting many of these folks deeply with his final choices. He ceded to his desire, arguably participating in the Lacanian antirelational act, and leaving behind a world within which he did not quite fit. He jumped ship because he believed he was taking up valuable space and resources from others, even though he was a valuable resource himself.

Another section of the letter reads:

This is not new, as many have chosen to give a life based on the view that no other action can most meaningfully address the harm they see. Witness one example: self-immolations in support of a free Tibet, sometimes by parents forced to the heart-breaking conclusion that a parent dying creates more value for children than a parent living. But those parents were not privileged. I am privileged, with a nice life at 60 years of age, and good health to the final moment. Privilege is feeling heavier than responsibility met.

I have friends who were close to Buckel and his family. They have shared with me how his inner circle was devastated, but also angry with him for doing this. I do not wish to diminish the idea of Buckel's death as a protest by suggesting he was mentally ill. Those who know him can attest to the fact that he was sad and despondent at times, but I do not believe mental illness is a prerequisite for suicide.

Both queer lives – Stanley's and Buckel's – illuminate the limits of theory, and in particular, the limits of queer theory's reliance on metaphor and abstraction. If Stanley's and Buckel's examples do not qualify as antirelational, then what does? Is antirelationality ever actually practicable? Survivable? Perhaps antirelationality is on a similar trajectory to some conceptualizations of queerness, solidarity, and happiness, as states that are worked toward, practices never quite perfected, and promises in perpetual motion. With all due respect, I must disclose that I believe Buckel made a catastrophic mistake, and my judgment comes from a place of love for what he had to offer the world and everyone in it. Nonetheless, the life he did live was

valuable and important and so too were his final thoughts. Here is how he concluded his suicide note.

Obviously, there are countless ways that humans harm other humans, animals, and the Earth, and thus countless causes to serve by giving a life. I choose just one, not because I claim that it is more important, but because it happens to give me the courage I will need to die in the hope it is an honorable death that might serve others. As an attorney, I worked eight years for others' freedom from poverty, and thirteen years for others' freedom from discrimination. But work for freedom fails as we slowly turn Earth into a prison. Pollution ravages our planet, oozing inhabatability via air, soil, water and weather. Some have already lost houses, family, and nations, a fate that waits for all as the decades pass. We're killing humans and other beings slowly by killing our shared home. Most humans on the planet now breathe air made unhealthy by fossil fuels, and many die early deaths as a result -- my early death by fossil fuel reflects what we are doing to ourselves. Our present grows more desperate; our future needs more than what we've been doing. Although solutions lay partly in laws, no power will match that of individuals in large numbers who change their everyday choices and reduce the harm they cause. Here is a hope that giving a life might bring some attention to the need for expanded action, and help others give a voice to our home, and Earth is heard.

Cruising the Antisocial Thesis

Antirelationality has played a significant hand in shaping contemporary queer theory. This concept's trajectory, journeying across the work of Freud and Lacan to scholars like Edelman and Munoz, has dovetailed with a generalized queerly political unruliness. Surely antirelationality does not have to be marinated in queerness in order to be a productive theoretical and political tool. But the numerous queer theorists who contribute to the debate between relational and antirelational theories and practices continue to imbue antirelationality with a specifically queer character. In *Cruising Utopia*, Munoz offers a way out of the "rigid conceptualization that is the straight present."²⁴⁴ Through his creative scholarship he gives his readers a "flight plan for a collective political becoming."²⁴⁵ His project urges queer movements forward beyond current gay and lesbian mainstream politics with a vividly illustrated hypothesis

²⁴⁴ Munoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 185.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 189.

that queerness is not yet here, counterintuitively drawing on queer art of the 1960s and 1970s to elaborate his arguments. Hope is at the center of his project as “both a critical affect and a methodology.” As a scholar of performance studies, his artist subjects have been “strategically displaced” through a “backward glance that enacts a future vision.”²⁴⁶ Through queer art he recommends and “describes aesthetic and political practices that need to be seen as necessary modes of stepping out of this place and time to something fuller, vaster, more sensual, and brighter.”²⁴⁷

Munoz joins a fleet of queer thinkers who have rallied against the antisocial thesis of the antirelational turn, queer theoretical thinking “under the influence of Bersani’s definition of sex as anti-communitarian, self-shattering, and anti-identitarian,” which Jack Halberstam argues “produces a counter-intuitive but crucial shift in thinking away from projects of redemption, reconstruction, restoration, and reclamation, and towards what can only be called an anti-social, negative and anti-relational theory of sexuality.”²⁴⁸ Munoz claims that the queer antisocial thesis “moves to imagine an escape or denouncement of relationality as first and foremost a distancing of queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, and other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference.” He continues, “[i]n other words, antirelational approaches to queer theory are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference.”²⁴⁹ And so, “queer feminist and queer of color critiques” – Munoz maintains – “are the powerful counterweight to the antirelational.”²⁵⁰

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 4.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 189.

²⁴⁸ Jack Halberstam, “Chapter 11: Queer Betrayals,” in *Queer Futures: Reconsidering Ethics, Activism, and the Political*, eds. Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Eveline Kilian, and Beatrice Michaelis (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 177.

²⁴⁹ Munoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 11.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 17.

Munoz is not alone in his critique of the limited considerations of other modes of difference, like brownness and lesbian subjectivity, in queer antisocial projects. These common critiques transport me back to my first year of graduate school during which I had a colleague who was brilliantly and hilariously forward. She would constantly reproach early queer theory for its overreliance on gay corporeal sex as an object of study. “If I have to read one more thing in queer theory about gay dudes barebacking I am going to lose it!” she once exasperatedly declared in a history of sexuality seminar. I believe her critique of the queer archive was in response to the scholarship of theorists like Hocquenghem and Bersani, who laid the conceptual foundations for the antisocial thesis by putting forward the first descriptions of queer antirelationality from Lacan’s scholarship through their analyses of gay sex. Such work was taken up by sexuality studies scholars like Edelman, Tim Dean, and David Halperin, all of whom are white gay men. And there are plenty more white gay men who continue to carry this research forward, myself included.

While the antisocial thesis has been chastised for its malnourishing properties of pernicious negativity, repudiations of politics, the irresponsible and damning fusing of queerness to the death drive, whiteness, elitism, and inaccessibility, it has nonetheless generated a maelstrom of new iterations of queer theory. So-called antisocial projects like *No Future* have led to valuable ideas and frameworks in both alignment and opposition to queer antirelationality. The polemical critiques of the queer antisocial thesis are passionate and sometimes more rancorous than the very ideas they are mobilizing against – ideas that Munoz observes have led queer theory to a “dismissal of political idealism.”

Shouting down Utopia is an easy move. It is perhaps even easier than smearing psychoanalytic or deconstructive reading practices with the charge of nihilism. The antiutopian critic of today has a well-worn chest of post-structuralism pieties at her or his disposal to shut down lines of thought that delineate the concept of critical utopianism.

Social theory that invokes the concept of utopia has always been vulnerable to charges of naivete, impracticality, or lack of rigor.²⁵¹

The major concern that predominates queer scholarship that positions itself against the antisocial thesis, most notably the bastion of queer theorists working under the headings of the “reparative” and the “relational”, is the antisocial thesis’ perceived retreat from and dismissal of politics in general, not just utopic politics.

In response to *No Future*, Halberstam observes that “...Edelman tends to cast material political concerns as crude and pedestrian, as already a part of the conjuring of futurity that his project must foreclose.”²⁵² *No Future* has been ordained through citation to be one of the most recent and significant carriers of the queer antisocial thesis and its apolitical tendencies. But, as with all groundbreaking scholarship and heavily cited works, there is the danger that thinkers will consume commonly circulated ideas in place of reading the primary source (Cheers to you, Freud!).²⁵³ In some scholarship, Edelman’s important polemic has been eroded and reduced to a simplistic dismissal of political initiative. Perhaps it has been helpful for queer theorists to regard Edelman’s rendition of queer antirelationality as a discursive wall to push up against as a means of propulsion toward a theory of hope or utopia. An accusation of nihilism, however, seems the easy theory out of a more complicated engagement with the queer antisocial thesis. Has the field of queer studies ironically foreclosed one of its most supposedly foreclosing theories, robbing it of nuance, making it stupid, and therefore easier to explain away?

²⁵¹ Ibid., 10.

²⁵² Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 107.

²⁵³ This problem and other issues related to practices of “reading,” and particularly within Queer Studies, is taken up in a special issue of GLQ. See “Queers Read This! LGBTQ Literature Now,” eds. Ramzi Fawaz and Shanté Paradigm Smalls, *GLQ* vol. 24, no. 2–3 (2018). Also, Jennifer Nash addresses the importance of returning to the original source within scholarly interpretations, which in the case of her project, is Kymberle Crenshaw’s conception of intersectionality. See Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

In an interview in 2015, eleven years after *No Future* was published, Edelman comments on the project's reception within the field of queer studies. He attempts to disinherit *No Future* from its common antisocial and apolitical charges. He notes that "antisocial" was a descriptor that others attributed to his theorizing, theorizing that he cites as having been already "implicit" within queer theory through the likes of Hocquenghem and Bersani. According to Edelman, his contribution to queer antirelationality came in his critique of "reproductive futurism," a concept which he imagines as an enabler of social and political theoretical possibilities, rather than a foreclosing theory. In his own words, he believes "the success of *No Future* had much to do with the way in which its complicated use of Lacanianism was nonetheless supported by an armature of political possibilities that was widely disseminate-able." Therefore, *No Future*, he continues, "could be applied to a host of different contexts - sociological, anthropological, political, aesthetic," and utilized by a variety of people from artists to academics who "found that there were reflections within this work of their own sense of exclusion from the order of the world as it was philosophically constructed by the mandate of what [he] called 'reproductive futurism.'" ²⁵⁴

While Edelman himself situates *No Future* in the lineage of queer antirelational work, he takes umbrage at the project's positioning within the antisocial rubric. Edelman admits that *No Future* identifies political impossibility, for "even our attempt to think outside of reproductive futurism would itself be constrained by it." Yet, he claims that such an impossible task "needs to be carried forward not despite the fact that it's impossible, but because it's impossible." Edelman continues.

Or to put it another way, there is only politics because of impossibility. If there were simply possibility of obtaining some utopian end point, then one would live in a world where fundamentally one were resistant to difference and politics. Politics is dissensus, it's not agreement. Politics is oppositional. It's not oppositionality for its own sake, but it's recognition that every attempt to totalize, to construct a universal or closed idealized

²⁵⁴ Edelman, "Interview with Prof Lee Edelman."

political system will always exclude something, and that exclusion will be then the locus of queerness, which is why there could be no queer utopia. The queer utopia would itself be a space in which queerness is excluded.

Edelman's conceptualization of queerness as a reoccurring point of cultural exclusion shares the same phantasmic spirit of Munoz's queerness on the utopic horizon. Both considerations, queerness is always on the horizon (Munoz) and queerness is always excluded (Edelman), describe a queerness that seems impossible to catch up to and fully inhabit. Under the light of political pragmatism, both theories can seem insufficient. Both theories come across as very queerly theoretical: impressive abstract academic thinking that is difficult to translate into everyday practice by subjects. Yet, Edelman and Munoz have argued that embalmed in such pangs of political impossibility is hope, and hope, they both wager, is pragmatic. They both allude to impossibility as a force that keeps queers striving, reinvigorating queer politics and thereby securing an attachment to the political. Even still, Edelman is regarded by a field of thinkers to be the mascot theorist of the queer antisocial thesis, despite his disavowal of that identification.

So that one of the ironies is that there are a number of queer theorists in response to this so-called antisocial turn who insist on thinking towards futurism and thinking toward utopianism, and imagine, idealize the possibility of imagining, a day when there will be no more homophobia, no more racism, no more sexism. Of course, we would all love to live in a world without the violence that those things occasion. The problem is that the world without racism, the world without sexism, the world without homophobia is a world without racial difference, without sexual difference, and without gender difference. So long as there is difference there will be evaluation of differences, a hierarchal construction of those differences. And the fantasy of the world without those oppressive ideologies, is indeed a fantasy of a world in which there is no dissent, a world in which no one disagrees with us, a world in which we're not confronted by opposition any longer, thus a world without politics, and that's not the world that I envision.²⁵⁵

I too cannot envision a world without politics, but maybe that is because I have only ever lived under neoliberal capitalism, and so the society to which I have belonged to as an adult has

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

always existed as hierarchical, divisive, layered with inequalities, and possessed by a sovereign mentality.

Anti Social Social Club²⁵⁶

Over the last five years I have noticed that my students are increasingly decked out in garb displaying the motto “Anti Social Social Club,” a brand of clothing founded in 2015. ASSCs founder Neek Lurk is infamously open about his melancholy on social media. He admits that under capitalism “negative is positive,” as his bad feelings and bad experiences have provided him with highly profitable clothing concepts like “Negativity Is Love,” “Everyone Goes Away In The End,” and “People Love Reading Negative Reviews.” In a 2016 interview Lurk boasted, “My brand is a perception that people buy into.” Many of my students, the majority of whom have been between eighteen and twenty-five years of age with jobs outside of the university, have evidently bought into the brand as well. This clothing is not cheap, and so I have always wondered why students who require loans and multiple jobs to pay their tuition splurge on it?²⁵⁷

I wonder if the appeal of ASSC to my students’ fashion sense mirrors the allure of antirelationality to queer theorists, and of negativity in general to queers (or to anyone really). Does it feel good to do good things with bad feelings? Does it feel productive to put negativity to work, to give it some use outside the epicenter of anxiety, depression, boredom, and failure? Can wearing bad feelings on one’s sleeve, literally, help to disable negativity’s suffocating grip by encouraging the facing of negative sentiments through the sharing of them with others, like with commiseration and humor? Bad feelings seem useful, sometimes even foundational, to the

²⁵⁶ Some of the thinking and phrasing in this section is a result of my collaboration with my colleague Ryan Conrad. See note 9. Ryan has given me his consent to use some of our ideas here in this section of chapter three.

²⁵⁷ Tierney Finster, “Anti Social Social Club: How Neek Lurk Made Money From Melancholia,” *Amuse*, March 30, 2016, https://amuse.vice.com/en_us/article/438x7n/neek-lurk-money.

construction and maintenance of certain identarian communities, especially marginalized ones. Is it any wonder that they can be fashionable as well? I have never asked my students about ASSC clothing due to my fear of sounding unhip and out of touch, but my hunch is that the clothing strikes the same chord with my students that it does with me: a refreshingly realistic tone that does not insult one's intelligence through impositions of stupid optimism and vapid brightsidedness like "Life Is Good" t-shirts and "Choose Happy" dish towels.

Queer communities are antisocial social clubs in their own right. Trauma colors queer lives, scholarship, and politics, justifying queer subjects' roles as cranky queers and feminist killjoys. Trauma emboldens queers in a sense, while it also begs to be soothed. One such method to soothe queer trauma is through community. An important part of the upkeep to queer communal relations is the acknowledgement that negative affects are deep-seated within many renditions of queerness. Theoretically, queers have tools to assist in this. Raymond Williams's *structures of feeling*, Deborah Gould's *emotional habitus*, and Jonathan Flatley's *affective mapping* all offer ways to process affect and emotion on a structural level that avoids the pitfalls of individualizing or interiorizing emotions. These theories give queers conceptual tools to perceive how emotions and moods circulate amongst communities at particular moments in history. In "Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue," Muñoz, in conversation with Lisa Duggan, claims:

W.R. Bion's notion of valence might also be useful to understand how a belonging in and through affective negativity works for an anti-normative politics. Valency, borrowed from chemistry, is the concept that describes the capacity for spontaneous and instinctive emotional combination, between two individuals or a group. Bion's concept provides a provisional and partial account of how emotions cement social groups as guiding basic assumptions (what he calls *bas*). Thus as a group or a pair we share happiness and grief, ecstasy and sorrow, and so forth. This affective commonality is a site for commonality and even sociality.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁸ Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, "Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2 (2009), 281.

In this formulation, Muñoz suggests that it is in and through an affective negativity that commonality and collectivity might coalesce. This is echoed by Flatley's reflections on melancholy and modernism in *Affective Mapping*. Mobilizing his concept of affective mapping, Flatley argues for a sense of collective identification with others against the social structures and historical developments through which negative affects originate. Through an analysis of one's own emotional life and seeing its connections to others, some agency can be derived. Flatley argues,

For only then can one see with whom one's situation is shared, who one's enemies are, what situations must be avoided, skills developed and tactics pursued—in short all the ways one might stave off despair and have some agency in relation to one's own emotional life.²⁵⁹

This potential for identification and collectivity based on shared affective states, particularly those marked by negative emotions, may open space for political organizing and action that transcends or connects subjects across traditional modes of identification (i.e., race, class, gender, sexuality) that political organizing relies upon all too often. As Duggan puts it quite humorously, “Bad sentiments can lead us (instead) *out* of dominant, alienating social forms... and into a collectivity of the cynical, bitter, hostile, despairing, and hopeless. This is how I find my people!”²⁶⁰

Thinking of queer communities as antisocial social clubs is not meant to downplay and deny the destructive power of trauma, which can effectively destroy collective ambitions, and lead queers to “political depression.”²⁶¹ In their introduction to *Queer Bonds* Joshua Weiner and Damon Young claim that “queer is at once disabled and inventive sociality.” “If an askew relation to the

²⁵⁹ Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 122.

²⁶⁰ Duggan and Muñoz, “Hope and Hopelessness,” 279.

²⁶¹ Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

normative terms of sexuality occasions a certain negative relation to the social,” they explain, “this means it also precipitates a certain reinvention of the social, of the nature of the ‘bonds,’ a reinvention that is sometimes invested under the sign of transgression, sometimes of utopia.”²⁶² Such a claim is particularly salient in a theoretical defense of antisocial queer theory. However, Weiner’s and Young’s assertion that a negative relation to the social is inherently productive because it motivates both a disabling and creative queer sociality assumes that the disabling agent leaves some remnants of sociality behind. Their argument, in addition to many a queer claim to the productivity of negativity, does not take into consideration the acrid and destructive sociality, despair, and nihilism that can result when subjects tarry with the negative so to speak. Yes, “feeling bad might, in fact, be the ground for transformation,”²⁶³ but as Heather Love reminds us, “there are ways of feeling bad that do not make us feel like fighting back.”²⁶⁴ It is not a trendy thought, but yes, negativity can be destructive. “A shattering can be a starting point” as Sara Ahmed reminds us, but only if someone is left standing afterwards to begin anew.²⁶⁵

While concepts like “alliance,” “solidarity,” and “togetherness” circulate heavily throughout progressive literatures and communities, indicative of the swelling wish for both an encompassing theoretical framework and effective praxis for achieving sociopolitical change across difference, political collaborations, despite best theories and practices, can and do go rancid. Sometimes it is a battle to *speak* to our solidary peers, let alone, act in concert with them. Recent events within queer networks have helped to usher in an understanding of some impasses in queer

²⁶² Joshua J. Weiner and Damon Young, “Introduction: Queer Bonds,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17 (2-3) (2011), 226.

²⁶³ Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 3.

²⁶⁴ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 14.

²⁶⁵ Sara Ahmed, “Killjoys@Work.” *Feministkilljoys*, March 28, 2017, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2017/03/28/killjoyswork/>.

organizing as acerbic and self-destructive – what my colleague Ryan Conrad and I have identified as “acid sociality.”²⁶⁶ Writer and self-proclaimed “organizational healer” and “pleasure activist” Adrienne Maree Brown has observed that acid sociality is not anomalous within queer communities today but appears embedded in pursuits of transformative justice more generally.

What we do now is find out someone or some group has done (or may have done) something out of alignment with our values. Some of the transgressions are small – saying something fucked up. Some are massive – false identity, sexual assault. We then tear that person or group to shreds in a way that affirms our values. When we are satisfied that that person or group is destroyed, we move on. Or sometimes we just move on because the next scandal has arrived.

Brown claims that she is not above this behavior, but wonders: “is that what we’re here for? To cultivate a fear-based adherence to reductive common values?”²⁶⁷

Many queer histories (and queer presents) are rife with repression and violence. Queer antirelationality honors queer trauma and is a theoretical suggestion of how to deal with contemporary queer hardship. And so, the distinction between queer antirelationality and queer acid sociality is an important one. Queer antirelationality, and its spawned antisocial thesis (despite the degree and tone of its accompanying negativity with which many queer theorists take offense) are escape routes out of the Symbolic Social Order. These theories are antirelational and antisocial in the sense that they suggest a “NO” to a world that’s incompatible with queerness. Antirelationality can be harnessed by queers in ways that do not occasion pungent and debilitating negativity nor a wholesale surrender to the death drive. Queer communities are certainly susceptible to acid sociality, but antirelationality is a distinct concept that describes one’s

²⁶⁶ See note 9.

²⁶⁷ Adrienne Maree Brown, “What Is/isn’t Transformative Justice?” at Adrienne Maree Brown, “Adriennemareebrown.net, July 9, 2015, <http://adriennemareebrown.net/2015/07/09/what-isnt-transformative-justice/>.

relationship to the Symbolic Social Order and is not necessarily counterintuitive to solidarity and other nonsovereign concepts of togetherness.

The antirelational Lacanian “act” encompasses individual ethical action, and while it may interrupt the Symbolic Social Order, it is not always an effective world building or nonsovereign practice. Buckel’s suicide arguably fits the antirelational bill, but with respect to the thinking of a relational queer theorist like Munoz, it constitutes an abandonment. Ideally, queer communities that function as antisocial social clubs maintain antirelationality as a community ethic and group practice, and their accompanying negative affects work to stabilize their queer bonds. The maintenance of these queer bonds, however, is difficult and delicate work. Treating our relationships like “Dixie cups,” as bell hooks observes, can become a common and established form of dehumanization “when greedy consumption is the order of the day.”²⁶⁸ The distinction between queer acrid sociality and queer antirelationality reveals above all else that an effective theory of political solidarity must “risk hope,” and part of that risk is humbling and softening the self to encourage cooperation, especially within the deployment of antirelationality.²⁶⁹ For queers, this is a challenge that lies within the moral responsibility to seek strategies that resist the normalization of identitarian subject relations and prevent the hijacking of our crankiness, competitiveness, and communality by institutionalized methods. Queers need methodologies that allow us to practice in our very communities what we theorize in our anthologies and teach in our classrooms. Queers need tools for supporting and enabling each other, even when we inevitably fail one another. With Brown, I wonder: “How do we shift from individual, interpersonal and inter-organizational anger towards viable generative sustainable systemic change?” And what might

²⁶⁸ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2016), 115.

²⁶⁹ Duggan and Muñoz, “Hope and Hopelessness,” 279.

practices of holding each other accountable that do not result in “call[ing] each other out until there’s no one left beside us” look like?²⁷⁰

Educated Hope

A hopeful and relational queerness is not confined to utopia. It can comprise epistemologies that *can* be translated into present, nonsovereign, praxis, like political solidarity or “Calling in.” Ngoc Loan Trần distinguishes “Calling in” from “Calling out”: it is the work of acknowledging and allowing mistakes to happen, “calling each other back in when we stray,” as opposed to banishing one from a project and/or shunning one from the community. Calling in, a street manifestation of Munoz’s theoretical queerness, is intimate relational work; it’s not the public performative stunts that social media platforms like Facebook orchestrate. Trần does not advocate for calling in to supplant calling out, but is interested in a simultaneous multiplicity of tools, strategies, and methods. He states,

We have to remind ourselves that we once didn’t know. There are infinitely many more things we have yet to know and may never know. We have to let go of a politic of disposability. We are what we’ve got. No one can be left to their fuck ups and the shame that comes with them because ultimately we’ll be leaving ourselves behind.²⁷¹

Despite the intensity of bad feelings that can animate antirelational queer politics, antirelationality is not incommensurable or antithetical to political solidarity. In fact, the two concepts are dependent upon one another for peak performance. From a Lacanian perspective, antirelationality as a rejection of the status quo is an individual ethical act. Yet, surely revolutionary change will not come from solitary action. One queer lying across the tracks of neoliberal capitalism is not going to derail the social order, yet millions might. Political solidarity can be practiced by queers

²⁷⁰ Brown, “What Is?”

²⁷¹ Ngoc Loan Trần, “Calling IN: A Less Disposable Way of Holding Each Other Accountable,” BGD, December 18, 2013, <https://www.bgdblog.org/2013/12/calling-less-disposable-way-holding-accountable/>.

to amplify antirelationality – to multiply the Lacanian Act through group commitment and practice. Additionally, political solidarity can be strengthened by the shared affects that queer antirelationality occasions. Political solidarity as a mode of nonsovereignty is not always rewarded or encouraged under the status quo because neoliberal capitalism shares a pulse with rugged individualism. Here, Ruti explains this in terms of lack:

What may be harder to discern is that the system produces the very scarcity that it proffers to help us transcend. Indeed, without this production of lack – without this ability to make us feel like something is missing from our lives (yet surely attainable in the future) – the system would quickly collapse, for if we ever reached a state of complete contentment, our desire would come to an end, and with it, our conviction that the new products we see advertised might add something to the quality of our lives; we would stop consuming beyond what we actually need. This is why, despite appearances, neoliberal capitalism thrives on the perpetuation of lack – frequently experienced as a vague anxiety about losing what we already have – more than on the generation of excess even as its excesses threaten to drown us in waste. Moreover, as Ehrenreich suggests, within this system, problems of social inequality have individual rather than collective solutions, so that if you are not making a living wage, you need to work harder rather than to agitate for higher pay. Queer theory's stance of negativity offers a resounding *No!* to this mentality, essentially reeling against the sugarcoating and depoliticization of life, including queer life, in contemporary American society.²⁷²

If neoliberal capitalist subjects want to pivot to a new or altered system, it seems necessary, at the very least, for the current societal significance of an individual's work ethic to be supplanted or at least supplemented by the importance of strong social cohesion and mutually generative collaboration. Queer antisocial social communities hold a lot of good nonsovereign potential in their collective practices of dissent and resistance.

Queer antirelationality is a misnomer as it requires strong social bonds to enact its vision of revolutionary change within the current social order. Black Lives Matter's sit-in protest at Toronto's pride parade in 2015 is a pertinent example of the productive relationship between antirelationality and political solidarity. The protest was not demonstrative of acrid sociality,

²⁷² Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out*, 2-3.

though some LGBTQ community members' incensed responses certainly were (not to mention oblivious, racist, and classist), but rather the demonstration was a claim to exist, an exhortation to fellow community members by queers of color to hear their concerns and act on them.²⁷³ While acrid sociality is a black hole to nihilism, critique, protests, and other means of resistance are generative sociopolitical tools. This BLM action tapped into the states of Toronto's queer communities and dared to ask, "who belongs here?" It was an effective community check-in that ultimately left Toronto's queers more unified, or at least more productive, for important debates and discussions pertaining to police presence at pride celebrations continue to evolve from this action today.

We may "never touch queerness," Munoz suggests, and so in this sense, Edelman's outlook on the impossibility of a queer utopia is not totally maligned from Munoz's queer forecasts.²⁷⁴ Munoz and queer theory's fleets of utopian, reparative, and relational thinkers are invested in the present in ways that Edelman and other so-called antisocial thinkers are accused of abandoning. Munoz's scholarship is invested in the present in so much as it is in search of ways out of its stagnancy toward a better future. His theorizing is a "queer utopian hermeneutic" that queerly functions in its "aim to look for queer relational formations within the social."²⁷⁵ For Munoz, while subjects will likely never be "queer," technically speaking, queerness' constant positioning as our horizon will continue to play a hand in shaping queer relationships to the present and to the political.

²⁷³ Sarah-Joyce Battersby, "Black Lives Matter protest scores victory after putting Pride parade on pause," *Toronto Star*, July 3, 2016, <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2016/07/03/black-lives-matter-protest-scores-victory-after-putting-pride-parade-on-pause.html>.

²⁷⁴ Munoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

Through a loving, yet serious reflection on Munoz's penchant for gossip, Butler theories this collective process as a "communicable excitation."

The gossip asks another to imagine along, build a reality, make it true, if only for the duration of the communication. An excited and excitable communication, a way of passing along an affect that makes it larger, letting it lift off from reality, where the affect is not a discrete bit of excitation, a quantity: it conditions and enters the collective crafting that augments its intensity; it is never quite separable from the scene of address that it transforms.²⁷⁶

Gossip can operate as mode of nonsovereignty like sex and politics can. It is a phantasmic scene of creativity that opens subjects up, together, to nonsovereign imaginings and practices. Butler maintains that "[c]ommunicable excitation holds the potential for solidarity in the service of a utopia that is not an end to be realized but an open-ended experiment in reconfiguring time and space."²⁷⁷ With Butler's helpful translations of Munoz' thinking in mind, it seems that queers and other politicized communities can benefit more from considering Munoz's conceptualization of queerness on the horizon as a means of identity formation and politics, as opposed to an end, a static and finite way of being.

Like queerness, through which one can constantly reorient themselves socially and politically, solidarity is a mechanism that propels an individual towards greater unity in the present. Solidarity theories are maintenance for sociopolitical movements in which solidarity failures become outdated blueprints: defunct relational dynamics that reparative queer theorists insist must be recycled into something better, or at the very least, something new. Surely, Edelman, Bersani, and other antirelational and antisocial thinkers are committed to finding an effective means of transformative justice in the here and now. They are not personally apolitical or apathetic, nor do I deem their scholarship suggestive of such. Despite the somewhat

²⁷⁶ Butler, "Solidarity/Susceptibility," 2.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 8.

aggressive critiques of its theories, queer antirelationality has been extremely generative in the field of queer studies. Still, there is something to say about the tone and style of the antisocial thesis, as well as its archives. Antisocial theorists have been justifiably regarded as elitist, inaccessible, negative, and foreclosing, and their archives as white, male and limited.²⁷⁸ The antisocial of the antisocial thesis, therefore, is more attributable to its form – the arrogance and exclusivity of “high” academic theory – than its ideas.

With Munoz’s untimely death in 2014 there was a shattering of sorts within queer studies. The scholar who implored us to risk hope, to not settle for this straitjacket of a present, and who provided us with passionate ideas about how to survive being alive, had died of heart failure. I only met Munoz once, and did not know him personally, but the news of his passing brought me to an impasse. I obsessed over the cruel irony that the theorist who championed queer utopia had died so unceremoniously and suddenly at 46 years of age. His death, as is always the case with others’ dying, became about me. I was at the start of my PhD, and I became muddled up with anxiety and despair. I eventually climbed out of the void by scouring the Internet for biographical information about this queer academic rock star. I found out that the relational ways in which Munoz lived his life were reflective of his theories: full of generosity, hope, possibility...and gossip.

Speaking with his former colleagues, artists, and friends, it became undeniably clear that Muñoz participated in similar ecstatic queer relationships. Enacting this collective queer time through the strength of his friendships with the artists he admired, the students he taught, and the colleagues whose interests he shared, Muñoz’s academic assertion of the power of queer relationality translated into his daily life, constructing queer utopias in performances, lecture halls, or dinners with friends.

²⁷⁸ See Judith Halberstam, “The Queer Art of Failure,” in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 87-121; Halberstam, “The Anti-Social Turn.”

It did not take me long to find remnants of the love that Munoz left behind in the “tools he provided his students, artists, friends, and readers to construct their own queer worlds.”²⁷⁹

The queer antirelational versus relational debate is like many debates in the academy: unjustly dichotomized. The discrepancies amongst queer scholars’ work on antirelationality, to me, are most salient in their emphases and styles, in the effects of the affects that get produced and circulated by their theories amongst their readers. I have been in rooms with both Munoz and Edelman. Though both rooms gave me a lot to think about, walking out of one of those rooms undoubtedly left me more energized and hopeful than walking out of the other. I can more easily construct blueprints for better futures from Munoz’s scholarship. Although my encounters with Edelman’s work have left me feeling intrigued and impressed, the awe did not generate any plans for moving towards transformative justice. *No Future* did not motivate me to get out there and make the world a better and queerer place. And it is within this sense that such scholarship, like Edelman’s theories of queer antirelationality, can become “antisocial,” not necessarily because the work positions itself against generative relationality and hopeful politics, but because encounters with such scholarship can be depressing and uninspiring.

Some contemporary critical theory reeks of nihilism and leaves its readers to stew in hopelessness. Edelman’s thinking is not exceptional here, nor is likely that he would concur, as explored earlier in this chapter, that his scholarship is in fact deserving of such charges. Still, I cannot help but note as I conclude this chapter that David S. Buckel supposedly ended his life because he felt that his work towards sociopolitical justice had become futile. It is worthy of consideration to wonder how a productive progressive trailblazer like Buckel, whose work was

²⁷⁹ Emily Colucci, “Vacating The Here And Now For a There and Then: Remembering José Esteban Muñoz,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 31, 2014, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/vacating-now-remembering-jose-esteban-munoz/>.

valued by so many, could arrive at the conclusion that his world, a world he significantly improved, would be better off if he were no longer in it. I must admit that the idea that antirelational thinking – even if ever so tangentially and informally – may have contributed to Buckel’s demise, leaves me feeling even more ambivalent as I near my doctoral defense. Despite this apprehension, I am resolute in my belief that queers – that anyone – can opt out of the Symbolic Social Order to varying degrees without destroying themselves. If I felt otherwise, I might have killed myself a long time ago. It is an unsavory thought, but I feel Buckel’s *death* ultimately did more to prop up the status quo than it did to amend it. He played “sovereign” with his final act. What good came from that? His *life*, on the other hand, moved mountains. I wish he was still here.

---CHAPTER FOUR--- SUBSTITUTIVE SOLIDARITY

What's In a Wish?

In this chapter I contend that wishes are orectic mechanisms that act as common holding grounds for political solidarity for contemporary Canadian and American settler subjects. I theorize the functionality of wishes from within the frameworks of popular culture, psychoanalytic theory, and speech act theory. Why and how are solidarity wishes so ubiquitous in contemporary Canadian and American society? What do they look and sound like? Do solidarity wishes do anything? Or, more specifically, what are they good for? *Solidarity Wishes* posits that wishes are valuable frameworks for analyzing solidarity because they are realistic and revelatory depictions of it. Political solidarity is neither an easy practice nor a simple goal, and wishes, as a theoretical framework, carry its complexities. I do not mean to suggest that a wish is some preferred vehicle for political solidarity, but rather my project is a critical analysis of solidarity wishes, of which, I am suggesting, exist in abundance. And so, I am not analyzing solidarity desires within the context of wishes because I have faith in wishes. My thesis, rather, is that wishes are stalled states of desire that can signal that a subject's ability to enact solidarity is compromised. Interpreting subjects' contemporary solidarity desires as wishes can deepen understandings of subjects' relationships to the concepts of sovereignty and nonsovereignty, which in turn can deepen social scientists' and cultural theorists' understandings of why and how subjects may or may not experience motivation to engage in political solidarity.

In their broadest sense, solidarity wishes denote the gamut of desires for a subject's attachment to others, a generalized yearning for relationality. A solidarity wish can be any pang of desire that recognizes the cruel but astute revelation of the nonsovereign reality of human life

(and of all sentient life, I might claim, elsewhere). If human subjects were truly sovereign subjects, they would not require love and its endless array of translations and transmutations. They would know nothing of debt, commitment, obligation, promise, care, collaboration, or solidarity. Despite the fantasies of rogue subjectivity with which neoliberal capitalism entrances contemporary Canadian and American settler societies, subjects are each arguably engrossed in a similar project, trapped on the high-speed train of survival onto which no subject had any alternative to climbing aboard in the first place, and on which no subject is impervious to its final, silencing, destruction. This theory of generalized shared precarity illuminates the nonsovereignty of human life by exposing the holes in sovereign logic.

With the thinking of philosophers like Hannah Arendt in mind, Judith Butler gestures toward a possible code of ethics that all subjects could honor because all subjects are tethered together by the nonsovereignty of their non-negotiable membership to planet Earth. *Solidarity Wishes*, as delineated in the opening chapters, is most interested in political solidarity, the sort of solidarity that is pointed, intentional, and wielded outwards in response to/toward a cause, with others, for the sake of others. Like with love, a subject can wish for, or feel, solidarity as its recipient or its giver, though the subject positions of receiving or giving or feeling solidarity are not mutually exclusive. In this chapter I defend the claim that some subjects who fundamentally fail at political solidarity do so because they do not recognize their own vulnerability, their own shared precarity, their own need for sociopolitical infrastructure, and are therefore lacking the “susceptibility” that Butler theorizes is necessary for the procurement of solidarities.

While there are differences between the functions of a wish within psychoanalysis and its ordinariness in everyday life and popular culture, nuances that I attempt to tease out in this chapter, both realms reveal hungry subjects. As psychotherapist and writer Adam Phillips

contends, “wishing is the sign of loss; wanting things to be otherwise because they are not as they are supposed to be.”²⁸⁰ It is from within this context of lack, specifically from a Lacanian understanding of desire as lack, that *Solidarity Wishes* attempts to underscore solidarity’s demand, both within contemporary formal sociopolitical movements and the mundane. Wishes sketch a subject that desires something it feels it likely cannot and will not have. Under this light, wishes are good scenes for studying solidarity, not productive means for building it.

I distinguish ordinary wishes from psychoanalytic ones in order to magnify certain elements of a subject’s relationship to its desires and therefore better analyze them. A wish, in the ordinary sense, denotes conscious desire. The unconscious as described by Sigmund Freud, where many a subject’s wishes live and may very well forever remain, is an uncharted and presumably vast psychic terrain. An ordinary wish is simply the moment when a subject thinks it knows what it is talking about, and in particular, wanting about. It is a subject’s conscious translation of its object of desire. Objects of desire may prove inadequate for subjects in that they cannot or will not condition the subject’s world in the ways in which subjects imagine the obtainment of these objects of desire would occasion. These objects may also prove bad in the sense that they prove cruel, what Lauren Berlant has portrayed to be the devastating ways that subjects chase beloved objects of desire around, pursuits that are dangerous, unhealthy, or otherwise debilitating for desiring subjects despite their seeming cruciality to said subjects’ capacities to bear the strife of life.

Ordinary wishes, regardless of the accuracy of their conscious translations of a subject’s unconscious desires, are not necessarily earnest and genuine declarations of desire by subjects. There are a number of ways that subjects can dupe themselves and others where their desires are

²⁸⁰ Adam Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery: On Curiosity and Other Appetites* (New York, Vintage Books, 1998), 15.

concerned. I interrogate hashtag solidarity, for example, in chapter five as one such possibility. In this chapter I focus primarily on solidarity stances – performed solidarity wishes – in order to assess the orectic insight into political solidarity that wishes hold. Politics is one realm in which the benefits of the performance of certain subjects’ desires – genuine desires or not – are easily observable. My argument is that some subjects may take solidarity stances so that they can harvest from them what Freud commonly refers to in his body of work as “substitutive satisfaction.” When substitutive satisfaction is derived from solidarity wishes, whether such alternative satisfaction is intentionally and consciously procured or not by a subject, the subject is nourished in the absence of its “wished for” solidarity. The substitutive satisfaction derived from solidarity wishes that I analyze in this chapter can result from a subject’s intentional and conscious deception or can surprise a subject by informing them about what they did not know they had wanted. Substitutive satisfaction might alert a subject to the fact that they do not actually desire something or are desiring the wrong thing: in particular, a subject may learn that they desire something that hinges upon the performance or illusion of a specific desire rather than the actual obtainment of the object of desire. As chapter five argues, taking a few seconds to utilize a solidarity hashtag on a social media platform, for instance, may provide a subject with nourishing attention and affirmation.

The substitutive satisfaction a subject may receive through the performance of their solidarity wishes, as exemplified in the hashtag example, regardless of whether such satisfaction is intentionally procured or not, can result in a quelling of solidarity desires through the temporary extinguishment of the desire for the object the subject initially wished for or believed they had wished for. Solidarity stances arguably constitute sociopolitical action, but their execution is not necessarily the work of political solidarity. Instead, such stances may occur as

forms of substitutive solidarity, a term I conceived of with Sally J. Scholz' concept of "parasitical solidarity" in mind.²⁸¹ Both parasitical solidarities and substitutive solidarities are solidarity imposters that "feed off of the various species of solidarity" with a motivation for existence that may solely be for a subject's "rhetorical purposes."²⁸² I preserve the distinction between substitutive solidarities and parasitical solidarities in this chapter because I do not believe that all substitutive solidarities are necessarily selfish and predatory, qualities that I feel that characterizations of solidarity as parasitic connote. Good feelings that result from a subject's efforts to enact transformative justice are not inherently selfish or destructive. If anything, they are relevant. Ultimately, this chapter speaks to what, if anything, solidarity wishes can accomplish for a subject if it is not the enactment or obtainment of political solidarity itself.

Ordinary Wishes

The song "When You Wish Upon a Star" was released in 1940 for Disney's animated film *Pinocchio*. It is a contender for Disney's most famous song to date.²⁸³ The tune is short and contains four simple verses that reference a variety of orrectic jargon: wish, desires, heart, star, dreams, dreamers, fate, love, and longing. There seems little intentional distinction between any of these terms in the lyrics, which tell a simple story with two main characters. "You" of "when you wish upon a star" is the protagonist, and "fate," personified as "she," plays the supporting role. The song was released during WWII, and so surely the world's turbulent climate at the time had some bearing on the song's yearning for love and wish fulfillment. The song's morale is not easily discernible, but one interpretation is that fate is generous to those who wish with good

²⁸¹ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 46-48.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁸³ David Roberts, *British Hit Singles & Albums*, 19th ed. (London: Guinness World Records Limited, 2006), 134.

intentions. In the lyric “if your heart is in your dream, no request is too extreme,” if “heart” is interpreted as love, then the song seems to suggest that if those who wish are doing so out of goodness it follows that fate will take care of wishing subjects and tend kindly to their desires. The personification of wishes as matters of the heart, as opposed to the brain, reflect the romantic and haphazard qualities imbued in ordinary wishes in popular culture. Since wishes are not often experienced by subjects as coming true, they are portrayed as orectic shots in the dark. When wishes do come true they are regarded as magical or miraculous. Wishes today, in Canadian and American mainstream culture, overwhelmingly are reflective of this ethereal association. If subjects find themselves inside of a wish, then they have likely already come to grips with the reality that their object of desire is probably unobtainable.

The drama of what becomes of a subject’s wishes in everyday life often looks like anything but a literal granting of them. Popular culture hints that straightforward, material, and positive resolutions to a subject’s desires do not come easily, and in order to survive the disappointments of their lives, subjects must be creative with what they get in response to what they want. “The whole course of the history of civilization” – Freud insists – “is no more than an account of the various methods adopted by mankind for ‘binding’ their unsatisfied wishes.”²⁸⁴ Freud cites religion, morality, and art, among other constructions, as wranglers of frustrated desires. The FMyLife blog, which received more than 1.7 million hits each day in 2009 shortly after it was created, is a humorous, quite pitiful, exhibit of stunted desires.²⁸⁵ The site, which is still in operation today, allows for users to share short anecdotes about their day, in tweet-like

²⁸⁴ Sigmund Freud, “The claims of psycho-analysis to scientific interest”. *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 13 (1958), 186-7.

²⁸⁵ For some interesting commentary on this cultural style of self-deprecation see Don Aucoin, “The culture of failure: If at first you don’t succeed, tell the world about it – because Web culture has become obsessed with our mistakes,” *The Boston Globe*, May 30, 2009, http://archive.boston.com/lifestyle/articles/2009/05/30/the_culture_of_failure_thrives_on_the_web/

form, justifying the “FML” (Fuck My Life) refrain that ends each post – an “art” in its own right.²⁸⁶ Here are two of my favorites:

Today, a 100-foot maple tree fell on my house. I was inside. I was sleeping. FML
– By Anonymous, 21/9/2019

Today, while cleaning out my daughter’s closet, I found my missing dildo. It’s a mold of my husband’s penis. FML
– By Anonymous, 7/1/2018

In addition to creating such posts, users can respond to each other by clicking one of two buttons: “I agree, your life sucks” or “You deserved it.”

There is certainly a performative element to the FML website, and the veracity of anything posted there is indeterminable. Nonetheless, this public display of creativity, steeped in complaint, is a fascinating reminder that subjects are often left unsatisfied, that unexpected and unwanted events happen, and that the sharing of such misery is comforting, possibly funny. Along the same lines, *Corrupt-A-Wish* is an online game that has had an online presence for about the last fifteen years across websites like Reddit and other virtual community platforms. The game rests on someone posting a wish to which someone must respond by granting the wish, but with a caveat, referred to as a “corruption.” One example from a round of the game on reddit reads: “I wish I could play guitar flawlessly,” to which another poster replied, “Granted, but only when you’re underwater.”²⁸⁷ Even as works of fiction, these posts reveal a certain preoccupation with unfulfilled desires. Brainstorming ways to ruin others’ hypothetical desires seems both entertaining and therapeutic to the participants. These online examples also operate as pathways to belonging. Complaints, thwarted desires, and misery are aired out and shared on these virtual platforms, but as a means of community building and fun. In this sense, unfulfilled or failed

²⁸⁶ <https://www.fmylife.com>

²⁸⁷ https://www.reddit.com/r/ThreadGames/comments/7mzi5p/corrupt_a_wish/

desires can be just as (if not more) generative, dramatic, and meaningful for subjects than fulfilled ones.

The dictionary definition of “wish” brings to light a significant quality of the concept that mainstream usage implies: to “feel or express a strong desire or hope for something that is not easily attainable; want something that cannot or probably will not happen.”²⁸⁸ Wishes, in common vernacular, gesture toward objects of desire that seem distant to the wisher, such as in “I wish I’d win the lottery” or “I wish you were here.” Lottery winners comprise a tiny subset of the population, and I can only wish for someone to be “here” if they are not. Therefore, such conscious desires are contingent upon a reality antithetical to the circumstances yearned for in the wish. A wish, then, “indicates a mere expression of preference,” an expression that is more melancholic than it is excited, far from any plan of action.²⁸⁹ Of course, miracles might happen, or put in the language of desire, dreams *do* come true, but the rarity of such happenstance is widely recognized. Ordinary wishes consciously recognize the distance between one’s reality and one’s object of desire.

Wishes can also express desires to undo past circumstances, like “I wish I never said that” or “I wish I had adhered to my dissertation writing schedule.” Such expressions of desire to acquire un-acquirable objects, which in these instances would require changing what has already transpired, contribute to a wish’s magical character. Make-A-Wish International clearly embodies this ethos. The organization uses its wide array of resources to grant wishes for children with life-threatening illnesses or disabilities in over fifty countries.²⁹⁰ The wishes, which

²⁸⁸ Oxford University Press, “Definition of wish,” *Lexico.com*, July 14, 2021, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/wish>.

²⁸⁹ Tamas Pataki, *Wish-Fulfillment in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis: The Tyranny of Desire* (London: Routledge, 2014), 4.

²⁹⁰ Make A Wish International, <https://www.worldwish.org/en>.

usually encompass desires to meet a famous person or travel to a foreign place, are understood to be tall orders that only come to fruition through the immense funding the network receives and the many volunteers it depends on. Justin Bieber for example, to this Canadian wild child's credit, has volunteered in over 250 kids' wishes.²⁹¹

As one of my supervisor's intuited during my writing process, *Solidarity Wishes* feels like a "grappling with hopelessness."²⁹² If a wish is indeed an expression of desire by a subject for a remote object, then the title of this dissertation could be misread as a declaration of hopelessness. Readers might assume that *Solidarity Wishes* is a commentary on the impossibility of political solidarity. It is not. Rather, the title is intended to reflect the complicated processes, diversity of translations, mixed results, and frustrated ambitions of political solidarity. *Solidarity Wants* would not have captured the complicated nature of political solidarity, or its character as a far-flung object of desire in contemporary society. When a server asks what a person "wants to eat," or "would like to order," the understanding held by everyone present in the restaurant is that whatever the customer would like from the menu is obtainable through the combined efforts of the server, the kitchen staff, and the money being exchanged. Similarly, when a parent pragmatically asks their child what they want for their birthday, the intended outcome is that the

²⁹¹ *Today*, September 3, 2015, <https://www.today.com/video/justin-bieber-helped-more-than-250-make-a-wish-dreams-come-true-518643267863>.

²⁹² Early in my writing process during an email exchange with Bobby Noble, who was my supervisor at the time, we discussed his feedback to a draft of my third chapter. His observations on the dissertation's relationship to hopelessness proved helpful to the distillation of my arguments. Here's a snippet of his words from that exchange: "I now have a better sense of both the tone/mood of writing but also how these things will by necessity shape argument and vice versa. More than any other project I've read, it is clear in your writing that these two things will continue to be bound to each other. I wonder how to make that a structure of the project? And make it much more explicit? That there are two things the writing does: grapple with hopelessness (especially in and around the potential or feared impotence of academic work as a politic) and make an argument. One cannot be separate(d) from the other. As you read other people on this, think about how these two points – deeply embedded in each other – can come to form a structure of your writing/dissertation. Inside what structure do other academics do their writing when they attempt to grapple with these two things?" Bobby Noble, email correspondence, August 6, 2019.

parent will know what to organize, or as if often the case, purchase, for their child. In both consumerist examples, a “want” is usually as obtainable as it is affordable. Under neoliberal capitalism, many objects of a subject’s desires, from bodies to brand names, can be demystified and simplified to their consumerist possibilities. Political solidarity, however, is not easily purchased. Perhaps this is a significant factor that has led to political solidarity’s propensity to materialize inside of wishes. Acquiring solidarity is more complicated than being able to afford it. Wishes reflect this difficult path to substantiality.

There is more to what makes a wish a wish than a desire for attachment to an elusive object. The other distinguishing feature of ordinary wishes concerns the character of the expression of desire, or the structure of the actual wish. Wishes, unlike promises, agreements, and to a certain extent prayer, do not necessitate the involvement of others to do their work. Wishes can be masturbatory. They may be made personally and quietly, as mental events that rely solely on the fantasy of the satiation of the subject’s desires as their fodder. If others are involved, they may be present only as figments of desire. When wishes go public, as is frequently the case in politics, it may be so the effects of the performance of a wish can be harvested for some self-serving means, what Scholz refers to as “rhetorical purposes” as in winning votes or favor.²⁹³ Furthermore, to consider wishes as masturbatory does not imply that a wisher’s desired object is never “cruel,” in Berlant’s sense of the term, but rather that wishes are inherently optimistic because they encase subjective orientations to various forms of attachment.²⁹⁴ What subjects are expressing attachment to in a wish – the object of their desire – may very well turn out to be toxic for them. Yet, and even though they may never encounter the objects of their wishes, the event of a wish, and in particular a sustained wish, might be enough

²⁹³ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 47.

²⁹⁴ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

to get hungry subjects off, to get them through another day of a harsh reality, regardless of the degree of nourishment the actualization of the wish would provide them.

The magical and spiritual qualities imbued in wishes in popular contexts by the likes of mainstream shared superstitions and rituals contribute to their personal aesthetic and shape as privatized phenomena. It is common practice, for example, to close one's eyes, make a wish, and blow out the candles on a birthday cake. Wishing wells are usually located in quiet and tucked away parts of parks and gardens. Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* was asked to close her eyes by the wizard while she clicked her ruby red slippers to the tune of her repeated wish-mantra "there's no place like home." According to some superstitions, your wish will not come true if you share the content of your wish with someone else after you blow the puffy seeds off a dandelion or the eyelash out of your hand or walk away with the larger piece of the turkey wishbone after you and someone else both tugged at each an end. In popular culture, ordinary wishes are conscious and often internalized bouts of desire for seemingly distant objects.

Psychoanalytic Wishes

Everything from neuroses to religions have been theorized by Freud as part of the effort to "seek a compensation for the lack of satisfaction of human wishes."²⁹⁵ Psychoanalysis posits that one credible interpretation of a human life is as a series of dramas whose plots revolve around the resolve of an endless array of desires filtered through a spectrum of varied degrees of consciousness and intentionality. Wish fulfillment, broadly speaking, is the name for such drama, as Thomas Pataki illuminates in his comprehensive project on the concept, and from whose theorizing I draw from in this chapter.²⁹⁶ Psychoanalysis describes all subjectivity as desiring

²⁹⁵ Freud, "The Claims," 186-7.

²⁹⁶ Pataki, *Wish-Fulfillment*.

subjectivity. From the moment the umbilical cord is cut, a human subject is on a journey to finding and sustaining its own nourishment. Creativity, disappointment, disillusionment, resourcefulness, fatigue, dread, hunger, hate, love, jealousy, hope – so much drama goes into the thick plot toward wish fulfillment. Living a life can be exhausting and depleting, and in order to survive, most subjects require sustenance that responds to emotional as well as physiological hunger. And as contemporary psychoanalysis increasingly incorporates neurobiology into its scope, the overlap of these false-dichotomous appetites – psychical versus physical – is ever more apparent.²⁹⁷

In *The Beast in the Nursery: On Curiosity and Other Appetites*, Phillips sets out to prove the importance – mainly the invigorating power – of hope.²⁹⁸ Hope is the feeling that subjects might find what they are looking for if they keep looking, which is to say, if they survive their frustrated desires and keep on living. To prevent such a visitation to hope from riding the well-worn tracks of stupid optimism, Phillips stages his thesis within “appetite.” Hope can be maintained so long as nourishment is sought, but without an appetite, one might lack the proper motivation to keep striving toward fulfillment. In other words, subjects might lose interest. Subjects might become uninspired. Phillips’ claim is that “inspiration is the best word we have for appetite, and that appetite is the best thing we have going for us (children are visionaries simply in their commitment to first things first).” An appetite is as vital as it is diverse, for “it is appetite that makes things edible, just as it is imagination that makes lives livable once they are economically viable.”²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ For a good example of scholarship that digs into this overlap, see Robert M. Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans At Our Best and Worst* (New York, New York: Penguin Press, 2017).

²⁹⁸ Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery*.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., XXII.

To Phillips, “lives are only livable if they give pleasure” (even relief is a form of pleasure), and so it becomes necessary to “renew our pleasures, remember their intensities” in order to be “delighted by hope, not merely persecuted or prosecuted by it.”³⁰⁰ Without appetite, subjects are no longer magnetized to the objects of their desires. Losing interest can be likened to losing the ability to feel hungry, a dangerous state that does not absolve subjects from the emptiness to which hunger pains once alerted them. Such precarity is palpable in the context of deeply depressed folks who no longer desire anything and are extremely vulnerable as a result. Maintaining interest, which is dependent upon having an appetite, is something that psychoanalysis, and psychodynamic therapy in general, is supposed to assist analysands with.

Phillips notes:

His patients, Freud realized, were working on and at their psychic survival, but like artists not like scientists; and their material was their personal history encoded in their sexuality. They were not empiricists, or only fleetingly; they were fantasists. Their adaptations were ingeniously imaginative, however painful; but they were stuck. Their symptoms were the equivalent of writer’s block, or rather, speaker’s block. Indeed, Freud was becoming their new kind of good listener, and their champion; someone who could get, who could make something of, their strange ways of speaking. Someone who, like a good parent, or a good art critic, could appreciate what they were up to, what they could make, and make a case for it.³⁰¹

Psychoanalytic theory describes desire as the lifeblood of human existence. It follows that psychoanalysis, and psychotherapy in general, aims to equip its practitioners with dependable methods and tools for harvesting creativity so that desires can continue to be stoked.

Freud, as is argued by Pataki, uses “desire” and “wish” interchangeably. For Freud, a “wish” spans “all the conative and orectic states that set our minds turning.”³⁰² Though some psychoanalytic thinkers propose conceptual differences between “wish” and “desire,” and claim

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Adam Phillips, *Becoming Freud: The Making of a Psychoanalyst* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 150.

³⁰² Pataki, *Wish-Fulfillment*, 5.

that Freud has contributed to such distinctions, I follow Pataki's thinking that wishes and desires are generally the same thing within classical psychoanalytic theory. Furthermore, the distinction between psychoanalytic wishes and ordinary wishes that I am illuminating in this chapter is not a distinction to which Freud pays any attention, though he *is* concerned with mapping the degree of consciousness of wishes/desires. Distinguishing between these two conceptualizations of wishes is a helpful way to recognize the unconscious and consider subjective intentionality. Ordinary wishes are conscious wishes, though the extent to which unconscious desires shape conscious wishes is unknowable, as are the effects that such a translation from the preconscious or unconscious to the conscious can have on a subject's desires.

Psychoanalytic wishes are not as clearly delineated as ordinary wishes and as a result contain more potential. Ordinary wishes are pessimistic. While it is true that they do not totally sabotage desire, but do some psychical work to keep it alive, like a foot in the door of wanting, they are nonetheless conscious, and often internalized, negative declarations. The negativity stems from the forsakenness of the object(s) of desire. Ordinary wishes are not taken very seriously in everyday life because not much is expected of them. While my father wishes to win the lottery, he is not likely going to win it, and he can bear the disappointment of this unfulfilled wish because he already believes in the unlikelihood of its fulfillment. He is well beyond any mourning of not winning the lottery, and by extension, is comfortable at the prospects of remaining in the middle class. Yet, his desire for wealth, security, and comfort that a lottery prize would add to his and his family's life is not dead to him. There remains a flicker of hope in the context of his wish. Thereby the wish is a mental mechanism that pacifies his disappointment while simultaneously hampering any movement toward his object of desire. In this light, ordinary wishes may appear contradictory, more ambivalent than they are pessimistic,

disappointing yet exciting, numbing yet energizing. Ordinary wishes may reinforce the status quo even as they toy with it. Ambivalence, and the paralysis that ambivalence can manifest into, however, are certainly not dependable affective states where inspiration is concerned, and so wishes can easily turn subjects into custodians of the status quo. Wishes often reflect stagnancy.

Unlike ordinary wishes, psychoanalytic wishes are dynamic and incitant, may or may not enter our consciousness, and can result in consequences that travel beyond the boundaries of a conscious rehearsal of desire. Psychoanalytic wishes, whether subjects like it or not, are attended to. Regardless of how subjects deal with their conscious wishes, the unconscious is always working, always awake, and always hungry. Unconscious desires cannot be ignored, or as Deborah Britzman puts it, “[t]he unconscious knows no time, no negation, and tolerates contradiction.”³⁰³ The half-heartedly fantasized progression of an ordinary wish is to result in the fruition of one’s declared and seemingly distant object of desire. The psychoanalytic concept of wish fulfillment, however, provides psychoanalytic wishes with an array of possible progressions – a diversity of potential next chapters. Like with ordinary wishes, psychoanalytic wishes through psychoanalytic wish fulfillment, tend to not experience the homecoming of their objects of desire. But unlike ordinary wishes, psychoanalytic wishes, through psychoanalytic wish fulfillment, can result in adequate alternative satiation for a subject. This alternative satiation may then extinguish the initial wish, although perhaps only temporarily.

The predominant difference between ordinary and psychoanalytic wishes can be attributed to their distinct processes of fulfillment. An ordinary wish is fulfilled when the wish comes true in the most literal sense. Pataki outlines four conditions that must be met for ordinary

³⁰³ Deborah P. Britzman, *Novel Education: Psychoanalytic Studies of Learning and Not Learning* (New York, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 48.

wish-fulfillment to occur. In his summary below, “p” signifies what is being wished for, aka: the object(s) of desire.

In the *ordinary sense*, any wish that p is fulfilled only if:

- (i) the wish is extinguished: the agent ceases to wish that *p*;
- (ii) the agent comes to believe that *p*;
- (iii) it is a fact that *p*: the wished-for state of affairs or action occurs;
- (iv) the wish is extinguished *because* of the occurrence of institution of *p*.

In psychoanalytic wish fulfillment – what Pataki denotes as Freudian wish fulfillment – the above conditions (i) and (ii) must be met, while (iii) and (iv) do not. In Freudian wish fulfillment like within ordinary wish fulfillment the agent believes the wish has come true and the wish is extinguished, two psychic events that take place without the wish literally coming true. So then, what does adequate satiation of one’s desire look like, if it’s not the literal coming true of one’s wishes?³⁰⁴

Another well-known Disney song, “A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes,” released in 1950 for the *Cinderella* soundtrack, gets a bit more specific with its unpacking of desire but still personifies the heart as the human organ at the center of wishes. Of course, the heart as a fleshy and essential organ is not what Disney is referencing, but rather what is being described is the heart’s figurativeness as a mascot of love. The first line of the song, which doubles as the third, defines dreams and also, rather uncannily, describes the processes of Freudian wish fulfillment within them: “A dream is a wish your heart makes when you’re fast asleep, in dreams you will lose your heartaches, whatever you wish for, you keep.” The morale of this song may be that one should never abandon hope because if one has “faith in [their] dreams” someday their “rainbow will come smiling through,” someday the subject in question will be happy. Or a more psychoanalytically derived version of this lesson is that one should never stop dreaming because

³⁰⁴ Pataki, *Wish-Fulfillment*, 8.

dreams can provide subjects with some creative blueprints for how to renovate their disappointing conscious existences. Specifically, dreams can help subjects adapt to the horrors of their existential situations, what Jacques Lacan means by “lack.” Dreams can soothe the sting of setbacks through some compensatory means of psychological nourishment beyond the attainment of a subject’s object(s) of desire. In dreams, hard-to-reach objects of desire have the possibility of nourishing their subjects. I doubt the song’s composers had Freud’s concept of substitutive satisfaction in mind when they wrote it, but the lyrics nonetheless describe his idea.

According to classical psychoanalytic theory, wish fulfillment or attempts at wish fulfillment can occur through “dreams, daydreams, phantasies, neurotic and psychotic symptoms – delusions, hallucinations – jokes and art, slips of the tongue, bungled actions, magical or omnipotent thinking and illusions such as religion, as well as forms of social organization and moral institutions.”³⁰⁵ At the individual level, wish fulfillment occurs through symptoms, which to Freud are the junctions at which “the repressed and the repressing thought can come together.”³⁰⁶ Symptoms, as Pataki contends, are “not only caused by conflicts between a person’s wishes and the internalized demands of reality, but *are* the fulfillments or satisfactions.”³⁰⁷ If for whatever reason subjects are hampered from moving toward their object(s) of desire, and so prevented from obtaining wish fulfillment in the ordinary sense, they might be able to “produce transformations in themselves – self-deceptive or consoling beliefs and phantasies, hallucinatory experiences, delusions, or other symptoms – which manage to substitute for the real objects of those wishes and, in a manner, satisfy and temporarily terminate them.”³⁰⁸ The satisfaction garnered from wishes in this way, through psychoanalytic wish fulfillment as opposed to

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 4.

³⁰⁶ Freud, 1950, as quoted in Pataki (need to fix this citation)

³⁰⁷ Pataki, *Wish Fulfillment*, 4.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

ordinary wish fulfillment, is what Freud referred to as substitutive satisfaction. In the next section I superimpose Freud's idea of substitutive satisfaction onto political solidarity in order to illuminate how solidarity wishes and solidarity efforts can be in pursuit of something beyond the enactment or material manifestation of solidarity itself.

Stances and Non-Performativity

I believe performances of desire, which I identify as stances, to be one of the most prominent shapes of solidarity wishes in Canada and the United States today. While I recognize that practitioners of political solidarity in Canada and the United States today can and do successfully produce it in a variety of ways, I am interested in the ever-widening gap between so called solidarity actions and non or less active *seeming* behaviors like thoughts, wishes, and stances. Broadly speaking, a stance is a wish performed, a public position a subject takes through the expression of their desire. A stance happens only in the presence of an audience. Otherwise, what has occurred is not a stance at all, but an ordinary wish, a thought, a prayer, or some other privatized mechanism of desire. Stances air out desire, but like wishes, may not necessarily do anything to close the distance between a subject and the object of desire cited in the wish.

This is not to say that stances are unproductive forms of wishes. A solidarity stance may very well secure satisfaction for a subject, but not necessarily through an enactment of political solidarity, which if procured would constitute wish fulfillment in the ordinary sense. When a solidarity seeking subject derives nourishment from a substitutive satisfaction around solidarity, what I refer to as substitutive solidarity, the ordinary wish fulfillment of political solidarity may be hampered. Political solidarity can be complicated and painstaking labor for formal and informal activists. Therefore, subjects may consider, perhaps even unconsciously, solidarity

stances to be easier routes to personal satisfaction than doing what is necessary to engage in political solidarity. Subjects, too, may not even consciously desire political solidarity, but may be more so interested in being noticed as desiring it. Once satiated by some substitutive satisfaction, often a form of attention or affirmation, a subject's motivation to produce or engage in political solidarity may recess. Substitutive satisfaction can act as a backdoor sustenance that deceptively appeases solidarity-seeking subjects. The satisfaction, the nourishment, is real. The deception is in reference to what takes place within the subject when the satisfaction received extinguishes (albeit perhaps only temporarily) the initial wish for solidarity, as if solidarity was obtained. Though the nourishing effects of some substitutive satisfaction may extinguish solidarity wishes, the desired content of the wish is not obtained and therefore the wish is not resolved in the ordinary sense but defeated or deferred.

Stances publicize wishes, and the benefits of doing so can vary from wisher to wisher. Public officials, like politicians for example, might take a stance on a contentious issue or in response to an event to secure favor with their constituents in the absence of consequential actions like policy reform. Or their stances may very well be first steps within a calculated reaction – a series of intentional actions that gesture toward the object of desire from the initial wish. It is easy to come up with recent examples of powerful public officials taking stances for their own political gain, or of the media practicing fearmongering, concocting distracting spectacles, and unnecessarily inflating controversy in order to sell stories. Stances and promises comprise much of the rhetoric that ascends out of political campaigns. Justin Trudeau, for example, was abetted in his successful campaign to the office of prime minister of Canada by his promise to instigate electoral reform. He's currently serving in his third term of office and still

no such reform has happened.³⁰⁹ While partisan politics, special interests, and personal relationships can all affect voting outcomes, the Canadian and American publics vote individuals into power – at least in part – based on the seductive potential for action that can be derived from their airings out of desire, from the allure of publicized political stances and promises.

To understand what performed solidarity wishes can accomplish for a subject, it is helpful to explore what they do not do for a subject. Sara Ahmed's concept of the "non-performative" is essential to my analysis here. For Ahmed, speech acts operate as non-performatives when "they do not bring into effect that which they name."³¹⁰ Ahmed conceives of this term out of her research on diversity initiatives within academic institutional settings. Specifically, she theorizes how institutions' "statements of commitment" to diversity initiatives do not operate performatively in the sense that they do not do what they describe. This begs acknowledgement of the layered concept of performativity in gender studies, queer theory, and philosophy. While Judith Butler famously sketched a theory of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* first published in 1990, both Butler and Ahmed are building from speech act theory that was introduced by the philosopher J.L. Austin in his seminal text *How to Do Things with Words* published in 1962.³¹¹

Speech act theory considers both the informative and active qualities of language. As Ahmed observes, "Austin appears to de-limit the potentiality of words by suggesting that some utterances do things and others do not." He draws a distinction between descriptive utterances

³⁰⁹ Tyler Kustra, "Trudeau and allies pledged 1,813 times to reform Canada's elections. Now it won't happen.," *Washington Post*, February 13, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/13/canadians-wanted-their-government-to-reflect-the-national-vote-but-these-reforms-arent-happening/>.

³¹⁰ Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 119.

³¹¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); J.L. Austin in J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, eds., *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered in Harvard University in 1955* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

that “report on something,” which can be assessed as true or false, and performative utterances that perform actions through their very existence, which can be appraised as successful or not depending on the relationship between an uttering subject and its world. Austin terms successful performatives as “happy,” and ones that fail as “unhappy.” An “unhappy” or failed performative occurs when the action named in the speech is not enacted.³¹² Like Ahmed, I am skeptical of this distinction that some spoken words “do things and others do not.” With Foucault on my shoulder, I join an array of poststructuralist thinkers who acknowledge that as subjects we are never spared from discursive power, and that language, regardless of its communicative and descriptive capabilities, is always discursive.

Performativity, in the concept’s broadest sense, involves the involuntary processes by which a subject harnesses discursive power in order to be something in their world.³¹³ A subject cannot opt out of these processes that generate meaning through their own actions, behaviors, speech, and thoughts, nor can a subject have dominion over their discursive effects. Gender is a performative example that is useful in understanding such discursive processes. While Butler has since been critiqued for her theory of gender performativity, notably for her perceived conflation of drag performance with lived gender embodiment, her groundbreaking theorizing around performativity nonetheless has significantly impacted how gender is understood and thought to be constructed today. For Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, gender “ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort.”³¹⁴ Gendered behaviors and characteristics are performative because “the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and

³¹² Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 54.

³¹³ For a history of this concept and survey of its capaciousness see James Loxley, *Performativity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

³¹⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 143.

sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.”³¹⁵ In a nutshell, the theory of gender performativity regards gender enactment as discursive.

To continue to be gendered in the world a subject must continue to do something, a series of things, repeatedly, ritualistically. The theory of social construction suggests that subjects do not solely inherit gender (biologically, culturally, or otherwise), but that they also accomplish it, by making its meaning, again and again.³¹⁶ For Butler, “[p]erformativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.”³¹⁷ For Ahmed,

[i]n the world of the non-performative, to name is not to bring into effect. For Austin, failed performatives are unhappy: they do not act because the conditions required for the action to succeed are not in place (for example, if the person who apologizes is insincere, then the apology would be unhappy). In my model of the non-performative, the failure of the speech act to do what it says is not a failure of intent or even circumstance, *but is actually what the speech act is doing*.³¹⁸

If we swap gender out for solidarity and follow Austin’s, Butler’s, and Ahmed’s lines of thinking, it can be deduced that many solidarity wishes operate as non-performatives not because the political solidarity that could manifest from a wish is prone to failure, but because these acts of wishing themselves foreclose the enactment of political solidarity in real time for a subject. In other words, *not* doing solidarity is what some solidarity wishes end up doing. The effects of an institution’s diversity commitment, to stick with Ahmed’s research example, can provide practicing subjects with some substitutive satisfaction, such as good press or government funding, which ultimately may stifle these subjects’ efforts towards practicing what they have committed to. A wish for solidarity, in this sense, may be a pass on solidarity. From fiery

³¹⁵ Ibid., 173.

³¹⁶ Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” *Gender and Society* 1, No. 2 (June, 1987), 125-151.

³¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York, New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

³¹⁸ Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 117.

political rhetoric to internalized yearning, solidarity wishes can function as performative non-performatives.

Substitutive Satisfaction and the Status Quo

Solidarity wishes are frequent throughout WIFI-facilitated, media-driven, globalized cultures. They are often articulated in the form of public stances, such as statements or declarations by a group that, or an individual who, testifies to the struggles of a solidarity group of which those taking the stance are not members of, or a petition against some unjust law or oppressive institutional policy. Stances can also look like politicians expressing dismay at a foreign leader's treatment of its citizens, or a labor union sympathizing with another union's obstacles to organizing. Solidarity stances can even encompass something as broad as a man displaying solidarity with women or a white person declaring solidarity with people of color, and in response to recent events or burgeoning social movements. Solidarity stances in and of themselves do not resolve the problems they reference or respond to. So, what do these expressions of solidarity accomplish? And for whom? What is the nature of the satisfaction that can be derived for a subject from a solidarity wish that is beyond attenuation to the content of the wish's supposed stimulating desire? Furthermore, how do solidarity wishes help subjects sustain the status quo through substitutive satisfaction, as I proposed earlier? Why and how is a subject hindered from progressive movement towards its initial object of desire once substitutive satisfaction is generated?

To understand how substitutive satisfaction is derived for a subject through psychoanalytic wish fulfillment it is helpful to home in on a few examples. I will start with the campy queer-cult classic and American film *Miss Congeniality* (2000), within which Sandra

Bullock plays a butch female FBI agent who goes undercover as a Miss America contestant to thwart a suspected attack at the pageant. Posing as Miss New Jersey, she fully participates alongside the other rightful contestants in order to protect them. In the question-and-answer section of the contest when asked what the most important thing is that society requires, each contestant confidently offers “world peace,” an answer that is met each time with affirmative cheers from the audience. When it is Bullock’s character’s turn she initially retorts: “that would be harsher punishment for parole violators, Stan.” After enduring the few beats of awkward silence that follow such an out-of-place answer, she strategically adds, “and, world peace,” to which the audience responds with ruckus applause.

Miss New Jersey’s smooth recovery is illustrative of the type of stance that I am analyzing here. While the Miss America contestants may truly desire world peace, they are not actively pursuing it by naming it. Rather, iterating the desire for world peace earns these contestants affirmation from the audience and the chance to win the pageant. The literal securing of world peace becomes beside the point. The film sardonically comments on the expected political passivity of beauty contestants. “World peace” is broad and simple, and stupidly hopeful, and so it will not threaten the characterization of these women as the vapid showpieces upon which the pageant relies. “World peace” is a culturally authorized desire for these women, a good answer for contestants who are essentially competing against one another to be seen as the most agreeable – or congenial – feminine object in the room. It is a safe wish, as far as the status quo is concerned. The world, rife with anything *but* peace, is not going to change on behalf of such a stance, even if the stance is shared by every contestant on the stage, which as the film satirically depicts, is the case.

The qualities of vagueness and blind optimism of the wish for world peace, qualities that are generally expected of the pageant contestants and imposed by societal gender norms that link femininity, beauty, and passivity, help maintain these subjects' objects of desire as near impossible for them to obtain, as well as ensure that the contestants remain ill-equipped to move toward their object(s) of desire. Specific desires for strategies to appease the Israeli-Palestinian decades-long ongoing conflict or to pass gun control legislation in the United States would have been better wishes in the sense that they are more context-specific and therefore slightly more feasible (though, of course, still tall orders...), but they do not qualify as good wishes for the beauty contestants in *Miss Congeniality*. These wishes, like Bullock's character's initial wish for harsher punishment for parole violators, trespass a slew of social and institutional dictates that are mandatory to the successful operation of the pageant. The pageant cannot function as a platform for political intervention because politics is considered by the mainstream to be repellant of the pageant's main purpose for existing, which is, to put it bluntly, trivial entertainment and sexual objectification. Certain ideologies must be safeguarded for the pageant to exist as it does.

Miss Congeniality is a work of fiction, though the insidious feminine standards around beauty, passivity, and apolitics that are mocked in the film are of course inspired by the very real forces of patriarchy, misogyny, gender hegemony, and Western savoir complexes. And the 1968 feminist protests against the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey reflected these forces and their complicated effects on women's lives.³¹⁹ Along with the FMyLife website and

³¹⁹ Beth Kreydatus, "Confronting the 'Bra-Burners': Teaching Radical Feminism with a Case Study." *The History Teacher* 41, no. 4 (2008): 489–504. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40543887>; Carol Hanisch, "What Can Be learned: A Critique of the Miss America Protest," Writings by Carol Hanisch, accessed December 18, 2020, <http://carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/MissACritique.html>; Lindsay Van Gelder, "The truth about bra-burners," *Ms.* (September–October 1992), 80–81.

Corrupt-A-Wish online game, the film is also an example of popular culture that reflects a significant degree of vilification of conscious desire. To explore this quality extensively throughout the film industries in the United States and Canada is way outside the scope of this dissertation, but one need not look far to find a variety of film tropes that convey skepticism in response to subjects' ordinary wishes. There is the *be careful what you wish for* trope that takes up residence most predominantly in horror and drama films. In these plots protagonists can be witnessed spending much of the film catching something like the love of their life or their dream job only to ultimately end up running from a serial killer or feeling trapped in their new career. There is also the *you already have all that you need* trope that is notorious in romantic comedies and Hallmark-type stories. The characters in these films usually find out that their chased-after objects of desire have been hiding out all along right under their noses. A third trope, the *wanting too much* trope, tells stories about subjects not quitting while they are ahead when it comes to following their dreams or answering to their desires. Films with moralistic undertones, like Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, for example, often rely on this trope. These three film tropes (these tropes are found within storytelling of any medium really) exemplify how the stories subjects tell about themselves are laced with discomfort and fear over desire, which is to say that these pieces of popular culture, in their own way, perpetuate the status quo by vilifying ambition.

Films and online media are of course not the only pieces of culture that reveal this profound human inferiority complex around desire. Puritanism and the widespread disavowal of female sexual pleasure are just two among many social constructions that have historically

showcased doubt that human beings are deserving of the objects of their desires. I now turn to an example that is not a work of fiction, unfortunately, American gun violence, whose preponderance showcases the reality of political solidarity manifested as frustrated desires, as opposed to political actions. According to a 2016 study in *Preventative Medicine*, 99.85% of Americans will know a victim of gun violence in their lifetime.³²⁰ Since the Columbine school shooting of 1999 gun violence has been a mainstay of American public consciousness. Fear and anguish in response to mass shootings over the last two decades have kept gun violence front and center in media coverage. In addition to school shootings, so-called terrorist attacks like the massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando in 2016 continue to stoke paranoia amongst Americans.³²¹

Though they make headlines and inspire passionate debate about violence, guns, gender, race, mental health, religion, bigotry, and difference, mass shootings only account for a fraction of America's gun violence epidemic. Guns are the major causes of death and injury in cases of suicide/attempted suicide, law enforcement activity, murder, self-defence, and accidents.³²² Regardless of which classifications are used and which statistics are circulated, guns are directly implicated in contemporary widespread American suffering. Like cancer, gun violence has been accepted as part of the American experience, as evidenced in school shooting drills and increased surveillance and security measures in public places, private institutions, and transportation hubs. As a lobbied for and well-funded facet of the everyday in the United States and – though to a much lesser extent – Canada, gun violence is part of the status quo. Despite the support that

³²⁰ Bindu Kalesan, Janice Weinberg, and Sandro Galea, "Gun violence in Americans' social network during their lifetime," *Preventive Medicine* 93 (Dec 2016), 53-56.

³²¹ Thrasher, Steven W., "Let's not give into fear after the Orlando shooting," *The Guardian*, June 12, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/12/lets-not-give-in-to-fear-after-the-orlando-shooting-florida>.

³²² John Gramlich, "What the data says about gun deaths in the U.S.," *Pew Research Center*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/16/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-u-s/>.

America's gun culture has from some American citizens, as well as from powerful lobbying groups like the NRA, many American citizens have expressed outrage at the persistent destruction guns are wreaking on their people. Despite this indignation over guns from government officials and ordinary citizens alike, very little has changed. No recent gun reform legislation has been passed, and guns continue to remain a part of the contemporary American ethos.³²³

Many an American's desire for gun control reform is visible through a widespread cultural wish infamously known as "thoughts and prayers." When considering ordinary wishes as personal and spiritual conscious revelations of desire for impervious objects, prayer is a related practice that comes to mind. Although prayer is a religious act that in its most technical sense is a communication with the Divine, it shares many of the qualities of an everyday wish. Both prayer and wishes are private and spiritual acts where fantastical desire is aired. Not all who engage in prayer believe that they are engaging in a literal conversation with God, or a god, or some higher power, though some of course do. Prayer can also be a vehicle for worship and gratitude, not just an expression of what one wants from some supreme being. Prayer can function as a communal activity in Churches, Synagogues, Mosques, Temples, and other places of worship. Regardless of these distinguishing qualities, thoughts and prayers in response to gun violence in American mainstream culture has come to resemble something that looks a lot like wishing – private, personal, introspective, and ultimately ineffective. Like wishes, thoughts and prayers are manifestations of desire that are conflated with inaction and have been pitted against what are perceived to be "active" behaviors like protests and voting.

³²³ Sarah Gray, "Here's A Timeline of the Major Gun Control Laws in America," *Time*, April 30th 2019, <https://time.com/5169210/us-gun-control-laws-history-timeline/>; Robert Longley, "Timeline of Gun Control in the United States," *ThoughtCo*, May 2, 2020, <https://www.thoughtco.com/us-gun-control-timeline-3963620>.

This dichotomy is loud in social and political responses to injustice, tragedy, and fear, as witnessed in the social and political American consciousness via reactions to the widespread gun violence that continues to plague the country. AJ Willingham, a writer for CNN, observed in May of 2018 that “thoughts and prayers” had reached “full semantic satiation.” The term “semantic satiation” is a complicated psychological concept, but Willingham distills it down to a generalized “phenomenon in which a word or phrase is repeated so often it loses its meaning.” She adds, “[b]ut it also becomes something ridiculous, a jumble of letters that feels alien on the tongue and reads like gibberish on paper.” Her observations were astute. By the time Willingham’s article was published the phrase “thoughts and prayers” had indeed trended into a ubiquitous cynical commentary on the state of sociopolitical responses to gun violence. While not new cultural nomenclature, “thoughts and prayers” has been freshly reinvigorated into a neologism that reveals dissent with the status quo. Hashtags and memes have helped to propel “thoughts and prayers” into an idea that laughs at itself when it comes to constructing meaningful and productive responses to daily mass shootings in the United States.³²⁴

There is a widespread cultural narrative surrounding gun violence that spans media coverage to coffeehouse conversation, and it is that the American public has grown, or is becoming, numb to such violence. Perhaps Americans and Canadians are less numb to gun violence than they are used to its discursive effects. Perhaps gun violence is a topic that subjects use to steer mainstream public conversations away from more controversial and difficult topics like mental health, gender, and race. Perhaps politicians and citizens alike tweet their thoughts and prayers for gun reform after each new mass shooting tragedy to deter the mainstream media from looking under other “rocks” when it comes to the causes of such devastation. Perhaps living

³²⁴ AJ Willingham, “How ‘thoughts and prayers’ went from common condolence to cynical meme,” CNN (May 19, 2018), <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/20/us/thoughts-and-prayers-florida-school-shooting-trnd/index.html>.

with gun violence is the price subjects must pay for allowing hegemonic masculinity to continue to go unchecked in certain contexts. Perhaps gun violence continues to provoke public displays of grief, fear, and indignation because subjects feel complicit, and therefore guilty, and stances – wishes performed – are one seemingly productive method of soothing their anxiety.

Under this light, subjects appear more dependent or addicted to gun violence than numb to its effects – not dependent on the violence itself, of course, but to the substitutive satisfaction that wishes for a solution to gun violence garner for a subject. This is evident in the high circulation of publicized thoughts and prayers in response to gun violence. The discursive repetition of this concept has instilled in subjects a sense of productivity in the face of a seemingly indefatigable foe. The semantic satiation caused by the ubiquity of thoughts and prayers for those who have desires to do something in response to gun violence has made the perverse possible for a subject. One can live in a society where both wishes to curtail gun violence and gun violence itself are embedded into the status quo. No one deemed sane is culturally authorized to wish for gun violence. Even the leaders of the National Rifle Association themselves publicly condemn senseless violence, the same individuals who do everything in their power to prevent any meaningful gun reform legislation from taking shape.³²⁵ Just as world peace was a good wish for beauty pageant contestants, condemning violence is a good wish for the leaders of the NRA. The NRA can publicize such wishes in good conscience because such wishes are non-performatives; they have been proven time and time again to be incapable of

³²⁵ At a speech in 2015, Wayne LaPierre, who has served as the executive vice-president of the NRA since 1991, stated: “Every day of every year, innocent, good, defenseless people are beaten, bloodied, robbed, raped, and murdered ... When a criminal attacks, politicians aren’t there to protect you. Their laws can’t protect you. And the media’s lies can’t protect you, either. You’re on your own. But you know what can protect you when no one else can, when no one else will? The ironclad, absolute safeguard of the Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms.” See American Conservative Union, “CPAC 2015 – Wayne LaPierre, NRA,” YouTube, February 27, 2015, accessed April 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfPkD4oqCVI>, quote appears at 09:38.

leading to gun reform legislation, regardless of whether it is the “right” thing to wish for. To the NRA, greater access to firearms is the answer to combatting such violence. Though the NRA’s public stances tap into the same fears and anxieties experienced by those promoting gun reform policy, they do so for an entirely different agenda.

Wishes, Political Solidarity, and Privilege

If a subject has arrived at a wish, it is evident that the prospects of acquiring the specified object of desire are not great. Yet, sometimes, interestingly enough, wishes are privileged states for subjects. This seemingly paradoxical aspect of wishes is worth some pause. When desire gets wrapped up in what I have sketched out as a wish in the ordinary sense, an object of desire drifts further out of reach. But wishes are not a final authority on the matter. Wishes are not God, or fate, or nature; they are subjective manifestations of the perceived low degrees of attainability of certain objects of desire. It is possible that wishing subjects will eventually be lifted out of their dejected desiring states. Sometimes when a subject remains inside of a wish it becomes apparent that the subject can bear the unfulfillment of the wish and can go on surviving sans this object of desire. In certain instances subjects may even be better off not experiencing the fulfillment of their wishes. In such instances wishes may be protecting a subject from bad desires, be they unhealthy, dangerous, or likely to cause conflict for the subject should they come to fruition. It is in this sense that wishes can be considered as privileged states, because desiring subjects can bear and even flourish despite the great distance between them and their specified objects of desire. Therefore, not all wishes are tragedies. Some wishes are helpful, necessary even, when it comes to subjects being able to bear the norms and constraints of their social standing.

If I hypothetically wish to fuck my student, for example, the opportunity to do so is not completely foreclosed because I am wishing for it, though it is worth considering the circumstances that may have led this particular object of desire of mine to the confines of a wish. Both my hypothetical student and I may be better off having this wish never come to fruition. My student and I also “do not exist in a vacuum; nor are [we] created by ‘God, Fate or Nature’ . [We] exist in a context which ascribes subject positions and grades and power accordingly.”³²⁶ It is significant that this desire for a specific type of closeness with my student is experienced as a wish, and not as a hope, want, will, plan, or goal, for any of these other modes of desire would position me closer to fucking my student, nearer to obtaining my object of desire, an object of desire I am not convinced I should ethically want. I find myself *wishing* to fuck my student, which I may be experiencing for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the stigma that surrounds teacher-student relationships has brought me to this wish. Maybe my past poor experiences with fucking other students or being fucked by a teacher as a student myself are to blame. Perhaps my developed understanding as a feminist educator of power dynamics in the classroom is mostly responsible, leading me to recognize the inherent power imbalance in this situation and the potential for my student to suffer. Despite how I got here, here I am, inside of a wish, desiring a particular intimacy with this student while doubting I will ever get it. Though I very well could be, I am not fucking my student, and I will survive, and it is in fact likely that surviving will be easier for me sans this object of desire than if this wish were to come true. There is my privilege with regards to this wish. Of course, not all wishes can be applied to this line of thinking around privilege and the distinct natures of different objects of desire need to be considered.

³²⁶ Bobby Noble (my doctoral supervisor at the time), email correspondence, April 27, 2020.

Like wishes political solidarity can also be a privileged state. One often engages in political solidarity with an individual or a group to which they do not belong, which often means one does not experience the injustice to which their mobilization of political solidarity is responding. Therefore, a certain amount of privilege may be inherent for some subjects within situations of political solidarity. Privilege, in this sense, refers to distance from the negative effects of the problems being addressed. There is only a need for solidarity if someone is in need or in trouble, and someone else is not, a quality of political solidarity that seems oft taken for granted in both empirical and philosophical conversations about the concept. And it is this privilege differential that sets political solidarity apart from other theories of unity. Political solidarity exists as one option for responding to human hardship, operating as a collaborative tool to foster help for those who need it by those who can afford to provide it. Such “need” is usually in reference to well-being, equity, and/or survival. Therefore, the usual beneficiaries of political solidarity in contemporary contexts are not the same folks who are working to rig a world for themselves in which they can thrive. The folks who need solidarity assistance are often trying to survive, to get by in the world in which they presently find themselves flailing.

If one understands each manifestation of political solidarity as Scholz defines it, which is as an instance where “individuals make a conscious commitment to join with others in struggle to challenge a perceived injustice,” then one can recognize that “a collective forms but it is not unified by shared attributes, location, or even shared interests.” Rather, “the unity is based on shared commitment to a cause.” Hence, Scholz cautions against the conflating of the solidarity group with the oppressed group. While shared experiences of oppression may provide fodder for political solidarity, “sharing a common history of oppression is not, however, sufficient for solidarity,” because, she contends, “each individual in the solidary group must value an

interpretation of the past and the present and share a vision for the future, regardless of whether each individual actually experienced the relevant history.” The unity that grows and strengthens among a group of individuals in shared resistance is not necessarily political solidarity.

Resistance is not synonymous with political solidarity, though, political solidarity may be enacted under the rubric of resistance.³²⁷

Political solidarity is a response to injustice, but subjects in its pursuit may not necessarily operate from within said (or any) context of injustice. This is a significant and potentially problematic aspect of political solidarity, one that is not lost on Scholz and other theorists who have critiqued solidarity for its perceived ability to overwrite difference among members of the same solidarity groups. “Solidarity requires mutuality, which presumes a sort of equality,” but unequal social and political conditions outside the solidarity group may lead to unequal ones within it.³²⁸ Furthermore, desires do not bear the same weight on all their subjects. Some objects of desires may prove impossible to attain for some subjects. Some subjects can survive this impossibility, while some may not be able to bear it. And still, for other subjects, an object of desire may be stuck inside a wish because the subject wishing for it lacks creativity or agency. In certain instances a subject’s object of desire may be banished to a wish by oppressive societal forces like racism, sexism, or homophobia. Additionally, a wish may be likened to an act of conscience, like a wish to fuck one’s student. This wish reflects human rational thought, common sense, while someone else’s wish to be loved and accepted as they are may describe an intent to survive. Both may be culturally unauthorized wishes, and both wishes may belong to queer subjects, but the stakes are certainly higher for one of the subjects mentioned in these examples.

³²⁷ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 34.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

Culturally unauthorized wishes can wreak havoc on people's lives. Much of Ahmed's scholarship is about the consequences for delegitimized subjects who bravely articulate their culturally unauthorized wishes. Through historiographies and philosophical inquiries into concepts like happiness, willfulness, and complaint, Ahmed cites how a subject's disclosure of culturally unauthorized desires is problematic, in that it turns the desiring subject into the site of the problem. Defensiveness abounds, for example, when someone in the academy comes forward with allegations of sexual harassment or complaints regarding a lack of diversity, or when a feminist kills the joy at the dinner table by not laughing at a sexist joke and instead challenges the speaker. Complaint is very rarely first encountered as anything but a negative phenomenon. Complainants socially or institutionally intervene by taking a stance through publicizing their delegitimized desires. Complainants are consistently dealt with, while the structural sources of their angst are often not. As Ahmed sagely observes: "[w]e learn about institutions by learning how complaints are stopped."³²⁹

Articulating one's true desire in a world that tarnishes one's true desire is courageous and potentially dangerous labor. Colonized people know this. People of color know this. Disabled people know this. Queer people know this. When queer folks act out some version of "coming out of the closet," for instance, they are taking a stance and publicizing their unauthorized wishes. For whatever reason a subject's relationship to their object(s) of desire might shift and they may find themselves moving out of the grim territory of a wish and into something that feels more active, intentional, and productive, though probably terrifying. Solidarity wishes however, as they are currently and commonly manifested as stances, are common and do not seem particularly hard to engage in. Petitions are signed, open letters are published, and hashtags

³²⁹ Sara Ahmed, "Nodding as a Non-Performative," *feminist killjoys*, April 29, 2019, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2019/04/29/nodding-as-a-non-performative/>.

are circulated with relative ease. While some politicized subjects' engagement in these expressions is indeed intended and performed as a means towards transformative justice, other subjects are stuck, intentionally or not, inside of solidarity wishes, and such presentational non-performative expressions may provide these subjects with some alternative nourishment. This latter subset of subjects at the center of such contemporary solidarity stances are usually operating from within very different power dynamics than are Ahmed's research subjects, or the hypothetical queer subjects that are amid coming out, or folks like Jessamyn Stanley and David Buckel from chapter three. Such subjects may not be privileged enough to bear the non-movement toward their objects of desire, particularly when such objects of desire are other people and other resources. These same subjects may also not be able to bear the movement towards their unauthorized objects of desire due to the consequences of attempting to act against hegemony and stigma.

While I agree with Scholz that political solidarity can manifest in response to one's own suffering *or* the suffering of others, solidarity is mostly currently envisioned as something a subject engages in on behalf of others. The political solidarity that appears most in vogue in Canada and the United States amongst white people – or hegemonic, mainstream actors – is a benevolent solidarity that can act as a foil to the silent witnessing of injustice. A subject may benefit from the choice to engage in solidarity on behalf of others, but the major motivation for political solidarity is commonly expected to correspond to what is outside oneself, and propel subjects toward the betterment of another subject or group. Political solidarity, therefore, is something only particular subjects feel their own survival is hinged upon. Perhaps this is the culprit most responsible for keeping a subject's desire for solidarity stuck inside a wish: the lack of urgency for solidarity as a means of survival, *their* survival. Perhaps some subjects' privileged

states protect them from ever feeling like they need solidarity themselves, and so their ambivalence towards wanting to practice solidarity stems from their inexperience of ever needing it.

The takeaway point here is that regardless of whether solidarity wishes go unfulfilled in the ordinary sense, they may be impactful for a subject, nonetheless. Processes of psychoanalytic wish fulfillment can lead subjects to harvest solidarity wishes for some other nourishment than solidarity itself. This drama is witnessed most clearly through solidarity stances, the performances of a subject's solidarity wishes. And it is the nourishment gained from this substitutive satisfaction through stances, such as in political rhetoric or hashtag solidarity, which might quell an appetite and extinguish a wish for practicable political solidarity altogether. Like sugar, solidarity stances may deliver subjects a feel-good quick fix for their hunger pains but do very little to address the jeopardy of their food supply.

Frustrated, Not Dead

Wishes are placeholders for a subject's tired desires. They reveal poignant trajectories of ambivalence, and possibly despair, toward objects of desire. Since wishes reveal not only what one wants, believes one wants, or has stated one wants, but also what one has abandoned reaching for, they do not share the same elements of hope and optimism that are enmeshed in mainstream notions of dreams and fantasies. Therefore, for subjects to successfully manifest and practice political solidarity, their desires for solidarity need to be liberated from the containment of their wishes. These ethereal bouts of wanting are undependable for bringing desires to fruition. While wishes do not utterly preclude solidarity actions, solidarity can easily get stuck

inside a wish inside a subject. A wish can easily encompass the entire solidarity event for a subject.

Though most things orectic are inherently optimistic, as in they exist to get fed, subjects may arrive at a wish from a place of hopelessness, or at least with the experiential knowledge that an object of their desire is not easily obtainable. If it were, subjects would surely reach out and grab it, or work towards it through some collaboration or a plan, as opposed to turning inside of themselves, away from any practical and tangible means to an end. Wishes, therefore, have both a descriptive and prescriptive relationship to their objects of desire. The bleak descriptions contained in wishes of the prospects of subjects reaching their objects of desire are responsible for prescribing the ambivalence, skepticism, and non-movement that keep a subject stuck. The present global demand for political solidarity feels strong, but hopefully my analysis of the mechanics of wishes in this chapter has helped to explain some possible reasons for the widespread paralysis around desires for this sociopolitical substance amongst Canadian and American settler subjects.

I have shown how solidarity wishes describe objects of desire that subjects feel they do not deserve, cannot secure, and/or have lost hope reaching for. But what if political solidarity is prone to being stuck inside of wishes because subjects do not actually desire it? What if the substitutive satisfaction derived from solidarity stances is not in fact some sort of plan B for a subject, but is truly the goal of their quest for wish fulfillment? Put differently, what if what I've referred to as substitutive satisfaction is not substitutive at all, but authentic, or central. My major contention in this dissertation is that wishes are political solidarity's predominant scene for subjects in 21st century Canadian and American society. If there is any merit to my thesis, then conceptualizations of wish fulfillment in both their ordinary and psychoanalytic senses reveal a

widespread ambivalence toward political solidarity that is steeped in contradiction. What if political solidarity is susceptible to wishes because many subjects do not actually feel that it is important or necessary? Could it be that political solidarity is far from a universally recognized beneficial practice, and much more likely to be exemplary of a faux value, the performance of which is deemed just as valuable as its obtainment, if not more, by many a subject?

I do not mean to downplay the power of the forces that keep subjects trapped in their wishes, such as political defeat or cultural hegemony, nor do I mean to imply that the subject is solely psychologically responsible for getting stuck inside the confines of their wishes in the first place. Evacuating solidarity from the realm of wishes is more than a matter of rewiring a subject's conscience and emboldening one's intentions. Societal norms and rigid institutional policies, for instance, are powerful discursive agents that may hinder politicized subjects from moving beyond their wishes into some semblance of practice. Not all subjects have the means and the capacity to move toward their objects of desire. As I recommended in the introduction, political solidarity needs to be incorporated into a universal ethics of nonsovereignty for it be evacuated from the realm of wishes. Until solidarity is seen as something that everyone deserves and could benefit from, it will not be something to which everyone will commit to value.

Whether subjects acknowledge it or not, they are tethered together through a type of mutual need, precarity in its most general form. In the context of a global neoliberal capitalist socioeconomic ethos that promotes competition, lone heroics, and scarcity at the expense of collaboration, collective care, acknowledging vulnerability, and sharing of abundance and resources, nonsovereignty is an ethics that needs to be intentionally recognized and promoted by subjects in order to develop an appetite for its practice. Theorizing promising practices of political solidarity is a waste of time if an appetite for nonsovereignty ceases to exist. In other

words, any hope that I have left for solidarity as an effective sociopolitical tool is predicated upon the recognition and elimination of human subjects' culturally entrenched and institutionally fostered skepticism of nonsovereignty. Then subjects might find themselves in a position to improve their sociopolitical collaborative praxis. Political solidarity can manifest in a variety of ways, from activism to financial support, but it appears to increasingly take up residency within wishes. Wishes are not entirely hopeless though. They are like life support for political solidarity, mental mechanisms that keep solidarity desires alive for subjects through minimal energy expenditure. The hope is that contemporary solidarity desires are not dead, just frustrated.

---CHAPTER FIVE--- HASHTAG SOLIDARITY AND THE POLITICS OF TRANSMISSION

What's in a Hashtag?

A hashtag is a digital tool that organizes virtual content into topics. These topics, which can be a word or phrase, are created through the application of the number sign (also known as the pound or hash sign) within social media platforms: #forexample. When a word or phrase is hashtagged a category is either born or joined. A hashtag is primarily an archival function, though its application promotes social interaction amongst its users as well. Social media practitioners utilize hashtags to find related content online and as a means of networking with like-minded individuals. Content qualifies as related when users claim it to be through the application of a common (shared) hashtag. Hashtags are not vetted digital phenomena, which is a significant aspect of their application. The actual content of hashtagged posts is, therefore, irrelevant to the efficacy of the hashtags. Hashtags operate like bottomless containers within the world wide web and will hold whatever users assign to them. This automatic blind faith that hashtags operate under helps to facilitate subjective agency. Hashtags are generative technologies for subjects that can be utilized toward social connection, as well as operate as activist tools toward transformative justice. Of course, the hashtag is not without its fair share of disciplinary effects, and I will explore both its generativities and restrictions on those politicized subjects who wield it in this chapter. Ultimately, this chapter explores what the hashtag can and cannot do for solidarity-seeking subjects against the backdrop of virtual media as a wishing well of desire.

Though there is some nuance to how hashtags operate across different social media platforms, they nonetheless “have come to capture the zeitgeist of our time.”³³⁰ Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, TikTok, Pinterest, Google Plus, Snapchat, among others, all incorporate the hashtag into their array of functions. There is no denying that the hashtag has arrived in contemporary life. Its productivity within a diverse range of human pursuits is no doubt helping to fuel its global prominence. And Covid-19’s effect of increased digitalization of many social functions is only adding to the hashtag’s ubiquity. In addition to corporations capitalizing off the profit-making capabilities of the hashtag, governments have begun to recognize the power and sway of the hashtag with regards to popular opinion, and of social media in general. A striking example of this is Finland’s consideration of social media influencers as essential workers.³³¹ Hashtags help people find one another, stay connected, earn an income, educate, organize, and agitate. As a versatile tool, the hashtag helps subjects steer through both mundane and political realms.

It is end of 2022, and the politics of transmission comprise a global ethos. Subjects all over the world find themselves affected – though in various ways and to diverse degrees – by the spread of Covid-19. Through the comparison of digital viral transmission to biological viral transmission in this chapter, I assess the utility of the hashtag as a tool for sociopolitical justice activism. The parallels reveal a world that is no longer discursively constituted by the bifurcation of online (digital/virtual) and offline (analog) experience. Human subjects cannot always easily discern where, when, or whether, the human has been. “We’re all cyborgs now!” I exclaimed to

³³⁰ Diana Dobrin, “The Hashtag in Digital Activism: A Cultural Revolution,” *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change* 5(1), 03 (2020): 1, accessed August 8, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.20897/jcasc/8298>.

³³¹ Melissa Heikkila, “Finland taps social media influencers during coronavirus,” *Politico*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/finland-taps-influencers-as-critical-actors-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/>; Jon Henley, “Finland enlists social influencers in fight against Covid-19,” *The Guardian*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/01/finland-enlists-social-influencers-in-fight-against-covid-19>.

my supervisor while I was writing this chapter. Her quick response to “speak for yourself” was a humorous but no less intuitive reminder that there exist varying degrees of enthusiasm where the digitalization of contemporary life is concerned. There is also a great deal of awkwardness within users’ experiences of “fresh” digital technology, awkwardness that I regard as worthy of critical attention.

When I began to conceive of *Solidarity Wishes* in 2017, I was cynical about the characterization of the hashtag as a means to achieve transformative justice. Since then, my thinking has significantly changed, and in light of the Covid-19 pandemic in particular, my predilection for embodied action and embodied dialogue has waned. By having initially contrasted the hashtag with “real” actions like protests and marches in my earlier thinking, I idealized embodied activism as the most productive means to move toward transformative justice. I had not fully considered the immense power of digital media and online technologies as producers and reformers of cultural discourse. Nor had I invested any significant thinking into troubling the stubborn dichotomy of theory vs. praxis (and its close cousin: thought vs. action) within which I was centering my analysis of desires for political solidarity. This chapter is a response to these gaps in my earlier thinking.

In the first section of this chapter, I introduce the concept of hashtag activism, within which I locate hashtag solidarity, paying special attention to how neoliberal capitalist systems commodify the hashtag, as well as to the hashtag’s immunity to certain commodification. After I contextualize digital activism within a rapidly globalizing and digitalizing world, I trace the awkwardness of hashtag activism using Carrie Smith-Prei and Maria Stehle’s theoretical framework. Next, I draw from Donna Haraway and Judith Butler’s scholarship on assembly, activism, and technology. The focus in this section is on digital media’s fostering of disembodied

and dislocated subjective narratives. And finally, I return to Michel Foucault's foundational theorizing around discourse and power by comparing his discursive subjects to Haraway's figure of the cyborg to help make my case for the utility of digital activism when promoting transformative justice. Throughout the chapter I consider various hashtag campaigns and trace their diverse effects in order to loosen the hashtag from the confines of the theory vs. praxis dichotomy, aiming to illuminate its analog as well as virtual potentiality. Ultimately, I hope to reveal the significance of wishes for solidarity that manifest online, as well as the nonsovereign productivity of the hashtag and other digital tools and practices. There are many elements inherent to the hashtag, and to the Internet in general, that provide for potentially productive practices of nonsovereign relationality.

Hashtag Activism

In 2007 as an early fan and user of Twitter, though not employed by the company, hashtag inventor Chris Messina tweeted to the twitter community wondering about the use of the pound sign to organize the platform's users and connect conversations.³³² Shortly thereafter Messina proposed the hashtag to the fledgling Twitter company and it did not bite. Twitter's leaders' thinking was that they could rely on algorithms to carry out similar functions instead of what Messina was describing.³³³ This is an important piece of the hashtag's origins story. Algorithms are not participatory tools. Algorithms get designed by someone, such as employees of Facebook, and then are applied to someone else's digital content, resulting in consequences

³³² Ben Panko, "A Decade Ago, the Hashtag Reshaped the Internet," *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 23, 2017, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/decade-ago-hashtag-reshaped-internet-180964605/>.

³³³ Tom Huddlestone Jr., "This Twitter user 'invented' the hashtag in 2007 – but the company thought it was 'too nerdy,'" *CNBC*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/09/how-chris-messina-got-twitter-to-use-the-hashtag.html>.

outside of posters' control, such as the removal of certain content if it is deemed by the algorithm to be in violation of company policy, for example. Had Twitter opted to take on the hashtag as an algorithmic tool, the hashtag would have lost much of what makes it valuable to hashtag activists today: its equalizing and subjective force. Despite Twitter's alleged early disinterest, the hashtag would eventually take off, thanks to the unfolding of a large fire in San Diego, #SanDiegoFire. The hashtag's effectiveness at tracking commentary on this event helped to solidify it as a worthwhile digital tool.³³⁴

Though not exclusively designed for Twitter, the hashtag started to gain prominence in 2009 once Twitter noticed the hashtag's use was on the rise and therefore decided to embrace it by building a search tool for hashtags within the Twitter platform. When Instagram launched in 2010 the hashtag became entrenched in social media culture. The Arab Spring and European anti-austerity movement were also developing at the time, and in 2011 the Occupy Wall Street Movement began. These major events relied on the hashtag, which only further entrenched the digital tool in contemporary culture.³³⁵ Resistance to sovereign power structures is what unified many of the events that the hashtag attached to in the early days of its inception. These situations consisted of subjects joining other subjects in expressive forms of dissent against institutions, economic systems, and other taken for granted forces that organize societies. This is the phenomenon of hashtag activism, an umbrella concept from within which I locate hashtag solidarity. The genre of hashtag activism has come to denote more than the hashtag's category-making capabilities. Hashtag activism, or digital activism, comprises online engagement that orients itself toward some political agenda through the aid of hashtag campaigns. With the rise of

³³⁴ Lexi Pandell, "An Oral History of the #Hashtag," *WIRED*, March 19, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2017/05/oral-history-hashtag/>.

³³⁵ Ibid.

online technologies and expanded social media platforms, hashtag activism has come to refer to an array of different online politicized activities often toward the promotion of transformative justice.

In his exploration of “narrative agency” in hashtag activism, Guobin Yang describes how “narrative forms” are “not limited to the syntactical structures of the hashtags,” but rather a trending hashtag creates an online discursive event that may span anywhere from a few days to years. He explains that “the temporal unfolding of such an incident is a process of people interacting with one another and collectively creating a larger narrative.” Hashtag campaigns are collaboratively constructed narratives that “encourage audience participation” like “reading, retweeting, commenting on others’ tweets or posting their own with the same hashtag.” Although hashtags have become mundane aspects of digital media, their very presence does not denote activism or politicization. To this point, Yang distinguishes “everyday hashtags” from “contentious collective events online.”³³⁶

The hashtags in many influential cases of hashtag activism have complete sentence structures rather than single words like #change. The following is a random list of examples: #BlackLivesMatter, #BringBackOurGirls, #StopGamerGate, #WhyIStayed, #JeNeSuisPasCharlie, #OccupyEverywhere, #CancelColbert, #ThisIsACoup, #ICantBreathe, #MuslimsAreNotTerrorist. As the above examples show, these hashtags contain verbs expressing a strong sense of action and force. The actions are petitioning, demanding, appealing, and protesting. They express refusals, objections, and imperatives to take immediate action. They often challenge narratives in mainstream media.³³⁷

#Cat and #BlackLivesMatter are both popular hashtags circulating across digital media, but only the latter example is representative of the type of hashtag that concerns this dissertation. #Cat connects users by sharing ideas, which may foster forms of social solidarity, while #BlackLivesMatter connects users by both sharing and challenging ideas, which opens

³³⁶ Guobin Yang, “Narrative Agency in Hashtag Activism: The Case of #BlackLivesMatter,” *Media and Communication* 4, 4 (2016), 15.

³³⁷ Ibid., 14-15.

opportunities for political solidarity. In most instances the use of #Cat does not constitute hashtag activism because nothing is confronted.

While some scholarship has distinguished the effects of a hashtag between “connective” and “collective” action, I am more interested in how hashtags may or may not further the politicization of some digital content, or, how hashtags may or may not be subjectively used toward the promotion of political agendas.³³⁸ What is the space between a wish for solidarity that manifests online through a hashtag and the activism or action needed to move the posting subject toward the object of desire in such a wish? It is certainly true that not all politicizing hashtags operate via subjective agency. One might have no idea what they are in for when they use a hashtag and inadvertently stumble into a debate passionately unfolding across social media. Nonetheless, hashtag activism is driven by politicized hashtags, intentional or not, and such hashtags are what this chapter sets out to analyze. Both #Cat and #BlackLivesMatter carry out connective action, and both – arguably – are representative of collective action, but only one hashtag is truly political, wielded by an online subject to confront something. The realm of digital media’s hospitality to both politicized and non-politicized content makes for complicated solidarities and awkward experiences for online users.

There is no denying the hashtag’s utility towards the promotion of transformative justice. The narratives that Yang claims politicized hashtags host are often “counter-narratives,” designed and wielded by oppressed and disenfranchised groups in the name of sociopolitical resistance and dissent.³³⁹ The hashtag is a highly accessible tool, which contributes to its role as

³³⁸ W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, “The Logic of Connective Action,” *Information, Communication & Society* 15:5 (2012), 739-768.

³³⁹ Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles, *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2020).

facilitator of “digital counterpublics.”³⁴⁰ It is free, it is simple, and it is dependable. It is a common tool for the common person (a common person with a smart device and internet access that is, which is encompassing an increasingly larger global group). On the ten-year anniversary of the hashtag, Messina wrote a blog post reflecting on the hashtag by describing it in ten different ways: free, inclusive, participatory, community-forming, resistance, memetic, generative, ephemeral, whimsical, and ours. Re: resistance, he explains:

The act of participating in the flow of a hashtag commons is a political act and contributes *attention currency* to something that is important or meaningful to you. Put another way: using a hashtag signifies a desire to join, connect, or speak your mind or your share perspective or experience. It says, “I exist, I am here, and I choose to express myself!”³⁴¹

Yet, hashtag activism has also been critically referred to as “slacktivism” and “performative allyship.”³⁴² The negative connotations embedded in these critiques of the concept are most attributable to the hashtag’s disembodied and dislocated nature as a form of “discursive protest,” to borrow Yang’s definition, which colors digital activism as immaterial and ethereal, and therefore supposedly aimless.³⁴³ This reveals further parallels between digital activism, like hashtag solidarity, and wishes. Wishes, technically speaking, are expressions of desire, and need not entail or motivate action beyond their expression to fulfill their purpose for existing. In fact, as I argued in chapter four, wishes can work to impede a subject from moving closer to their object(s) of desire. Thus, as a citation of a subject’s far-fetched object of desire, a wish’s primary

³⁴⁰ Anke Wonneberger, Iina R. Hellsten and Sandra H. J. Jacobs, “Hashtag activism and the configuration of counterpublics: Dutch animal welfare debates on Twitter, *Information, Communication & Society*,” *Information, Communication, and Society*, February 4, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1720770>.

³⁴¹ Chris Messina, “The Hashtag is 10! What the hashtag means to me 10 years after its Invention,” *Medium*, August 23, 2017, <https://medium.com/chris-messina/hashtag10-8e114c382b06>.

³⁴² Nolan L. Cabrera, Cheryl E. Matias, and Roberto Montoya, “Activism or Slacktivism? The Potential and Pitfalls of Social Media in Contemporary Student Activism,” *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, April 3, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000061>; Peter Kalina, “Performative Allyship,” *Technium Social Sciences Journal* 11.1 (2020): 478-81, <https://doi.org/10.47577/tssj.v11i1.1518>.

³⁴³ Yang, “Narrative Agency,” 13.

purpose is its expression, though the effects of such an expression on a subject can vary. Wishers are not typically moved by, or toward, happy endings. As Andrea Long Chu sagely expresses:

You don't want something because wanting it will lead to getting it. You want it because you want it. This is the zero-order disappointment that structures all desire and makes it possible. After all, if you could only want things you were guaranteed to get, you would never be able to want anything at all.³⁴⁴

Hashtag solidarity can seem similarly disassociated from tangible outcomes. #BlackLivesMatter has been in circulation since 2013, yet anti-Black violence and racism has persisted in the United States and Canada over the past nine years.³⁴⁵ It is understandable why one might consider hashtag solidarity to be more so a means to publish desire than actively respond to it.

Shortly after the mass shooting occurred in 2016 at Pulse, a gay night club in Orlando, Florida, there was a fervor of hashtag activism across the web. Individuals around the world changed their profile pictures on their social media accounts to reflect the gay flag or other rainbow imagery in solidarity with the victims as well as friends and families of those affected by the tragedy. People posted, shared, and retweeted condolences and declarations. Some of the most common hashtags that made the digital rounds were in the form of simple stances like “Pray for Orlando” and “I stand with the LGBTQ community.” Conversations and debates were sparked over gun control, mental health, homophobia, and islamophobia. Yet, five years later no significant gun control legislation has been passed in the United States and gun violence continues to ravage the nation. While the WIFI tsunami post Pulse carried with it a wash of moral and financial support, public grieving, expressions of solidarity, and ideas of how to change culture and prevent such a tragedy from unfolding again, there is the lingering

³⁴⁴ Andrea Long Chu, “On Liking Women.” *n + 1* 30: Motherland (Winter 2018), <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-30/essays/on-liking-women/>.

³⁴⁵ Monica Anderson, Skye Toor, Lee Rainie, and Aaron Smith, “Activism in the Social Media Age.” *Pew Research Center*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/07/11/activism-in-the-social-media-age/>.

disappointment that all those online expressions of solidarity, all those solidarity wishes, were futile. Due to the failure to achieve meaningful gun reform, it is easy to retroactively assess the hashtag solidarity and digital activism that amassed in the wake of the Pulse tragedy as a performative and passionate stand-in for action, though this is far from my position on the matter.

With Sara Ahmed's theorizing around the non-performative qualities of institutional diversity initiatives in mind, I initially resented hashtag solidarity, and other forms of digital activism like it, because I perceived it as impulsive, unintentional, vapid, performative, and rhetorical, as well as a cheap means for subjects to shirk off engagement in embodied action. In other words, I deemed hashtag solidarity to be a very performative non-performative.³⁴⁶ A hashtag operates instantaneously and automatically, and though these traits can contribute to productivity in certain contexts, they led me to assume that hashtags and other means of digital activism cheapened social justice actions. Though a hashtag requires intentionality, it does so at the mere press of a button. Hashtag solidarity is a practice Dean Spade cites is empowered by "the demobilizing liberal mythology of moving hearts and minds."³⁴⁷ Social media can be demobilizing when subjects are "encouraged to solely participate by liking, sharing, declaring, or debating [their] views with [their] media silos, without otherwise engaging with other towards change."³⁴⁸ Time and time again I have witnessed hashtags provide online subjects with a lazy means of contributing to established and profound dialogues and debates, which led these subjects to circumvent the important work of research and contextualization. It was due to these experiences and through this line of thinking that I was led to initially regard the use of

³⁴⁶ Ahmed, *On Being Included*.

³⁴⁷ Spade, "Solidarity Not Charity," 147.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 133.

politicized hashtags as shallow actions via performative stances in response to some issue, event, or debate.

The pleasure garnered by some subjects through hashtag activism – be it visibility, attention, affirmation, the nourishing idea that one is *doing something* about injustice – is the type of substitutive satisfaction that I elucidated in chapter four. This substitutive satisfaction can appease subjects at the expense of killing motivation to make material gains beyond online expression. Therefore, Freud’s theorized substitutive satisfaction, or a conscious version of this concept, may be directly responsible for what Spade theorizes as the demobilizing effects of social media. This is the trap a wish can set, and my theory when I first began to write *Solidarity Wishes* was that hashtag solidarity was demonstrative of many a stultifying wish. As years went by after the Pulse nightclub shooting, I watched the status quo remain unchanged. Solidarity wishes appeared to me as prisons for change, holding grounds that blocked desire from transforming into action. This was the frustrated place from which I began this dissertation. Thus, I had intended my analysis of hashtag solidarity to be an integral part of my takedown of wishes, those mental mechanisms that I regarded as lazy or hopeless destinations for a subject’s desires. As I write this chapter, I am happy to admit that I was not completely accurate in my assessment of the hashtag. Yes, sometimes hashtag solidarity operates as little more than a wish performed – a shallow stance. Yes, sometimes such stances are demobilizing performative non-performatives. But also, sometimes, hashtag solidarity and other forms of digital activism are useful political interventions with incredible online *and* offline reverberations. When hashtag solidarity amounts to more than mere solidarity wishes the results can be efficacious.

Virality

Transnational trending of digital content occurs when cultural objects “go viral.” To go viral – be it a work of art, an idea, a story, a quote, a body, a campaign, an accusation, a statistic, a revelation, a threat, a lie, a wish – is for something to circulate with great frequency and far reach. While such scenes of information propagation are not confined to online spaces, the sites of “infection” are usually traceable to some virtual origin. “Trends start here,” one of TikTok’s taglines, is an on-the-nose reflection of this reality. Yet, if you were to take a tour today of Toronto, Canada, my home city and one of the most diverse cities in the world, it would not take you long to encounter Black Lives Matter imagery offline, despite the digital hashtag origins of BLM. In home windows, on front lawns, in shared green spaces and parks, on public transit, and in the fronts of shops, galleries, and restaurants, BLM slogans and sentiments have a loud presence in both analog and digital contexts. In addition to social media, diverse conversations about race relations and power dynamics continue to ignite across institutions and living rooms. The Black Lives Matter movement, in fact, was nominated in January of 2021 for the Nobel peace prize.³⁴⁹

Sometimes the # is still present in BLM offline visuals, as if those who installed them felt that the message would be less effective without a hashtag. While the hashtag is a tool that technically functions online, its analog presence likely prompts unaware passersby to search for #BlackLivesMatter online, which would of course lead one to further immersion into the topic. As Messina describes it, “[w]henver you’ve seen or overheard a hashtag and decided to investigate further, your thoughts have been invaded by a meme — also known as a thought

³⁴⁹ Martin Belam, “Black Lives Matter movement nominated for Nobel peace prize,” *The Guardian*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/29/black-lives-matter-nobel-peace-prize-petter-eide-norwegian-mp>.

virus!”³⁵⁰ It is undeniable that the hashtag is capable of an analog existence, or put more precisely, of facilitating an offline existence for the content it works for while online. In the case of #BlackLivesMatter, or #BLM, the hashtags circulate between online and offline planes, a characteristic that is no doubt indicative of these hashtags’ success, again by which I mean great frequency and far reach. These qualities work to sustain the presence of hashtags and secure the ideas they carry into mainstream culture.³⁵¹

Despite careers in communications, publicity, and marketing that are dedicated to ascertaining what enables shreds of culture to go viral, pinpointing how, why, and when this phenomenon happens is difficult to accomplish. In this sense hashtags share in the seemingly magical properties of wishes. A wish may or may not come true, but they often do not, and so when they do come to fruition for a desiring subject the experience can feel surreal. Likewise, there is an unfathomable amount of content spreading across the World Wide Web at any given moment, and only a small fraction of what lives online goes viral. When content does go viral a subject could be impacted in a diverse range of ways. For example, internet sensations like YouTube stars and Instagram influencers may construct their livelihoods out of such, often unexpected, circumstances that evolved out of the sudden and prolific transmission of something they once, maybe on a whim, posted online.³⁵²

As of 2020 there were approximately 7.81 billion people in the world, and of them 5.2 billion owned mobile devices (66.83% of the world’s population). Of those 5.2 billion people 3.5 billion owned smart phones (44.81% of the world’s population). And though not every person in

³⁵⁰ Messina, “The Hashtag is 10!”.

³⁵¹ For further analysis of this interplay between online and offline realms where social justice is concerned, see Te-Lin (Doreen) Chung, Olivia Johnson, Adrienne Hall-Phillips, and Kyuree Kim, “The effects of offline events on online connective actions: An examination of #BoycottNFL using social network analysis,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 115 (February 2021).

³⁵² Susan Scutti, “Accidentally famous: The psychology of going viral,” *CNN*, March 16, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/16/health/social-media-fame/index.html>.

the world has a smart phone or a mobile device of some kind, of the 7.81 billion people in the world there were 10.06 billion mobile connections resultant of 5.22 billion unique mobile subscribers. This data suggests that there were 2.25 billion more mobile connections than there were people worldwide.³⁵³ As of February 15, 2022, there were 412,351,279 documented cases of the corona virus worldwide and 5,821,004 documented deaths due to the virus worldwide.³⁵⁴ The logics of the virus – infection, propagation, transmission, containment, prevention, paranoia, – are deeply embedded in cultures internationally, on behalf of both digital and biological viral loads. Even the idea that humanity is itself a virus, wreaking havoc on the planet, is a trending conjecture.³⁵⁵ And scientists are backing up this claim.³⁵⁶ I am struck by how objects of transmission are dominating global consciousness. I am also struck by the parallels between these distinct objects of transmission from within the same globalized world. Specifically, the contrast in transmission of radio waves and the Corona Virus illuminates how the present globalized consciousness is one of frustration, confusion, fear, and also hope at present.

On December 2, 2014, following the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, President Barack Obama visited the campus of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland to witness first-hand what scientists were doing to ease the destruction of the deadly virus. That day he gave a speech at the NIH Clinical Center that aimed to convince both Congress and the American people that current action (i.e., congressional funding) was needed to build “an infrastructure” to

³⁵³ Simon Kemp, “Digital 2020 – Global Digital Review: Essential Insights Into How People Around the World Use the Internet, Mobile Devices, Social Media, and Ecommerce,” *We Are Social / Hootsuite*, 2020, https://p.widencdn.net/1zybur/Digital2020Global_Report_en.

³⁵⁴ “WHO Coronavirus (Covid-19) Dashboard,” *World Health Organization*, December 9, 2021, <https://covid19.who.int/>.

³⁵⁵ Sierra Garcia, “‘We’re the virus’: The pandemic is bringing out environmentalism’s dark side,” *Grist*, March 30, 2020, <https://grist.org/climate/were-the-virus-the-pandemic-is-bringing-out-environmentalisms-dark-side/>.

³⁵⁶ David O. Wiebers and Valery L. Feigin, “What the COVID-19 Crisis Is Telling Humanity,” *Neuroepidemiology* 54.4 (2020), 283-286.

fortify the United States and the global community against similar future health crises. From the context of the present Covid-19 pandemic that grips the globe, his words are prescient.

There may and likely will come a time in which we have both [sic] an airborne disease that is deadly. And in order for us to deal with that effectively, we have to put in place an infrastructure – not just here at home, but globally – that allows us to see it quickly, isolate it quickly, respond to it quickly...So that if and when a new strain of flu, like the Spanish flu, crops up five years from now or a decade from now, we've made the investment and we're further along to be able to catch it. It is a smart investment for us to make. It's not just insurance; it is knowing that down the road we're going to continue to have problems like this - particularly in a globalized world where you move from one side of the world to the other in a day.³⁵⁷

Obama's words have me marvelling at not only their premonitory qualities, but of the modern technological capabilities they describe that allow human beings (and whomever else manages to hitch a ride) “to move from one side of the world to the other in a day.” Technology is just one part of the story, but regardless of the causal factors, globalization has remained mostly unchecked as *the* path forward for most of the capitalist world since the Cold War.

The coronavirus, however, has called globalization into question in part by exacerbating nationalist, populist, and xenophobic sentiments that had already been steadily growing from one recent world event to the next. 9-11, the Arab Spring, Brexit, the Trump Administration's homeland security politics, the sustained growing wealth inequality around the world – both the forces that have produced these events and what has resulted from them – have hampered the world's globalizing momentum. Borders have been closed and fortified globally, travel bans have been enacted, and citizens urged to “shelter in place,” “stay-home,” “self-quarantine,” “flatten the curve,” and “maintain social-distance.” Depending on the country and its point in what is so often cited as “the battle against the virus,” there appears to be a dance happening

³⁵⁷ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on Research for Potential Ebola Vaccines,” *The White House: Office of the Press Secretary*, December 2, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/02/remarks-president-research-potential-ebola-vaccines>.

between the forces responsible for this curbing of human behavior. Some blend of the law, patriotism, nationalism, solidarity, morality, science, and fear appears to be responsible for rewriting social norms and applying new forms of biopolitical control onto populations. Even the circulation of global capital is being scrutinized around the world through “trade wars.” There is this sense that human beings have spread out and gotten too comfortable, collaborated on the world stage perhaps a bit too liberally, and now nations are sending out signals that it is time to reign it back in and focus on home in the face of natural disasters and their ensuing financial fallouts.

Though solidarity stances appear common across mainstream culture, people and institutions are also exhibiting behavior and adopting procedures that suggest that isolationism, nationalism, and self-sufficiency are the models to which it is worth turning. Where collectivism is concerned, the world seems ambivalent, and ideas and practices of nonsovereignty seem particularly at risk at this time. “We’re all in this together” made a cute motto in people’s windows at the beginning of the pandemic, but there now seems to be greater acknowledgment that there are many ways in which human global subjects are very much not in this together. That is, humans are not all experiencing the pandemic simultaneously, or in proximity, or to the same degree of intensity and effect. While a virus is impervious to geographic borders, privileged individuals with the proper resources can better safeguard themselves and their health against such a threat. Additionally, class, race, and gender tensions have been exacerbated by the heightened anxieties and fears brought on by Covid-19. Although no imaginable crackdown on immigration policies for any given country on earth can keep the virus from crossing borders, scapegoating and ethnocentrism at both the levels of local community as well as the nation-state are on the rise. Racist hostility has manifested toward people of Chinese descent, and Asian

people more generally, in Canada and the United States.³⁵⁸ All of this tension has resulted in hits against globalization as the path forward to progress for the modern world.

The politics of transmission are also furthering an institutional reliance on the military metaphor to provoke the public to rally against perceived threats to their sovereignty via threats to national security, which is certainly not a new practice. The creation of the American citizen-soldier in the aftermath of 9-11 is a stark historical example, as well as the inundation of “if you see something, say something” campaigns that have sprung up in public spaces in the United States and Canada in the name of public safety and homeland security. Jackie Orr has referred to these institutional securitizing psychic process as “the militarization of inner space.”

The psychology of the civilian-soldier, the networks of everyday emotional and perceptual relations, constitute an ‘inner space’ that is today, I suggest, one volatile site of attempted military occupation. But the occupying forces I’m concerned with here are not those of an invasive enemy ‘other.’ Rather, a partial and urgent history of attempts by the U.S. government, media, military, and academy to enlist the psychological life of U.S. citizens as a military asset – this is the embodied story that occupies me here.³⁵⁹

Orr’s focus is on the United States, but her theorizing can certainly be applied to Canada.

The campaigns Orr describes motivate citizen surveillance through fear mongering and invocations of patriotic duty in the United States and Canada alike. Citizens are weaponized through indoctrination, urged by authorities to assist in the maintenance of the state’s hierarchical power for their own well-being and protection. Presently, people from around the planet continue to observe and reflect on the battle between human civilization and COVID-19.

³⁵⁸ Sabrina Tavernise and Richard A. Oppel Jr., “Spit On, Yelled At, Attacked: Chinese-Americans Fear for Their Safety,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2020 (Updated May 5, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/chinese-coronavirus-racist-attacks.html>; Isabelle Docto, “Anti-Asian Violence Spiked During Covid-19, Here’s What You Should Know,” *Chatelaine*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.chatelaine.com/living/anti-asian-violence-covid-19/>.

³⁵⁹ Jackie Orr, “The Militarization of Inner Space,” *Critical Sociology* 30 (2004), 455.

This common view describes the human species at war with a biological virus, a virus wreaking havoc not only on physiological systems, but economic, political, and social systems as well.

Between March 13th and June 29th of 2020 the prime minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, gave daily morning updates about Canada's response to the pandemic. On April 2, 2020, he concluded his remarks with this war time rally to civilians.

I want you to know that we're giving this fight everything we've got. Just yesterday, we announced the biggest economic measures in our lifetime. Governments of all orders are organizing the most significant civic mobilization since WWII. Doctors and nurses, truckers and air cargo operators are scaling up operations to levels we've never seen before in our history. But here's the truth. None of that will be enough without your help. *[translated from French]* The idea of serving one's country changes from one generation to the next. Your grandfather may have served this country by going abroad and fighting a war. Your mother may have fought for more equality. But now, it's your turn. It's your turn to contribute to the general effort. You can serve your country by staying home and following the rules. I know that that may seem simplistic but it's the only way to come through this trial. Every single one of us has to do their part. We must all sacrifice our routine so that life will return to normal at some point. I know that we can and that we will together.³⁶⁰

In addition to the use of combat jargon and imagery, Trudeau and the Canadian government have also sprinkled team language throughout their public relations campaigns. And such styles of propaganda are trending around the world. In response to the postponing of Wimbledon, an annual tennis tournament in England, pro-player Roger Federer made the following announcement.

Since 1877, Wimbledon fans have embraced the Championships. We have watched through multiple types of screen, at all hours of the day and night, descended from afar, even queued... my how you have queued. This summer, sadly, we must come together by staying apart. No tents will be pitched, no records broken, no trophies engraved. But as we say thank you for your passion and support, we remind ourselves that countless champions will be crowned. As frontline workers across the globe compete for us, we

³⁶⁰ Justin Trudeau, "Trudeau's daily coronavirus update: 'We're giving this fight everything we've got' (Full transcript)," *Maclean's*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/trudeaus-coronavirus-update-april-2-full-transcript/>.

cheer for them. For now, with play suspended, we are united in hope that tomorrow will be better than today.³⁶¹

Both the military and sports metaphors do the bidding of neoliberal capitalism. Competition, security, protection, individual effort, and self-sacrifice all are valued for achieving some broader aim, yet the broader aim looks a lot like more sovereignty. These messages incite dutiful citizens to be team players and “contribute to the general effort,” what Trudeau refers to as “this fight,” so that all subjects can return to “some sense of normalcy.” This governmental messaging also normalizes “normal.” To return to normal, or to reach some state of a “new normal,” solidifies the systems that structured subjects’ lives prior to the Corona pandemic as the normalcy that they are now mourning the loss of during this period of upheaval. Neoliberal capitalism, in a nutshell, is what gets normalized in this discourse. Subjects are all in this together in so much as they are being called to salvage their adherence to the concept of “capital.” Subjects are all in this together in the effort to save “the system,” which feeds itself through the disruption and negation of nonsovereign possibilities.

Hashtag activism adds to the optics and politics of transmission in interesting and unique ways. It is reported that just over half of the entire world’s population in 2020 constituted social media users. And one statistic suggests that this number rises to 63% “when looking at eligible audiences aged 13+ years.”³⁶² Therefore, the hashtag is a discursive site of infection, replication, and transmission to which a modern subject is highly susceptible. A hashtag also constitutes technology that is counterintuitive to such sentiments around containment. A fortified border

³⁶¹ Roger Federer, “‘We must come together by staying apart’ – Roger Federer delivers message after Wimbledon blow,” *Tennis365*, April 11, 2020, <https://www.tennis365.com/tennis-news/we-must-come-together-by-staying-apart-roger-federer-delivers-message-after-wimbledon-cancellation/>.

³⁶² Kemp, “Digital 2020.”

might stop a migrant, but it is not going to have the same effect on a hashtag. Equipped with connective, collective, and subjective properties, the hashtag's potential utilizations are diverse. An analysis of hashtag activism reveals how the world has been brought to a disorienting crossroads of paradoxical transmission. While a diversity of efforts at the individual, communal, local, national, and transnational levels have been made to prevent and limit the transmission of Covid-19, efforts that facilitate a retreat from certain aspects of local and global cooperation, Canadian and American institutions have looked to the internet as an expanse full of possibility and a tool for keeping this aging vessel known as "late capitalism" afloat. It is two years into this pandemic, and it appears that these online tools and digital technology are indeed helping to stave off societal collapse.

It is also no surprise that cyber security appears to have joined the limelight as a significant contemporary issue. The world that Obama referenced as an enabler of the spread of airborne diseases like the Spanish Flu, Ebola, and now the Corona virus – the world in which one can "move from one side of the world to the other in a day" – is the same world that increasingly finds itself embroiled in conflicts of identity theft, election interference, mis/mal information propagation, bullying and harassment, sexual assault crimes, and deepening ideological rifts around various modes of difference like race, gender, sexuality, and class, all of which are hosted online. Many countries already restrict, some more than others, the internet and its flow of virtual content.³⁶³ And huge digital social networking corporations like Facebook are no stranger to public suspicion and political scrutiny. In 2020 my home institution of York University launched (online, no doubt) a "new intensive format of its Cyber Security program this November to help

³⁶³ Paul Bischoff, "Internet Censorship 2021: A Global Map of Internet Restrictions," *Comparitech*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.comparitech.com/blog/vpn-privacy/internet-censorship-map/>.

address the critical and growing cyber security skills gap in Canada and worldwide.”³⁶⁴ Will burgeoning online technology be the next scapegoat for rising nationalist and isolationist tides, despite digital media’s resuscitation of neoliberal capitalism during this pandemic? Where will this moment of confusing paradoxical transmission bring global citizens? Despite the optics of cooperation and collaboration, are concepts of togetherness like political solidarity even more at risk than they already were? And how can digital technologies like the hashtag help politicized subjects usher in brighter futures full of nonsovereign possibilities?

Awkward Politics

In *Awkward Politics: Technologies of Popfeminist Activism*, Smith-Prei and Stehle make the case for awkwardness as a “mode of politics” and topic of academic analysis.³⁶⁵

Awkwardness messes with timing and with the time-line, it messes with space and location. It is very much of the body and its hormonal secretions, but it is also social and ephemeral, moving in and out of visibility, gone in an instant through leaving its emotional traces. Awkwardness can be coincidental, unintentional, or even an externally given label demarcating the upsetting of social norms, but it can also be intentionally provoked or engaged. Looking at the awkward allows us to approach popfeminist performances with a playful self-consciousness and a sense of agency.³⁶⁶

Rather than stifle or ignore it, Smith-Prei and Stehle advocate for feminist methodologies that meet awkwardness head on, analyze it, and take full advantage of it, all toward finding “new forms of agency in the interface of digital and analogue activations, where words, images, and narratives matter.”³⁶⁷ While the research subject of *Awkward Politics* is digital popfeminist activism, with a focus on feminist protest art and performance, a variety of digital media can feel

³⁶⁴ scsadm, “New online intensive Cyber Security program for rapid reskilling to fill global talent shortage,” School of Continuing Studies, York University, October 7, 2020, <https://continue.yorku.ca/cyber-security-short-intensive-program-launches/>.

³⁶⁵ Carrie Smith-Prei and Maria Stehle, *Awkward Politics: Technologies of Popfeminist Activism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016), 12.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 7.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 8.

awkward to practitioners. Smith-Prei and Stehle's work showcases how "[t]he digital becomes a means of capturing, archiving, and transmitting awkwardness." They claim that "[d]igital spaces underscore the simultaneous public and private experience of the awkward while also intensifying the materiality, aesthetics, and affects of the awkward position."³⁶⁸ Awkwardness appears a healthy affective harbinger of progressive activism. Its presence is indicative of the interplay of diverse methodologies, utilization of new tools, challenges to major socioeconomic systems, and messy dialogues.

The relative newness and rapid growth of online media and digital technologies, and therefore, the cloud of unfamiliarity that looms over many a virtual experience, is a defining and awkward-making characteristic of hashtag activism. People and institutions are constantly playing catch up to ever-expanding technologies and practices, which can be awkward to say the least. To this point, I wonder whether my uncle's concerns from chapter two are due to what some sassy millennials might cite as "boomer problems." Though my 75-year-old uncle is active on Facebook with friends and family, I wonder how much of his hesitation regarding the politicization of discourse on social media can be chalked up to his technological illiteracy. More specifically, is his characterization of social media as an inappropriate host for politics a comment on his disenchantment with politics, or an effect of his benightedness regarding what Facebook and other platforms could accomplish for him politically were he to embrace them to such an end? Is it the awkwardness of social media that gives my uncle pause?

Another major contributing factor to digital media's awkwardness is its disorienting effects on understandings and experiences of materiality. Smith-Prei and Stehle are particularly concerned with how digital technology has complicated the materiality of popfeminist activism,

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 7.

while I apply this consequence to social justice activism more generally. Marches, sit-ins, rallies, and picket lines all function through a reliance on corporeal materiality, on the gathering of bodies in public space. Even hunger strikes, which are frequently carried out in prison in isolation, require an acting body, as well as a social apparatus (probably virtual) that broadcasts the action to an audience beyond the prison guards witnessing the strike. Analog activists put themselves out there, and so their bodies double as sites of protest and tactics of dissent, whereas within digital activism bodies may not constitute sites or tactics, nor are the locations of bodies necessarily relevant or even knowable in the first place. The decentralization – or possible absence – of bodies in digital activism removes a familiar anchor of political organizing, but also a common contributor to activist vulnerability. When activists organize in public space, as Butler notes, their “bodies are the object of many of the demonstrations that take precarity as their galvanizing condition.”³⁶⁹ In public protests the bodies assembled often belong to disenfranchised groups, which contributes to their “indexical force,” a powerful potentiality of

the body that arrives with other bodies in a zone visible to media coverage: it is *this* body, and *these* bodies, that require employment, shelter, health care, and food, as well as a sense of a future that is not the future of unpayable debt; it is *this* body, or *these* bodies, or bodies *like* this body or these bodies, that live the condition of an imperiled livelihood, decimated infrastructure, accelerating precarity.³⁷⁰

This weight of the body in analog activism constitutes one way that “acting in concert can be an embodied form of calling into questions the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political.”³⁷¹ I agree with Butler that “it matters that bodies assemble.”³⁷²

What, then, can be made of activism without bodies? Are bodies necessary components of social justice actions? Can live subjects exist without bodies? Can activism exist without

³⁶⁹ Butler, *Notes Toward*, 9.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 7.

subjects? Can activist subjects exist without knowable locations – sans physical geographic standpoints? In other words, can the avatar speak? Subjectivity for digital activists is tricky territory. It is obvious that avatars can speak technologically, but they do not or cannot always appear or act in corporeal form. When digital activists appear on the wings of WiFi, it may not be apparent, immediately or ever, from where on earth they are appearing. I am interested in how these contours of digital presence affect activist subjectivity.

In her scholarship Butler is not attempting to instal embodied activism at the top of some hierarchy of sociopolitical action, but rather she is describing the singular impacts of bodies in public space. In order to do so she distinguishes “freedom of assembly” from “freedom of expression,” and “bodily performativity” from “linguistic performativity.” These distinctions enable her to claim that “embodied actions of various kinds signify in ways that are, strictly speaking, neither discursive nor prediscursive.” For Butler “forms of assembly already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands they make.” She references “silent gatherings,” such as vigils and funerals as events that “often signify in excess of any particular written or vocalized account of what they are about.” At such a gathering, the “mode of signification,” Butler states, “is a concerted bodily enactment, a plural form of performativity.”³⁷³ Ultimately, for Butler, public assembly signifies beyond what might ever be said, and it shifts the performative subject from the individual to the group.

If performativity has often been associated with individual performance, it may prove important to reconsider those forms of performativity that only operate through forms of coordinated action, whose condition and aim is the reconstitution of plural forms of agency and social practices of resistances. So this movement or stillness, this parking of my body in the middle of another’s action is neither my act nor yours, but that something that happens by virtue of the relation between us, arising from that relation, equivocating between the I and the we, seeking at once to preserve and disseminate the generative

³⁷³ Butler, *Notes Toward*, 8.

value of that equivocation, an active and deliverable sustained relation, a collaboration distinct from hallucinatory margining or confusion.³⁷⁴

Butler's theorizing of public assembly as something that is "neither my act nor yours," sounds a lot like political solidarity. Individual subjects are responsible for inciting it, but the solidarity group that gets formed, and the actions that this group is collectively capable of, are now beyond and in excess of any individual subject. Butler's theorized forms of group performativity, whose facilitation she credits to public assembly, are productive hosts of political solidarity. The question that then looms is whether hashtag solidarity, and digital activism in general, can similarly facilitate political solidarity for sociopolitical justice activist subjects.

Digital technologies and practices like hashtag activism not only operate as conduits for disembodied narratives of subjectivity, but also dislocated narratives of subjectivity. Digital space, Pinar Tuzco claims, offers online subjects "potentials to challenge geography's traditional biopolitical paradigm." It "unsettles the arrangements of bodies and makes us question entrenched notions of what counts as 'human' in relation to geography." Tuzco continues, "in other words, digitization demands taking into account modes of moving through and occupying space that cannot be mapped with traditional notions of representation."³⁷⁵ Using Avtar Brah's conceptualizations of "diaspora space" as sites that construct belongingness affectively as opposed to geographically, Tuzco likens diasporic realms to digital realms.³⁷⁶

Rather than a distinct location inhabited by a community or an individual with a particular migration experience, it is a spatialized structuring of affects of emplacement that reshapes notions of belonging and attachment towards more distributed forms, including bodies that are relatively still. Similar to diaspora space, digitization's affects of belonging are animated by the sense of being part of a network and one's movement through interdigitated locations.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 9.

³⁷⁵ Pinar Tuzco, "'Allow access to location?': Digital feminist geographies," *Feminist Media Studies* 16.1 (2016), 153.

³⁷⁶ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996).

³⁷⁷ Tuzco, "Allow access," 153.

Like *Awkward Politics*, the subject of Tuzcu's project is feminism. Her analysis of digital feminist geographies leads her to recommend that feminists embrace their "positional entanglement," which she defines as the "always messy process of constructing one's political standpoint." Contemporary feminism must confront "how to mobilize positions that are productively paradoxical, that is, how to make use of digital entanglements as modes of feminist embodiment."³⁷⁸ In other words, digital media is not inherently counterintuitive to embodiment; in fact, it is constitutive of it. Though incredibly diverse, bodies are the only places subjects live. Consciousness can only be accessed through the body.

Although outside the scope of this chapter, I must cite that disability studies provides important theoretical frameworks and scholarship to help get at this problem of subjectivity without bodies, or subjectivity without certain bodies, by problematizing the taken-for-granted assumptions and norms that normalize and constrain subjects' corporeality.³⁷⁹ Critical disability studies, along with critical race theory, feminist theory, and queer theory have all flagged ways that certain bodies have historically been denied subjectivity, as well as illuminated how social constructions have congealed to reify these corporeal exclusions. The junction of disembodied subjects engaging with other disembodied subjects in cyberspace through activism and protest may appear disorienting to some subjects due to the absence of something once taken for granted, but it also may facilitate new forms of subject-formation and subject-expression. The absence of material bodies, bodies that historically have acted as magnets for pernicious essentialism for instance, might reduce subjects' potential to commit such essentialism online.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 154.

³⁷⁹ For important examples of such scholarship that use feminism and queerness to aid its arguments see Alison Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013) and Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006).

Subjects are necessary to the construction and execution of protests and other acts of dissent and resistance, regardless of their analog and digital natures. Subjective agency is what happens when activists act. In a sense, bodies are also necessary components of social justice activism, but analog public assembly is not the only possibility for bodies to function and appear within social justice movements.

Another way to reconcile subjectivity with disembodiment and dislocation is to revisit conceptualizations of technology. Definitionally, technology does not necessarily denote digital innovation, a fact not lost on the authors of *Awkward Politics*. Smith-Prei and Stehle nod to Teresa de Lauretis' theorizing of gender as technology to construct a framework for analyzing digital feminist activism. De Lauretis' definition of technology as the discursive sum of "various social technologies" (a harkening back to Foucault's theory of sexuality as a "technology of sex") can move us beyond conceptions of technology as mere bouts of digital advancement, which is where mainstream regards of technology remain.³⁸⁰ Technologies can also refer to "that mechanism of construction, which facilitates a crossing of the theoretical with the practical."³⁸¹ I was not conceiving of technology in this way when I first began to work on *Solidarity Wishes*. I now recognize that "both material bodies and the digital work as technologies that communicate the place where practice and theory collide."³⁸² Both can do things. Both can act as tools for the promotion of transformative justice.

To start with the preface that the technological denotes the digital, as I non-consciously did in the early stages of writing this dissertation, is to reinscribe a slew of false unhelpful dichotomies, like thinking vs. doing, theory vs. praxis, online vs. offline, and technological vs.

³⁸⁰ Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), ix.

³⁸¹ Smith-Prei and Stehle, *Awkward Politics*, 7.

³⁸² Ibid.

material, all of which can muddy the possibilities of what hashtag activism can do for a subject. Alternatively, if technology is conceived of as the intersection of thinking and doing, as the things subjects make and then use in order to make again, then both bodies and digital media can be recognized as potentially productive technologies, things that subjects may use. This line of thinking usefully complicates the body. Bodies are not just – albeit organic – material. Haraway reminds us that bodies as “objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes,” and that [t]heir boundaries materialize in social interaction.³⁸³ De Lauretis, Butler, Haraway, and Smith-Prei and Stehle all proffer – each in their own way – the body as a tool, like a hashtag, as opposed to some corporeal prerequisite or stand-in for activist subjectivity. Therefore, activist narratives of disembodiment do not foreclose subjectivity because bodies are not subjects in and of themselves. Subjects are actors with bodies. Hashtag activists are subjects with bodies whose technologies of choice may decenter their bodies from their actions.

Still, a body is subject to a subject. I recognize that oppressed and marginalized subjects are subjects whose identities and bodies are under duress, which complicates notions of agency and freedom. I will explore these complications further in the context of discourse production in the remainder of this chapter. I also recognize that subjects are not always easy to find within digital media. Bots and trolls abound in online spaces, and their presence can complicate things where subjectivity is concerned. It is no doubt difficult for subjects to engage with hard to find, or perhaps artificial, subjects. But somewhere below the digital camouflage of scammers and harassers, lurks a subject, and somewhere on earth resides that subject’s body. As Haraway puts it, “[t]echnology is not neutral.” She continues, [w]e’re inside of what we make, and it’s inside of

³⁸³ Donna Haraway, “Chapter Eight: A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simions, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 200-201.

us.”³⁸⁴ Trolls are jerks, but subjects, nonetheless (unless the trolls are bots...in which case they’re still jerks!).

Enter Haraway’s cyborg, which she debuted in 1984 in her “Cyborg Manifesto” as the vehicle for an intervention into socialist feminism.³⁸⁵ The cyborg is a “cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.” The cyborg is useful to an analysis of hashtag activism because it lays bare the historical processes of social construction that are embedded within technological objects. When Haraway describes the cyborg as a creature of fiction she is not solely emphasizing fiction as a creative genre, but she is also underscoring the fiction of social construction and its historical effects on women’s movements and contested categories like “woman.”

Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. The international women's movements have constructed 'women's experience', as well as uncovered or discovered this crucial collective object. This experience is a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.³⁸⁶

The illusionary yet stubborn boundary between science fiction and social reality that the cyborg delegitimizes is just one of many boundaries that Haraway’s work trespasses, and it is worth noting that Haraway is not the only thinker who has worked to demolish it. Many scholarly thinkers, such as Raymond Williams and Adrienne Maree Brown for example, have looked to science fiction for sociopolitical possibility and transformative justice inspiration in their

³⁸⁴ Donna Haraway as quoted in Hari Kunzru, “You Are Cyborg,” *Wired*, February 1, 1997, <https://www.wired.com/1997/02/fharaway/>.

³⁸⁵ Nicholas Gane’s interview with Donna Haraway helpfully contextualizes the cyborg within socialist feminism. See Nicholas Gane and Donna Haraway, “When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done?: Interview with Donna Haraway.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, 7–8 (2006), 135–158.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

scholarship.³⁸⁷ The lesson here, however, is that narrative genres like science fiction, fantasy, utopia, and even feminist pornography, are not a subject's only hope for finding a reprieve from the confines of stubborn social constructions like gender, race, class, and sexuality, for subjects can reconstruct their actual selves, and therefore alter their lived existences. Subjects can make better tools and technologies for finding the good life. And as Lauren Berlant's theorizing suggests, they can find better objects to attach to. Technology, then, can constitute the gamut from gender to hashtags. In theory, in addition to amending subjects' bodies for this world, subjects can amend this world for their bodies, yet another lesson critical disability studies has helped to deliver. In the next section I analyze hashtag activism through a Foucauldian lens to help make further sense of some of the discursive complications that arise for hashtag activists online in addition to disembodiment and dislocation. Despite the awkwardness that may arise in virtual pursuits of transformative justice due to disembodiment and dislocation, I hope I have clearly shown how digital activism and other virtual relational practices are not necessarily limiting to subjectivity but can in fact expand nonsovereign possibilities for subjects through organizing tools like hashtag activism.

Digital Discourse Production

Online communities are built around what is shared, and sometimes a meme or a hashtag is enough to build a virtual village. When hashtag activists disseminate or recirculate digital content the results are two-pronged and simultaneous: commentary on some current situation or issue is created and the politics of the poster is performatively reflected. If I were to retweet

³⁸⁷ See Raymond Williams, "Science Fiction," *The Highway: The Journal of the Workers' Educational Association* 48 (December 1956), 41-45; Williams, "Utopia and Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 16, Volume 5, Part 3 (November 1978); Adrienne Maree Brown and Walidah Imarisha, eds., *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press and the Institute for Anarchist Studies, 2015).

content by someone like J.K. Rowling, for example, or be affiliated with her through a shared hashtag, my trans politics might be scrutinized as a result, as Rowling has been trending as one of the world's most infamous transphobes.³⁸⁸ Regardless of what I posted, despite my love of or unfamiliarity with Rowling's writing, and whether or not I personally am transphobic, something as instantaneous, thoughtless, and easy to carry out as a retweet or a shared hashtag could unwittingly rope me into a debate or attach me to certain characterizations. This is a significant quality of the hashtag, its ability to organize digital content as well as reflect the politics of those who post it, despite the intentionality of the subjects involved.

A consideration of #BlackLivesMatter, #AllLivesMatter, and #BlueLivesMatter helps to exemplify this important dual impact. These three hashtags have a fascinating discursive relationship.³⁸⁹ Though these hashtags are all in some way commenting on the sanctity of life, they are often used against each other in attempts to disarm arguments put forth by those in ideological unalignment. If there are three cars in a parking lot, each with a bumper sticker that references one of these hashtag mottos, it is very likely that the drivers all hail from distinct sociopolitical camps. I am willing to bet money that the car sporting the #bluelivesmatter (aka: police lives matter) bumper sticker in this hypothetical parking lot is not the baby blue Prius with the pride flag in its back windows and "Bernie2020" decal on its trunk. I would also wager that the car with the #blacklivesmatter bumper sticker is not the Chevy pickup truck with the gunrack in its rear window and truck nuts dangling from its trailer hitch. I am cheekily making

³⁸⁸ Alison Flood, "JK Rowling's new thriller takes No 1 spot amid transphobia row," *The Guardian*, September 23, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/sep/23/jk-rowling-thriller-no-1-transphobia-row-troubled-blood-robert-galbraith>.

³⁸⁹ Monica Anderson, Skye Toor, Lee Rainie, and Aaron Smith. "Activism in the Social Media Age," *Pew Research Center*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/07/11/activism-in-the-social-media-age/>.

assumptions here, and so there is plenty of room for error (surely *somewhere* in the world there is at least one baby blue Prius with a Trump/Pence bumper sticker...), but the reality is that political and ideological characterizations circulate with hashtags between online and offline realms. It is part of their schtick. The ways that consumer goods like bumper stickers and virtual content like hashtags circulate and entangle subjects in particular subcultures are part of the politics of transmission.

The largest sociopolitical resistance movements of recent American and Canadian (and arguably world) history – The Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, Me Too, Occupy, Idle No More, Standing Rock to name a few – all have functioned heavily via hashtags or were initiated through them. With the #MeToo movement, for example, it was the hashtag that propelled a local initiative into the vast social movement it is today.³⁹⁰ I am interested in what it means for a hashtag like Black Lives Matter, and all its baggage, to have traveled from social media to the windows and lawns of homes in Rosedale, one of the wealthiest and whitest neighborhoods in Toronto, or for the words “Me Too” to be yelled by the nine-year-old girls in my care at the playground when they are enthusiastically discussing – in equal parts jest and seriousness – the issue that “boys are pigs.” I suspect it means that the issues flagged, and sentiments raised by Black Lives Matter and Me-Too activists are at present within the purview of mainstream culture. I suspect these hashtags’ trajectories also say something about the internet, its central role in contemporary human existence, and its sheer power in creating and shaping cultural discourse. It is astonishing to me that Foucault’s foundational poststructuralist theorizing of the

³⁹⁰ Jamillah Bowman Williams, Lisa Singh, and Naomi Mezey, “#MeToo as Catalyst: A Glimpse into 21st Century Activism,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 2019.1, Article 22 (2019), <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol2019/iss1/22>.

concept of discourse pre-dates the World Wide Web. What has greater discursive power than the internet? His theories on discourse and power feel custom built for today's digital media.

Haraway noted that "Michael Foucault's biopolitics is a flaccid premonition of cyborg politics, a very open field."³⁹¹ It is up for debate whether Foucault would take umbridge at the snarky use of "flaccid" here, but Haraway's point nonetheless expresses gratitude to Foucault's thinking. Twenty years later she revisits this homage and explains the needs for Foucault's notion of biopower to be "enterprised up" to make it jive better with the here and now.

Foucault wasn't fundamentally immersed in the re-worlding that the figure of the cyborg makes us inhabit. His sense of the biopolitics of populations has not gone away, but it has been reworked, mutated, trans-ed, technologized and instrumentalized differently, in a way that makes me need to invent a new word – technobiopower – to make us pay attention to technobiocapital and cyborg capital. This includes getting it that the bio- here is generative and productive. Foucault understood that the productivity of the bio- is not just human. He understood that this is about the provocation of productivities and generativities of life itself, and Marx understood that too. But we've got to give that a new intensity, as the sources of surplus value, crudely put, can't be theorized as human labour power exclusively, though that's got to remain part of what we're trying to figure out. We can't lose track of human labour, but human labour is reconfigured in biotech-capital.³⁹²

Foucault's conception of biopower has grown into biopolitics, which scholars have branded as *the* poststructuralist vehicle to explore the ways in which bodies are controlled by state power.

Biopolitics is population control politics. Both biopolitical and cyborg political theories describe apparatuses of power from vaccines to social constructions like race, class, and gender. These are the technologies that some humans have created and by which many humans are ordered and sometimes confined by. For both Foucault and Haraway discourse production is a primary issue. Human subjects are the inventors of their Frankensteinian systems, not God or cruel fate. Both theories gesture toward rebellion against such monsters through the reversing or remaking of

³⁹¹ Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 150.

³⁹² Haraway, "When We," 148.

discourse, but it is Haraway's cyborgian politics that I deem capable of extending beyond the depressing and cynical futility that undergirds much poststructuralist scholarship today. The hashtag joins a long list of recent technologies that can be understood as what Haraway conceives of as "technobiopower," generative technologies that blur the boundaries of flesh and machine, social and digital, productive and non-productive, and for whose societal omnipresence Covid-19 has expanded.

Online subject formation is a rapidly growing research topic within scholarship from game studies, social/digital media studies, and digital feminist media studies to name a few.³⁹³ Chris Brickell's article "Sexuality, Power, and the Sociology of the Internet" uses sexuality as a vehicle to analyze the internet's role in the construction, regulation, and oppression of subjectivities. Like Foucault, Brickell situates his analysis within sexuality. He observes that "Foucault noted that the subject constituted through power relations is never free from the constraints of context," which begs some obvious poststructuralist questions.³⁹⁴ What subject is not constituted through "power relations?" If the answer is none, then are subjects, in a sense, mythical creatures? Is the agency of subjectivity a sham? A hopeful fiction? Are the conditions necessary for the subaltern to speak achievable? Or is the mediation of power an inherent part of the workload of maintaining subjectivity for all subjects?

Online sexual subjects constituted "through power relations" and under certain "constraints of context" are prime examples of Foucauldian discursive subjects because while the internet facilitates a means to speak, it can also constrict and regulate subjectivity, as illuminated

³⁹³ For a recent example of such scholarship that explores subjectivity and digital/virtual relationality across the axis of gender, see Mónica Grau-Sarabia and Mayo Fuster-Morell, "Gender approaches in the study of the digital economy: a systematic literature review," *Humanities Social Sciences Communications* 8, 201 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00875-x>.

³⁹⁴ Chris Brickell, "Sexuality, Power and the Sociology of the Internet," *Current Sociology* 60.1 (2012), 33.

in Brickell's research. Haraway does not deny this reality of online subject formation, yet I find her cyborg to be a more hopeful figure than Foucault's subject of biopower. Her theorizing around the cyborg reminds us that social constructions are really technologies of human design and application. The World Wide Web, as signifier, can enable subjects with significant agency and tools to combat such oppressive forces. As Mari Ruti contends through her use of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, "it is the signifier that carries [subjects'] desire."

Indeed, it is only as subjects of signification that we are capable of desire in the first place. In this context, it is important to repeat that even though Lacan regards language as something that all too easily deprives us of singularity (of the specificity of our desire) by subjecting us to sociodiscursive hegemonies, he admits that the signifier does not always coincide with the symbolic order—that the signifier does not invariably speak or support the discourse of the Other (17). In effect, when commenting on the strangely inspired writing practice of James Joyce, Lacan explicitly asserts that language challenges normative structures of signification as much as it reinforces them, and that to some extent one has the capacity to invent the language one uses; one has the power to activate the poetic function of language. As Lacan (1975–1976) observes, "This assumes or implies that one chooses to speak the language that one effectively speaks. . . . One creates a language insofar as one at every instant gives it a sense, one gives it a little nudge, without which language would not be alive" (p. 133; transl. [Ruti's]).

Like Foucault, Lacan was writing before the rise of the Internet, yet his observations sound so specifically tailored to it. Ruti elaborates:

Lacan therefore concedes that although language functions as an impersonal structure into which we are introduced at birth, we are nevertheless capable of giving it a little (poetic) 'nudge' that transforms it into something uniquely ours—that conveys something about the truth' of our desire. That is, the fact that each of us has the power—however limited—to push aside congealed forms of meaning gives us a measure of creative freedom. In other words, even though being compelled to participate in a common symbolic system on one level deprives us of personal distinctiveness, on another level it offers us the possibility of carving out a singular place within that order; we can particularize or personalize the discourse we are asked to inhabit.

Yes, hashtag activists, like all subjects, are not immune to the "constraints of context," but their context, in this case the digital realm, enables them to remake it. This is important reworlding work, and to sweep it under the rug of postmodern nihilism is counterproductive to

transformative justice, not to mention lazy. The hashtag and other digital technologies, therefore, can help to open possibilities of agency for subjects. This realization is soothing to the antisocial and nihilistic angst I explored in chapter three. It is pacifying to think that subjects are “not merely subservient to hegemonic social structures but can and do have an impact on these structures; it clarifies why [subjects] manage from time to time to rearticulate and reorganize social reality.”³⁹⁵ This reorganizing of social reality is what I suggest in the conclusion of *Solidarity Wishes* that Covid-19 is, hopefully, responsible for instigating.

In *History of Sexuality Volume 1* Foucault rebukes the repressive hypothesis, which is that the major story of sexual subjectivity throughout the last three centuries in the Western world is primarily one of sexual repression. He critiques this metanarrative by showcasing how sexuality has been something subjects have spoken quite a lot about as a result of the prompting of institutional discourses like religion, medicine, and law. Sexual subjectivity since the turn of the 18th century, according to Foucault, has not been solely a story of repression, but one of intense propagation. However, the constructions of sexual identities have no doubt been fiercely regulated and normalized.

The appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and ‘psychic hermaphroditism’ made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of ‘perversity’; but it also made possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.³⁹⁶

Sexual subjects constituted online, like Smith-Prei’s and Stehle’s subjects of popfeminist activism, are incited to speak by the same digital mediums that constrain them. “Contrary to what some branches of cyberfeminism suggested in the early 1990s, digital space is not

³⁹⁵ Ruti, “The Fall of Fantasies,” 504.

³⁹⁶ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 101.

automatically a space where differences vanish, where borders dissolve, and where bodies take on new meanings.”³⁹⁷ The internet is not void of power and reifying norms, but hashtag activism has nonetheless provided subjects with tools to produce reverse discourse. And queer subjects are certainly not the only communities well practiced in the art of queering discourse by harnessing online tools to further their projects of liberation and reappropriation, despite digital media’s penchant for objectification, commodification, and performative non-performativity.

Shortly after Officer Darren Wilson killed unarmed teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson in August of 2014, Marcia Chatelain, Professor of history and African American studies at Georgetown University, curated a social media campaign through the utilization of a hashtag. She reflects:

#FergusonSyllabus initially started as a request I made to my Twitter followers and friends to dedicate the first day of classes to Michael Brown and the other youth of Ferguson who would not have a normal first day of school because of the unrest in their community. I believed that by talking about some element of the unrest through the lens of a discipline or to create a space in which students could express their questions or confusions about the moment (which captured the attention of cable news reporters, streamed live via Periscope accounts and was narrated by activists via Twitter), educators could amplify the greatest possibilities of online organizing and in-person gathering. Twitter provided an excellent vehicle for me to ask scholars to teach about the crisis, but the ability to search the platform using the #FergusonSyllabus term also allowed for a larger conversation among educators.³⁹⁸

#FergusonSyllabus proved to be an extremely productive initiative for Chatelain. It not only expanded her toolkit as an educator, but it created possibilities for her analog life. As a Black female scholar, she was provided access to modes of resistance and activism that could operate and reach audiences outside of the academy. Through the online amplification of her words and her work Chatelain was thrown into the role of public intellectual. While the experience was not

³⁹⁷ Smith-Prei and Stehle, *Awkward Politics*, 9.

³⁹⁸ Marcia Chatelain, “Is Twitter Any Place for a [Black Academic] Lady?” in *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and Digital Humanities* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 174.

without “anxieties and the complications that come when an untenured woman of color becomes increasingly more visible in a national conversation,” #FergusonSyllabus proved prolific for manifesting political solidarity.³⁹⁹

In Sally J. Scholz’ rendition of political solidarity, the model of political solidarity around which *Solidarity Wishes* was devised, “political solidarity shifts the emphasis of solidarity.” Civic and social forms of solidarity base their constitutions on “varying notions of dependence and group control,” while political solidarity “highlights individual conscience, commitment, group responsibility, and collective action.”⁴⁰⁰

Political solidarity, unlike social solidarity and civic solidarity, arises in response to a situation of injustice or oppression. Individuals make a conscious commitment to join with others in struggle to challenge a perceived injustice. A collective forms but it is unified not by shared attributes, location, or even shared interests. The unity is based on shared commitment to a cause.⁴⁰¹

#FergusonSyllabus was not simply a tool to unify a group and sustain that unity, and it was more than mere resistance, it was action in reaction to the killing of Michael Brown, in sync with ensuing rebellions over anti-Black violence and institutional racism in Canada and the United States that wage on eight years later. #FergusonSyllabus went beyond the critique and contributed to reworlding in various ways. Police brutality, specifically the killing of Brown, was the inciting event that led Chatelain to first use #FergusonSyllabus. Such instances of police brutality are windows into the broader and widespread ideologies of systemic racism and anti-Blackness, the “situation of injustice or oppression” at the center of #FergusonSyllabus. Chatelain used a hashtag to create space for political solidarity to flourish. And it proved successful not just because the hashtag provided an occasion for collaboration, comradery, and

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 175.

⁴⁰⁰ Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 33.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 34.

community, but because the individuals who engaged with Chatelain through the hashtag each “value[d] an interpretation of the past and the present and share[d] a vision for the future, regardless of whether each individual actually experienced the relevant history.”⁴⁰²

#AloneTogether

Audre Lorde wrote a now famous essay that was published in her 1984 collection *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. She wrote it in response to her experience of participating in a New York University Institute for the Humanities conference on American women, and she initially delivered it in a public presentation at another conference shortly after, which only adds to the fierceness of the work. The essay speaks to her dismay upon discovering that Black and lesbian women’s voices were represented in but one panel in the American women conference. According to Lorde, she and the only other Black woman who was asked to speak on this panel were “literally found at the last hour” by conference organizers. The essay’s title doubles as the piece’s main idea, a riff off an old slavery metaphor, which has contributed to decades of feminist scholarship in incalculable ways. The problem that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house was Lorde’s vehicle for delivering her major epistemological critique of the conference. The metaphor also enabled her to draw many parallels to the oppressive patriarchal culture of her time. “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable.”⁴⁰³ Applying this thinking to hashtag activism, and online cultures more generally, is helpful.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 110-111.

Though the critiques in Lorde's essay are targeting a certain kind of "academic arrogance,"⁴⁰⁴ and despite Lorde's unabashed search for the "theory behind racist feminism,"⁴⁰⁵ her thoughts can be (and they certainly have been) applied to a variety of domains where transformative justice is attempted. These are the oft cited golden words of Lorde's essay:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference -- those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older -- know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.⁴⁰⁶

Lorde adeptly describes a massive problem that plagues many academics, activists, artists, and others who "stand [and think] outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable" subjects. It is the problem of systems. It is what Lacanians understand as the inescapability of the Social Symbolic Order. It is the growing suspicion in the guts of members of politicized communities that they will not find a better way because they cannot, that politics do not ultimately accomplish anything, and that systems cannot be reformed from within said systems. This logic is a well-trodden path to nihilism and defeat. And it is what was likely largely responsible for activist David Buckel's suicide as explored in chapter three. Since tools, bodies, and perspectives double as products of the social order that politicized subjects organize against and dream of toppling, there seems to be a real divide amongst progressive folk as to what such tools are capable of where transformative justice is concerned. Hashtag activism, as I have attempted to show in this chapter, is one such contested tool.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 110.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

Sara Ahmed's theorizing around the "non-performative," as explored in chapter four, is just one story about how the hashtag may prove futile at dismantling the master's house.⁴⁰⁷ The dual impact of the hashtag, by which I mean the effects on both posted content and poster of content, is significant because it reveals the hashtag as more than a digital tool to organize and spread information, but a method for constructing subjectivity. The hashtag produces effects for online subjects similarly to those of speech acts. With a hashtag a subject's desires for solidarity can be performatively aired out through wishes and stances. Wishes and stances can function like performatives, which is, as theorized by John L. Austin, a type of speech act "in which *by* saying or *in* saying something we are doing something."⁴⁰⁸ Ahmed extends this line of Austin's thinking by identifying non-performatives, which she defines as utterances that don't do the things that they name. This translation of hers on the futurities of language does not deny the productivity of speech. She is not negating Austin's theory of the performative but drawing from Butler's theory of performativity to add nuance to it. The theory of the non-performative, therefore, is not an attempt by Ahmed to identify another class of speech acts, but rather to identify another mode of performativity. She accomplishes this by distinguishing non-performatives (her theory) from failed performatives (Austin's theory). Due to the way the hashtag works, online subjects may easily derive some substitutive satisfaction from its use, which may ultimately stifle any further solidarity practices through an extinguishment of the subject's solidarity wish (albeit perhaps only temporarily) altogether.

If the burgeoning field of feminist digital media studies has made anything clear, it is that the internet is not some magic wand. But is it one of the master's tools? And if so, can such tools be successfully reappropriated? Is hashtag activism capable of inciting some truly revolutionary

⁴⁰⁷ Ahmed, *On Being Included*.

⁴⁰⁸ Austin, "How to Do Things with Words," 14.

change? It is hard to deny that it already has. I concede that the perception of the internet as a totally borderless, free flowing, equalizing, and democratic space is a case of wishful thinking, yet I continue to have faith in the hashtag as a nonsovereign tool. Messina explains how when he devised the hashtag, he was working for himself and not some massive corporation.

To me, it's critical to point out that the success of the hashtag is anomalous in Silicon Valley. Its creation was not motivated by profit, but by a desire to make the web a better and more interesting place *for everyone*. Nor was the hashtag singularly my invention—numerous people contributed to it, including Stowe Boyd offering the term 'hash tag' and Nate Ritter helping to demonstrate their use in disaster response. So remember too that the success of the hashtag represents a different model for contributing to the world. Not everything worthy of pursuit must be driven by economic or capitalistic outcomes.⁴⁰⁹

The hashtag's origins are important, and although it is not impervious to commodification, it has not completely sold out either.⁴¹⁰

Reconciling subjectivity, agency and identity with digital disembodiment and digital dislocation is about exploring both the hinderances and advantages of online subject formation and subjective agency; it is not a value judgment of digital spaces because a body is not present or because a body appears without clear origins of place and time. My analysis in this chapter is neither meant to be a critical commentary on non-materiality nor an accusation of hashtag activism as a non-material realm. As I explore throughout *Solidarity Wishes*, there is this persistence when speaking about politics today, particularly within left-leaning progressive social networks, to bulldoze towards doing. This praising of action and often resultant

⁴⁰⁹ Messina, "The Hashtag is 10!"

⁴¹⁰ There exists a variety of services to help hashtag users understand and capitalize off the hashtag's potential monetary value. A marketing and publicity company called Hashtagify self identifies as "the most advanced Twitter hashtag tracking tool." See <https://hashtagify.me/explorer/about>. Another company, Molly Marshall Marketing, offers a course called "hashtag camp." The program boasts a curriculum to help "grow your audience, boost your reach, and double your Instagram engagement with effective use of hashtags." See <https://mollymarshallmarketing.com/courses/hashtag-camp-t/>. When considering such companies, the hashtag's commodification is palpable. This is a reality that can result in a paradox for hashtag activists, those online subjects who use the hashtag to critique and confront the social, economic, and political systems that order human lives.

denigration of thinking plays into a long list of dichotomies, which in one way or another, all stem from the binary of materiality vs. immateriality.

Doing, practicing, organizing, acting are material subjective actions that get pitted against immaterial counteractions like thinking, theorizing, citing, and posting. I share Haraway's indignation over such false dichotomizing, a process she refers to as "boundary sorting."

Boundary sorting between 'physical' and 'non-physical' is always about a specific mode of worlding, and the virtual is perhaps one of the most heavily invested apparatuses on the planet today – whether you talk about financial investment, mining, manufacturing, labour processes, and vast labour migrations and outsourcing which provoke huge political debates, nation-state crises of various kinds, reconsolidations of national power in some ways and not others, military practices, subjectivities, cultural practices, art and museums. I don't care what you are talking about, but if you think that virtualism is immaterial, I don't know what planet you are living on!⁴¹¹

The thickening virtual reality of the here and now *is* reality. It is no longer science fiction; it is a significant facet of modern life for modern subjects. As Williams once cleverly put it, "[f]iction is a kind of fact, although it takes some people centuries to get used to it."⁴¹²

Haraway's cyborg helps to reveal the cracks in these seemingly impenetrable systems that order a subject's existence, as well as the paradoxical potential within the imperfect technologies that humans build for themselves. The commoditization of social media and digital technologies can lead hashtag activists to further enmesh the logics of neoliberal capitalism into society, while also effectively enabling them to resist or critique neoliberal capitalism within their campaigns. Haraway's cyborg suggests that neoliberal capitalism is not the permanent world operating system its subjects make it out to be – what she has termed the "informatics of domination" as a convenient placeholder for "white capitalist imperialist patriarchy in its contemporary late versions!" Subjects have tools at their disposal to find alternatives.

⁴¹¹ Haraway, "When We," 148.

⁴¹² Williams, "Science Fiction," 41.

[The informatics of domination] forces us to remember that these forms of globalization, universalization and whatever-izations that work through informatics are real and intersectional. The networks aren't all-powerful, they're interrupted in a million ways. You can get flicker feelings: one minute they look like they control the entire planet, the next minute they look like a house of cards. It's because they are both. And a whole lot is going on that is not that. So, it's about trying to live on these edges – not giving in to nightmares of apocalypse, staying with the urgencies and getting that everyday life is always much more than its deformations – getting that even while experience is commodified and turned against us and given back to us as our enemy, it's never just that. A whole lot is going on that is never named by any systems theory, including the informatics of domination.⁴¹³

Digital media provides subjects a prolific outlet for the expression of their solidarity desires.

There is a fresh vitality that gets attached to a subject's wishes when they go online. It is an opening of sorts, letting others into personal desires, which as witnessed within a variety of successful hashtag campaigns, may lead to unpredictable yet successful relations and reworldings.

Hashtag activism, like many virtual technological innovations, taps into the capabilities of a crowd. It erodes individual senses of sovereignty and ushers in nonsovereign understandings and models for living.⁴¹⁴ What Haraway identifies as the “informatics of domination” looks a lot like sovereignty, and her implication is that it is – whatever it is – fallible. Yes, human subjects will always be products of some social and symbolic order, but this does not foreclose subjects' opportunity to act as refugees of the same social and symbolic systems. Hashtags are but one force within a diverse and expanding fleet of digital technologies that assist subjects in both the amplification and critique of their societies. In this sense, hashtags have the potential to lead

⁴¹³ Ibid., 150.

⁴¹⁴ Another example of a technological innovation that facilitates nonsovereign ways of living for subjects, like the hashtag, is the free app Be My Eyes, which according to its website, “connects blind and low-vision people with sighted volunteers and company representatives for visual assistance through a live video call.” A handicapped person struggling to find a particular button on their remote control could possibly receive immediate assistance from a stranger volunteering their time on the other side of the planet. I find this so fucking radical! See <https://www.bemyeyes.com/>.

longing subjects to their forsaken objects of desire. Regardless of whether a hashtag is characterized as one of the master's tools or not, the hashtag seems more than capable of bringing the master's house down, or at the very least, as in the case of #MeToo, "cancelling" him, if not destroying the structures he has built.

Having emerged within the last fifteen years, the hashtag's genesis story takes place within a fertile period for the world where social and political unrest has found rapidly developing technology. While the hashtag was not specifically conceived of for the purposes of promoting sociopolitical justice, nor are all hashtags politicized, it is undeniable that the hashtag has proved productive for the promotion of certain political agendas. "Although the new tools of global communication and the new relations of globalization may indicate a resurgence in the number of appeals to solidarity," as Scholz observes, "[solidarity] actually has a longer history in social, political, and economic thought."⁴¹⁵ Proliferating digital technologies are rapidly altering the landscape of human civilization in remarkable and immeasurable ways. Hashtag activism, a new technology, has reinvigorated and reimagined political solidarity, a very old idea. The intersection of the World Wide Web and political solidarity within the context of a highly contested globalized world is the scene from which this dissertation has been imagined, and it is a hopeful one.

But of course, and here is where I am landing this chapter, hashtags cannot save subjects or sociopolitical movements all on their own. Boundaries like the one Haraway references between science fiction and social reality have gained historical traction in the social through repeated adherence – uncreative, automatic, blind, coerced adherence. And many of these

⁴¹⁵ Sally J. Scholz, "Seeking Solidarity," *Philosophy Compass* 10.10 (2015), 725.

boundaries function as dichotomies: culturally fortified boundaries of thought that can cause significant social repercussions.

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. This cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation. In the traditions of 'Western' science and politics — the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other — the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination. This chapter is an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction.⁴¹⁶

I am floored by how relevant Haraway's theorized "border war" is to the world in which I find myself thinking about solidarity, sovereignty, and desire. The borders of human thought, its oft uncontested limits out of which binaries and dichotomies and norms, oh my, have been generated, are responsible for providing Canadian and American settler subjects with some of their most nefarious psychological/social/political discursive captors: gender, sex, sexuality, race, class, disability, to name a few. Furthermore, literal and conceptual border wars that are presently ordering the lives of sentient creatures all over this globe, as exacerbated during these pandemic times, are the *mise-en-scène* in which hashtag activism is exploding. With Haraway in mind, I think of the hashtag as cyborgian technology, a collaboration of digital innovation and the experiential knowledge of petrified layers of social reality. And so, it follows that hashtag activists are cyborgs, or sociodigital subjects (for those unnerved by the cyborg label). As sociodigital subjects, hashtag activists are avatars of organic and inorganic material, subjects with and without bodies, who come equipped with hybrids of social and virtual technologies.

⁴¹⁶ Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 150.

I am aware that I run the risk of romanticizing digital subjects and digital technologies within this dissertation. I look to Haraway and Butler for guidance on how to avoid such shallow idealization. Haraway does not lose sight of the centrality of subjective agency within her work. Technological innovation is a contemporary enabler or constrictor of agency, not a substitution for it. The subject does not kowtow to digital technology in Haraway's thinking or in Butler's theories of public assembly. Butler is clear in her theorizing that embodied space is not distinct from digital space, but rather that the embodied and the digital are intertwined and part and parcel of the lived experience of many of the contemporary subjects I am taking up in this project.

Although some may wager that the exercise of rights now takes place quite at the expense of bodies on the street, claiming that Twitter and other virtual technologies have led to a disembodiment of the public sphere, I would disagree in part. We have to think about the importance of media that is 'hand held' or cell phones that are 'held high,' producing a kind of countersurveillance of military and police action. The media requires those bodies on the street to have an event, even as those bodies on the street require the media to exist in a global arena. But under conditions in which those with cameras or Internet capacities are imprisoned or tortured or deported, the use of the technology effectively implicates the body. Not only must someone's hand tap and send, but someone's body is on the line if that tapping and sending gets traced. In other words, localization is hardly overcome through the use of media that potentially transmits globally.⁴¹⁷

There are a multitude of social factors and subjective privileges that can contribute to whether localization is overcome or not, and so attributing such a phenomenon solely to the use of digital media is shortsighted.

As an American citizen whose country of residence has been Canada for twelve years, I never think twice about signing any one of the many petitions that flood my inbox each month. The "signing" often equates to the mere clicks of a couple of buttons. I am seldom concerned about reprisals to such a seemingly forgettable action. In fact, I am often skeptical that signing

⁴¹⁷ Butler, *Notes Toward*, 93-94.

the petitions that come my way will have any effect whatsoever, good or bad, local or global, personal or political. This is simply not the case for all signatories though. For some, petitions are courageous acts that increase their vulnerability as dissenting subjects within oppressive regimes. The ongoing persecution by the Turkish government of the signatories of the Academics for Peace petition back in 2014 is a glaring example. The petition calls for peaceful solutions to the Kurdish Turkish conflict, and in particular demands that the Turkish state abandon its “deliberate massacre and deportation of Kurdish and other peoples in the region.” Butler signed this petition. And so did Cihan Erdal, a Turkish permanent resident of Canada and PhD candidate at the department of Sociology and Anthropology of Carlton University who was arrested when he was back in Turkey visiting family and conducting research in the Fall of 2020. He remained jailed over a year later. His signing of the petition in 2014 appears to be directly connected to his arrests. Signing petitions is a common component of digital activism. The use of digital media and virtual technology does not totally disconnect a subject from their geographic origins, their body, or their sociopolitical standpoint. Erdal’s arrest makes evident that “[s]omeone’s body is on the line,” just not mine or Butler’s.

Although digital media does not shield hashtag activists from their lived social realities, it is important to recognize that digital media can facilitate different nonsovereign possibilities for activist subjects than what gathering in public or marching in the streets may be able to accomplish. First and foremost, hashtag activism gifts accessibility to subjects. Some subjects may be spread too thin across the competing demands of earning a living and caretaking to feel they can act in any meaningful political way. Digital media enables feasible forms of activism for such subjects. Furthermore, whereas hunger strikes, sit-ins, and marches may feel too formal for some, digital media like the hashtag individualizes and casualizes activism, which may help

convince non-engaged subjects to lead more politically active lives, to stay connected, and to critically think. And sometimes a hashtag is one of the only remaining safe and accessible options for a precarious individual or group to confront oppressive laws, social norms, institutions, narratives, or authority figures. In addition to safety and accessibility, there are ways that digital media can preserve the subject and its voice in online encounters, whereas in embodied activism, subjects can lose themselves in a crowd. Group think can win over subjective desire online too, but ultimately, online disembodied and dislocated narratives enable subjects to engage in activism differently, and in alternatively productive ways. Finally, digital media also undertakes important archiving work. Yes, the stickiness of online spaces – that is the permanence that objects in cyberspace can earn in cultural consciousness – comes with both pros and cons. Still, the digital archive, despite such difficulties, is an important sociopolitical tool.

Both the embodied group performativity of analog activism and the online group performativity of digital activism can make big sociopolitical waves. While I think Butler is a bit guilty of romanticizing embodied group performativity, ultimately, she, Haraway, Smith-Prei and Stehle, and myself are aligned in our observations that digital disembodiment, digital dislocation, and digital commodification are key aspects of contemporary subject formation, not obstacles to it. Butler suggests that if “this conjecture of street and media constitutes a very contemporary version of the public sphere, then bodies on the line have to be thought of as both there and here, now and then, transported and stationary, with very different political consequences following from those two modalities of space time.”⁴¹⁸ It may be awkward, but this is the nature of cyborgian reality.

⁴¹⁸ Butler, *Notes Toward*, 94.

The current politics of transmission have scrambled perceptions of sovereignty and nonsovereignty for citizens and nation states alike. The now viral global mantra of coming together to stay apart is paradoxically confusing.⁴¹⁹ The world is rife with simultaneous wishes for togetherness and isolationism. As global citizens during a pandemic “we” are all in this together while we close and fortify borders. We are all in this together while antisocial depression is on the rise. We are all in this together while we dodge each other in the streets. We are all in this together while governments militarize civilians on behalf of patriotism and nationalism. We are all in this together while we prioritize local concerns. We are all in this together while countries engage in competitive vaccine window shopping. We are all in this together while some subjects do not have access, or legal clearance, to the internet. We are all in this together while subjects blame “this” on someone else. We are all in this together while subjects manipulate and contest this “we.” We are all in this together, while some subjects are dead or dying.

Despite the pressing need for cooperation from micro to macro communities, the politics of transmission seem to have knotted global citizens even tighter around fantasies of sovereignty. This is part of the story of Berlant’s cruel optimism. Like good little neoliberal capitalist subjects, when the going gets tough neoliberal subjects try harder to make their individualizing systems work. They long for heroes, like vaccines, and hunt for scapegoats, like China. They turn inwards and pray harder. Their wishes grow, but they do not. As I have tried to illuminate, there is a lot of productive nonsovereign sociopolitical potential in the hashtag, as well as a lot

⁴¹⁹ It is 2022 and not all the confusion and instability that Covid-19 continues to cause is totally new. The parallels between HIV and Covid-19, for example, will continue to be studied and explored for years to come. For a useful introduction to the overlap between these two global health threats see: Michael Montess, “Decades of lessons from HIV can help us deal with Covid-19,” *Ricochet*, July 13, 2020. <https://ricochet.media/en/3219/decades-of-lessons-from-hiv-can-help-us-deal-with-covid-19>.

the hashtag is already responsible for accomplishing for subjects, despite its fostering of borders of its own. However, my fear is that the contemporary politics of transmission are knee jerking human subjects in the wrong direction, back toward sovereignty as an antidote, as the way forward and out of Covid-19. The politics of transmission have confused some, and a hashtag, as ingenious a tool as it is, is not going to save the world. Without a globalized ethics of nonsovereignty to raze and rebuild “our” world together, a hashtag is but a paint job for the master’s house.

---CONCLUSION---
“HONEY, WE’RE THE BIG DOOR PRIZE!”

It is the start of 2022 and the world’s story for the last two years has revolved around Covid-19, a virus whose name has joined the global lexicon, a pandemic that has proved “both far more terrifying and more mundane than what we anticipated.”⁴²⁰ One of my final lessons as a graduate student is that one cannot be a productive social scientist or cultural critic without considering the impacts of the pandemic on all aspects of life on this planet. Human civilization is weathering this storm through a variety of collectively mediated efforts, and yet, despite the magnitude of this crisis and how vulnerable and powerless it can make individual subjects feel in its wake, sovereign thinking continues to camouflage much of the nonsovereign potential of this here and now. Nations are compared to other nations over crisis management protocols. Stories of heroes and antidotes are circulated and consumed around the world as entertaining and hope-inspiring fodder. The virus does not discriminate, but the response to the pandemic has highlighted the world’s divisions. Rather than fully come to terms with their inability to control and command one’s way out of this quagmire and embrace nonsovereignty as a necessary condition of surviving, hiving, and thriving in this swiftly reorganizing world, many subjects continue to disavow their inherent vulnerability and interdependency. They continue to hold out for the sovereign in a frenzied search for some final solution. Vaccines. Twists of fate. Divine interventions. Rapid tests. More toilet paper. Next year.

An analysis of settler breeds of political and pragmatic sovereignty gestures toward the impactful role that colonization has played in contemporary settler psyches and cultures. In a

⁴²⁰ Kouri-Towe, “Solidarity at a Time of Risk,” 191.

future project, I hope to more closely analyze the relationship between colonization and western settler pragmatic sovereignty – what I have referred to throughout these pages as sovereign thinking – as well as between colonization and Western manifestations of solidarity.

Nonetheless, I hope that *Solidarity Wishes* functions as an effective primer to understanding the relationship between colonization, Western conceptions of sovereignty, and Western manifestations of solidarity through its theoretical, cultural, and political critical analysis of Canadian and American settler breeds of sovereignty.

In this dissertation I defended the theory that political solidarity is something that is prone to getting stuck inside of wishes for many contemporary Canadian and American settler subjects. I argued that an ethics of sovereignty that ideologically structures many a subject's social, political, and institutional life is largely to blame for this phenomenon. This dissertation focused on the normative cultural practices and discourses of Canadian and American settler subjects specifically. I assume that subjects' reliance on sovereign thinking is especially strong in Canada and the United States due to the ethnocentrism embedded in the experience of living in two Western, wealthy, and democratic countries, as well as due to the allure of strong brands of neoliberal capitalism that predominate life experience for many subjects who reside here. Western sovereign thinking is manifest in charity models enlivened by narratives of benevolence, sympathy, and saviorism. As I hope I have illuminated, mutual aid practices and theories are antidotes to such charity models. And more broadly speaking, queer and feminist theories and practices help to imbue solidarity with a less sovereign tint than many of the common white and Western do-gooder models that are currently in circulation under the rubric of progressivism or "progress."

By centering an analysis of political solidarity through the framework of desire I illuminated how solidarity wishes and their expressions – solidarity stances – can be harvested by both individuals and groups to achieve something other than solidarity itself. I likened this alternative nourishment that some solidarity subjects gain to the psychoanalytic concept of “substitutive satisfaction.” Broadly speaking, solidarity stances publicize solidarity desires. They are solidarity wishes performed. Politicians are the classic example of those who have something to gain from such stances, but as the rise of the hashtag reveals, solidarity virtually traffics through personal and corporate in addition to political discourses. With just the click of a button, a subject can instantaneously signal and claim their solidarity with another subject or group, and in some cases to the attention of exceptionally large audiences, as with #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #NODAPL.

The rise of digital technologies and expanding social media tools like the hashtag have helped to position solidarity securely in the center of mainstream Canadian and American cultural consciousness. The attention solidarity has received in the public eye, however, has not been completely affirmative. The qualities inherent to digitalization and to virtual social and relational practices, such as immediacy, accessibility, and proliferation, have affixed a certain shallowness to solidarity’s reputation. The great speed, open access, and incredible transmissive capabilities of social media all contribute to the productivity of virtual life, while also contributing to the critiques of solidarity practices as performative, automatic, impulsive, empty, common, and unintentional. As I have tried to express throughout this project, this is all part of the story of solidarity’s potential and limits. Neither a wholesale affirmation – nor a rejection – of solidarity as an effective sociopolitical practice is conclusive. Like technology, solidarity can

function as a tool, and so there is always the potential for subjects to better utilize it. Solidarity need not constitute static ideas, congealed practices, or fixed methods.

In this dissertation I distinguished between “ordinary wishes” and “psychoanalytic wishes” to highlight and explore the generativities of Freudian (classically psychoanalytic) wish fulfillment at the social, cultural, and political levels. I defended my claim that solidarity subjects, subjects tangled up in pursuits toward transformative justice, can derive some other nourishment from their solidarity wishes without their wishes coming true in the most literal sense, that is without the tangible manifestation of solidarity. The phenomenon of Freudian wish fulfillment is, of course, not limited to desires for solidarity, but can occur in relation to a subject’s desire for anything. “When you wish upon a star” it, psychoanalytically, “makes no difference who you are, anything your heart desires will come to you.” It makes no difference who a subject is or what a subject desires because substitutive satisfaction is obtainable through any number of psychological mechanisms, from dreams to disorders. In this sense, all desire is potentially generative, for any desire can get one’s soul to salivate. Any subject can be motivated by the force of their appetite to actively and creatively find a means to quell it.

In the ordinary sense of wishes, however, the identity of the desiring subject makes a world of difference where wish fulfillment is concerned. It is not always permissible for certain subjects to want certain things in certain contexts. Desire, especially sexual desire, continues to be a heavily policed realm of human subjectivity. Sometimes desiring subjects are so afflicted by a socially, politically, culturally, and/or institutionally ingrained undeservingness that they consciously become disenchanted with their objects of desire. Or, as is likely the case with some solidarity subjects due to the preponderance of sovereign thinking, they never desired said object to begin with. Or, perhaps a subject’s chronically sought-after substitutive satisfaction becomes

enough to keep fulfilling one's wish for a particular object of desire, staving off the need to fulfill the wish in the ordinary sense. These are the stories about political solidarity, sovereignty, and desire that I have been telling throughout the pages of this dissertation.

When subjects lose their objects of desire in their wishes, the wishes that I analyzed in this dissertation as the psychosocial mechanisms that trap a subject's desires, then they may be experiencing what Adam Phillips refers to as losing interest. Losing interest, in its most tragic denouement, can lead a subject to lose their life. Psychoanalysis (and a great deal of psychotherapy in general) is meant to help analysands find their way by finding their appetite when they have reached this point.

One kind of psychoanalysis aims to make good – if only by reconstruction of the early environmental provision – an environmental deficit. At its most extreme – or by its critics – this is called analysis as a corrective emotional experience. The other kind of psychoanalysis aims to restore the artist in the patient, the part of the person that makes interest despite, or whatever, the early environment. At its most extreme, for the artist of her own life, it is not so much a question of what she has been given but of what she can make of what she has been given (no one chooses their parents, but everyone invents them, makes what they can of them).⁴²¹

The latter kind of psychoanalytic treatment in Phillips' description is the one more suited to Lacanian psychoanalysis. In this dissertation I have analyzed a few different ways to think about what Lacan theorized as a subject's lack. Judith Butler argues, along with philosophers like Hannah Arendt, that there is an inherent precarity built into all human life. For Butler, precarity binds human subjects together as the "joint of [their] non-foundation."⁴²² I share Lacan's philosophy that psychotherapy which aims to help subjects *overcome* such lack is a stupid agenda because it is an impossible feat. Instead, psychotherapy that aims to help subjects restore their inner artists, as Phillips describes it, seems a much more worthwhile therapeutic aim.

⁴²¹ Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery*, 4.

⁴²² Butler, *Notes Toward*, 119.

Political solidarity is but one way to practice nonsovereign relationality that is worth investing in. I do not worship it as the tour de force of theories, practices, and solutions, nor am I attached to any single method of political solidarity. Rather, it is nonsovereignty that I am dedicated to normalizing as an ethics or mentality for solidarity seeking subjects. If subjects are not actually invested in nonsovereignty, and instead remain hoodwinked by the allure of sovereign power, by the fantasy that their subjectivity is an encapsulation of their sovereignty, then it is no surprise that solidarity desires get stuck as often as they do. Throughout these pages I argued how Freud's wishes operate a lot like Sara Ahmed's non-performatives. They do things for subjects other than what is being expressed, or revealed as wanted, by the subject. The expression of a desire or articulation of something like a diversity commitment can become psychic equipment that operate beyond getting a subject closer to the specified object of desire. As twisted as it may sound, what is often accomplished is an impasse, a block to fulfilling desire or making good on such a commitment.

A solidarity wish, therefore, can work to maintain the status quo of sovereignty. When a politician performs a solidarity wish by highlighting their stance on social media or expressing their desire within their political rhetoric, they might capitalize off the positive feedback their stance earns them without ever having moved closer to obtaining or securing solidarity. They can talk the nonsovereign talk without ever practicing nonsovereign relationality. The accolades for being on the "right side of history" that a politician may receive for airing out their solidarity wishes can result in substitutive satisfaction – the nourishment a desiring subject may receive on behalf of their wishes as an alternative to moving toward their expressed object of desire. Responding to the question of why some solidarity desires manifest in a subject's wishes and others do not could fill the pages of an entire dissertation of its own. Subjects may not desire

solidarity but feel obliged to pretend they do for a variety of reasons. Subjects may feel ambivalent, undeserving, or scared of solidarity. They may feel coerced or pressured into wanting solidarity, which results in an indignant resistance to anything of the sort. Perhaps subjects understand what it is they want through the optimism in what they do not want. Perhaps subjects do not and will not ever possess the psychological abilities to understand what it is they truly want. Perhaps all signified desires are profoundly tainted by the social conventions of language, culture, and affirmation. Perhaps a subject's conscious object of desire is always a mistranslation of an unconscious wish. Regardless of their causation, I hope at the very least that *Solidarity Wishes* has succeeded in illuminating solidarity wishes as common phenomena for Canadian and American sociopolitical settler subjects.

Berlant frequently circles back to the notion of the “good life” in her work and explores what the good life entails, whether it is possible, and if it is, for whom.⁴²³ There are many versions of the good life in common circulation amongst Canadian and American subjects that operate like wishes. Economic stability/abundance appears its most common manifestation. Subjects suspect that every aspect of their lives on earth will improve, from their health to their happiness, once they can afford a particular lifestyle. Many subjects know that their prospects of getting rich are poor, yet such wishes remain alive in the depths of their consciousness. These wishes seldom die, but remain in stasis, in an orectic hibernation of sorts. If such desires were to die subjects might experience some sense of newly found freedom; they might find new and better objects. Instead, objects of desire like the status and stability of wealth, those great carrots

⁴²³ Berlant theorizes the “good life” in a variety of places, but in this interview she succinctly and usefully summarizes the concept. See “Why Chasing The Good Life Is Holding Us Back, With Lauren Berlant (episode 35),” *Big Brains*, November 4, 2019, <https://news.uchicago.edu/podcasts/big-brains/why-chasing-good-life-holding-us-back-lauren-berlant>.

of neoliberal capitalism, often remain tethered to the consciousness of subjects no matter how distant, unobtainable, and cruel they might seem.

How subjects go about finding better objects, however, is easier said than done. One thing that seems for certain, however, is that for subjects to find better objects they need to lose their bad ones. But how the heck does one go about losing an object of desire? And more specifically, how does one lose an object of desire that has accrued so much value and hope, like the objects Berlant analyzed in *Cruel Optimism*, despite such objects' devastating returns. *Cruel Optimism* was about the paradoxical relations of subjects to their objects of desire. Micki McGee describes these relations well.

The paradox Berlant has named is that what [subjects] seek eludes [them] precisely because the mechanisms by which [they] seek [their] objectives (whether personal happiness or political change) are irredeemably flawed in that they preclude the very outcomes that are desired.⁴²⁴

Solidarity Wishes carried Berlant's thinking from *Cruel Optimism* forward by pointing the finger at sovereignty as perhaps the biggest culprit responsible for keeping subjects tethered to toxic objects of desire. Berlant has suggested that her forthcoming work, *The Inconvenience of Other People*, continues the discussions from *Cruel Optimism* through an analysis of why it is so hard for subjects to lose their objects.⁴²⁵ The theory nerd in me is beyond excited to hear Berlant's suggestions in this forthcoming work for how subjects might be able to put such an important thought into practice.

In chapter three I explored this idea of subjects trying to lose their objects through the aid of queer theory. I seriously contemplated whether suicide might constitute an act of queer

⁴²⁴ Micki McGee, "Cruel Optimism for the Neurologically Queer," *Social Text Online*, January 13, 2013, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/cruel-optimism-for-the-neurologically-queer/.

⁴²⁵ Lauren Berlant, "Interview with Lauren Berlant: Research Center for Cultures, Politics and Identities (IPAK Center)," YouTube, November 28, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ih4rkMSjmsj>.

antirelationality. I explored whether an intentional action like suicide has the potential to rid a subject of certain objects through an interruption to, or extrication of, the Social Symbolic Order. Specifically, I contemplated whether self-destruction fell under the rubric of what Lacan theorized as an ethical subjective act that could disrupt the Social Symbolic Order as a means of the setting the stage for something else. I concluded that suicide, at least in the context of David Buckel's life, was an ineffective practice and not meriting of the antirelational label. While suicide can operate as an ethical, subjective, and disruptive act, it does not productively reset the stage of the Social Symbolic Order for something else because subjects end up dead and therefore – for the most part – can no longer be productive. The pandemic started as I finished the first draft of the chapter on queer antirelationality. I have hope that Covid-19 will prove to have been a generative disruption to the social order and the status quo, at least for the subjects that survive, and will help enable them to find better objects. Will the pandemic prove to be an incubator for antirelational and nonsovereign ethics? While Covid-19 is a natural phenomenon and does not constitute an intentional ethical subjective act, as specified in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, what subjects do in its wake will.

If “all [subjects'] stories are about what happens to [their] wishes,” as Adam Phillips surmises, then there is much insight to be gained from what the conceptualizations of solidarity as desire reveal about those who feel it, want it, and/or declare it.⁴²⁶ Solidarity wishes may very well act as merely rhetorical, strategic, and performative devices for solidary subjects, traveling no further than the fleeting press releases for which they are designed and the flagpoles on which they are raised. And yet, if rescued from these ambivalent states of wishes, solidarity desires can also constitute heartfelt visions of desired trajectories, evidence of wills to reform, and

⁴²⁶ Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery*, XIII.

precursors to critical sociopolitical change. Covid-19 has organized a here and now that coaxes subjects toward sovereign ethics and practices in some ways, while simultaneously illuminating paths to nonsovereign ethics and practices in other ways. I am concluding *Solidarity Wishes* in a hopeful moment for the subjects I have considered throughout these pages. As more of the world's population continues to get vaccinated, and as the pandemic loosens its grip on human civilization, now more than ever in recent history subjects could be presented with opportunities to topple and redesign the systems that they have been pushing up against since the 1960s. Covid-19 may prove to be the closest thing to a universally shared experience that the world witnesses for many years to come. *Now*, it seems, is as good a time as any for subjects to move towards an ethics of nonsovereignty.

Solidarity Wishes is not landing in a neat and tidy place. As Berlant observes, “there’s a lot of mess in solidarity, because the point of solidarity is a concept—an emotion.” Though already referenced in chapter two, her observation is worth repeating here: “you don’t have to like the people you have solidarity with; you just get to be on the same team and have the project of making the world better.”⁴²⁷ Since there is a ton of focus within progressive activist discourse on the design of effective solidarity practices, it is easy to lose sight of the important affective dimensions of political solidarity, even though affective solidarity experiences are ubiquitous throughout Canadian and American culture. For example, in response to the 2016 mass shooting at Pulse, an Orlando nightclub, then U.S. President Barack Obama characterized the gay club as “a place of solidarity and empowerment where people have come together to raise awareness and speak their minds and advocate for their civil rights.”⁴²⁸ He also expressed how he and the

⁴²⁷ Malsky, “Pleasure Won.”

⁴²⁸ Barack Obama, “President Obama Delivers a Statement,” *The White House*, June 12, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntF-ieEOgkM>.

United States government “feel enormous solidarity and grief on behalf of the families that have been affected.”⁴²⁹ The president’s wielding of solidarity in this example characterizes the concept as something that can be had in so much as it can be felt, and whose existence is only as good – as known – as its agent’s declaration of possession. Through his words President Obama and the American government became self-professed agents of solidarity, unified with the victims’ grieving families, and by extension many LGBTQ Americans tending to their resultant identity wounds. Solidarity, technically speaking, is something that is felt by subjects, and solidarity practices are what may (hopefully) arise from such feelings or lead to such feelings.

Berlant’s reminder of the affective anchor at the root of the concept of solidarity is useful here as I conclude *Solidarity Wishes* and consider the variety of ways subjects summon and practice solidarity. Solidarity is first and foremost a feeling. Sometimes subjects feel it and sometimes they do not and cannot. While I focused on solidarity wishes in this dissertation, expressions of desire for solidarity, which can manifest both personally and publicly, and produce a variety of effects for a wishing subject, solidarity also often manifests as affective declarations (“I feel” statements). Sometimes life events ignite feelings of solidarity in subjects with, for, and/or toward other subjects. And sometimes these subjects express their solidarity feelings, as is so commonly witnessed within petitions, open letters of support, political rhetoric, and hashtags which, as I explored extensively, can produce a myriad of effects for all subjects involved, some productive, some not-so.

I focused on solidarity as manifested within subjects’ wishes because I was concerned about why some subjects do not seem to desire, feel, or care about solidarity. I was curious about why solidarity appeared to exist more abundantly as wishes than as pragmatic practices. I

⁴²⁹ Barack Obama, “President Obama Speaks on the Shooting in Orlando,” *The White House*, June 13, 2016, <https://youtu.be/tPwsqFbtWvk>.

considered solidarity desires that reflected a range of solidarity potential, from desires for pointed political practices for producing transformative justice to a more generalized yearning for an ethics of nonsovereignty. As Berlant points out, subjects need not dress solidarity up in positivity and optimism. The concept is much more coldly pragmatic than that.

But one of the things that we debate when we're trying to [make the world better] is: Do we want the same world? We agree that we don't want the world that exists, but do we want the same world? And a lot of politics, a lot of the humorlessness of the political, comes when you realize that the people who share your critique don't share your desire.⁴³⁰

Despite all the hopelessness I investigated in this project, I conclude *Solidarity Wishes* more hopeful about solidarity than I when I started because my sense of the concept's potential is clearer. Solidarity is not love, friendship, empathy, kindness, charity, or unity. Solidarity, most simplified, is the recognition of sovereignty as fallacy. Solidarity, at its best, is a humbling experience for subjects who feel it and practice it, but it is not entirely selfless. Solidarity encompasses the recognition that subjects cannot make it all on their own.

While I wrote *Solidarity Wishes* I was haunted by folk singer John Prine's song *In Spite of Ourselves*. The tune was released on September 14, 1999, on Prine's album of the same name. The more I listened to the peculiar, but cute song the more I came to understand it as a revelation of nonsovereignty. The song was released at a time when the world was experiencing a widespread paranoia about the turn of the century and the potential devastating effects on its global computer systems. The Year 2000 problem, known commonly as "Y2K" or "the millennium bug," housed a variety of anxieties that human subjects were experiencing as they headed into a new century and new millennium, ultimately codifying Y2K as a historically significant apocalyptic narrative. In the context of my analysis of the hashtag and other

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

Cyborgian technology, I found the timing of my discovery of this song during the writing of this dissertation to be uncanny. Y2K was not revelatory of a global paranoia over natural disasters, environmental conditions, epidemics, astrological drama, war, or religious narratives that typically dominate apocalyptic discourse, but rather reflected humanity's fear over the technological monsters of its own creation. Y2K *could* have been a moment where the master's tools dismantled the master's house. Though what was most feared throughout Y2K discourse never came to fruition, just as was the case regarding anxieties over nuclearization during the Cold War, the song nonetheless seems to contain an awareness of the awe-inspiring power of nonsovereignty – of the gargantuan potential and power of the things subjects collaboratively create, from relationships to hashtags.

The song was also released on the first album Prine produced since contracting and getting treated for cancer. The disease affected his vocal cords and so the tone of his voice on this album was noticeably different, but not displeasing to many of his fans. To have cancer, undergo surgery and treatment for it, and then hit another milestone in one's career by producing an album, is certainly a feat Prine was only able to accomplish through the aid of and collaboration with many others. Watching someone grapple with cancer seems a sure-fire way to dispel the myth of pragmatic sovereignty. Few afflictions render subjects more vulnerable and more in need of assistance.

While I can concede that Y2K and Prine's experience of cancer are not the most convincing pieces of evidence of this song's nonsovereign morale, the lyrics are more difficult to refute. To me, they champion the nonsovereign affective states of susceptibility and deservingness that help prime subjects for nonsovereign practices like solidarity. The verses of

the song contain the characters' biting, yet affectionate characterizations of each other, which also point to why they like each other so much. Here are the third and fourth verses:

She thinks all my jokes are corny
 Convict movies make her horny
 She likes ketchup on her scrambled eggs
 Swears like a sailor when shaves her legs
 She takes a lickin'
 And keeps on tickin'
 I'm never gonna let her go.

He's got more balls than a big brass monkey
 He's a wacked out weirdo and a lovebug junkie
 Sly as a fox and crazy as a loon
 Payday comes and he's howlin' at the moon
 He's my baby I don't mean maybe
 Never gonna let him go

The refrain of the song is simple but poignant.

In spite of ourselves
 We'll end up a'sittin' on a rainbow
 Against all odds
 Honey, we're the big door prize
 We're gonna spite our noses
 Right off of our faces
 There won't be nothin'
 But big old hearts, dancin' in our eyes

Despite how destructive subjects can be to each other, as described in the humorous antics of these two protagonists, it is apparent that the one thing they can agree upon is the value of their friendship – the value of themselves to each other.

Political solidarity operated as the nonsovereign concept du jour of *Solidarity Wishes*. I enlisted Sally Scholz' conceptualization of political solidarity to illustrate solidarity as a nonsovereign practice in which subjects can maintain their political and social attachments in the context of the debilitating neoliberal capitalist systems that structure their lives. Like sovereignty, solidarity is an aspirational concept. Unlike sovereignty, it is a realistic reflection of

interdependent subjectivity. Solidarity can be likened to nonsovereignty manifested in a feeling toward another subject, a feeling that can, and hopefully will, ignite into productive solidarity practices. To embrace an ethics of nonsovereignty is for subjects to understand that cooperation and collaboration with other subjects is necessary for the transition of their solidarity wishes into feasible desires. Subjects simply cannot survive on this planet, let alone thrive, without help. For subjects to genuinely feel solidarity they must embrace both their susceptibility to, as well as their deservingness of, an ethics of nonsovereignty and all that comes attached to it. As Berlant observes,

[t]he discourse that we have about what you get when we have democracy is more sovereignty, and yet belonging is all about the possibility of having a world that you could trust with your nonsovereignty – with your dependence on other people and with the way that you have to be in the world with them to build a life.

If, as Berlant posits, “the political” can be conceived of as the search for a “good nonsovereignty,” then solidarity has much to offer politics.⁴³¹ In other words, Butler’s words to be precise, “[w]e are also bound to one another, in passionate and fearful alliance, often in spite of ourselves, but ultimately for ourselves, for a ‘we’ who is constantly in the making.”⁴³²

Solidarity Wishes is vitalized by the supposition that better politics, and resultantly better futures, are available through nonsovereign practices like political solidarities. Despite all the solidarity drama contained in these pages, I hope it is clear to you, honey, that I’m your big door prize, and you are mine.

⁴³¹ Berlant, *Public Feelings Salon*.

⁴³² Butler, *Notes Toward*, 121.

---AFTERWORD---
**“ANYTHING THAT YOU SAY TO ME WOULD ACTUALLY
 MAKE ME SMARTER”**

The news of Lauren Berlant’s death came while I had something baking in the oven, both literally and figuratively. It was the morning of June 28, 2021, and I was at my job at a popular Toronto bakery. Thirty-five hours of customer service/servitude a week dulls the ache of one’s soul through the crushing choreography of capitalism, for your information. Sometimes, in the heat of the consumer encounter, I find myself talking like someone I would not ordinarily be able to stand. If you have never had this revelation, well, all I can say is that it is crushing. Thus, my soul was already wilting when my friend spiritlessly referenced Berlant’s death as if I had already heard the news. I hadn’t. The clash of the mundaneness of this transmission with the devastating information it contained made me dizzy. I also felt guilty for how much Berlant’s death was seeming to matter to me despite not personally knowing them. It was not only sadness that I felt at first. I also felt this overwhelming incredulity toward the thought that I would never hear from Berlant again, that no one would. I was fixated on their untimely (at least to me) passing. Where does the death of a teacher and scholar who facilitated discussions on belonging to which I wanted so deeply to belong, leave me? I cared deeply for this person, even though I only knew them as a thinker, and, as I am told, they were so much more than that. Now they were gone, I was devastated, and my cookies were burnt.

I also had *Solidarity Wishes* baking at the time of Berlant’s death, and it was just about finished. I had thought about emailing Lauren frequently during the last six months of their life, although I had no idea that they were in fact living out the end of their life. I was unaware they were ill. I had many questions I would have loved to float by them. I can admit that part of my

strong attachment to Berlant was rooted in my anxiety over their forthcoming book, *The Inconvenience of Other People*. As I was completing this dissertation about the dance between sovereignty and solidarity in subjects' lives, I was growing evermore concerned that Lauren was about to launch their latest masterpiece any day now, and that what it contained would lap my ideas with a brutal brilliance. My anxiety, as pompous perhaps an anxiety it was (as if I even had a readership that would notice any intersections of theirs and my ideas...), was haunting me. While academia plays host to many an inferiority complex, I was finally starting to feel a little proud and a little clever as I neared the completion of my dissertation, despite becoming increasingly paranoid that my project's top interlocuter was going to jeopardize the originality and value of my scholarship. I know that this was delusional thinking. What kind of sovereign did I think I was that my work was singular and outstanding enough to be put in any sort of comparison with Berlant's? And what kind of sovereign did I think Berlant was that I was so scholar-struck? I feared being inconvenienced by Berlant, by someone I loved in unorthodox ways.

The reality is that Lauren Berlant is absolutely going to inconvenience me, and I am probably going to enjoy it. Their book is set to be published by Duke University Press in September of 2022. I suspect they completed their book and got all their business in order with their publisher before they passed away. I would not be surprised if the project even contains a foreword by Berlant, bravely and creatively written for an audience that would soon be grieving their loss. As odd as it sounds, I could sure use their insight on how to deal with their death. Their forthcoming project aims to illuminate the inconvenience of other people as inconvenient, yes, but also as a drive, an inherent tug subjects experience toward other people despite their incoherent-making antics. In Berlant's view, it is an extremely useful thing for a subject to

become undone by another subject. It is a necessary thing where the learning productive nonsovereignities is concerned. The illusion that subjects are in ultimate control of their lives needs to be shattered so that subjects can turn their focus to learning how to be out of control better, together.

Through their brilliant corpus and via their passionate pedagogy, Berlant provided tools to many. They gave me theories I could depend on. I would not have written *Solidarity Wishes* without encountering Berlant's scholarship, as this dissertation is in direct response to their characterizations of the chokehold that sovereignty has on subjects' lives. I am fascinated by Berlant's thinking, indebted to it, but also, jealous of it, confused and overwhelmed by it, frequently undone by it, and in a sense, in competition with it. And yet, I need it. I love it. And love, Lauren tells me, signals nonsovereignty.

I often talk about love as one of the few places where people actually admit they want to become different. And so it's like change without trauma, but it's not change without instability. It's change without guarantees, without knowing what the other side of it is, because it's entering into relationality. The thing I like about love as a concept for the possibility of the social, is that love always means nonsovereignty. Love is always about violating your own attachment to your intentionality, without being anti-intentional. I like that love is greedy. You want incommensurate things and you want them now. And the now part is important.⁴³³

Like love, scholarship, is inherently a nonsovereign practice, or at least it ought to be. Although Berlant had so many good ones, no one is in charge of ideas, and I think she understood that well. In an online presentation that Berlant gave in the last year of her life, when the facilitator expressed that there was only time left to take two more questions Berlant encouraged their viewers to get in touch.

I just want to say to people that my work email is l-berlant@uchicago.edu, so if your questions didn't get answered, or you think of something later, or you didn't want to embarrass me in public because I was wrong about everything, you know, feel free to write me. I mean I'm working on this other book now, and you know, any impact,

⁴³³ Berlant, "No One is Sovereign in Love."

anything that you say to me would actually make me smarter. So, I would be very grateful to hear from you, and I'll try – I'll write you back.⁴³⁴

I cannot express enough how much I regret not writing Berlant. I have no idea what they were like on a personal level, but I believe they would have welcomed my email and written me back. The reflexivity and generosity that Berlant's words imply are not to be taken for granted in the academy. As thinkers and writers, scholars take great big bites of each other's work, and we swallow and digest some of it, and some of it we spit right back out in each other's faces, forgetting or never forgetting the taste. We riff off and build upon one another's ideas to such a degree that we never can be completely certain of whom to attribute our final products. Citations matter of course, but it is impossible to successfully cite every idea that has come to us from someone, or somewhere, else. Recognizing the nonsovereignty of scholarship is one small but significant step towards realizing an ethics of nonsovereignty that academics can take. Whether *Solidarity Wishes* is ultimately assessed as half-baked, burnt, or brilliant, what is for sure is that I could not have written it on my own, and definitely not without Lauren Berlant.

⁴³⁴ Berlant, "Cruel Optimism."

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