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RMIT University

Jenny Hedley

Depression diaries: Performative writing and navel-gazing as anti-capitalistic modes of creative practice

Abstract:
Where Lauren Berlant's crisis ordinariness asks us to step away from trauma theory and recognise how we are mostly treading water in an increasingly problematic world, Ann Cvetkovich presents depression as a sociopolitical response to structural inequality. Responding to Cvetkovich's call for performative writing which combines embodied subjectivity with intellectual inquiry – and Lauren Elkin's ode to the art monster, "with her diaristic indulgence and her personal clutter" – this autotheoretical investigation follows a feminist, queer imperative to write through symptoms of depression and systemic brokenness, embracing resistant modes of navel-gazing (Febos), ventriloquism (Poletti), autotheory (Fournier), autoforms (King) and diaristic indulgence through creative practice research. A series of mini-manifestoes invites an interleaving of diaries with theory.

Biographical note:
Jenny Hedley is a creative writing sessional and third-year PhD candidate at RMIT University whose work has appeared in *Archer, Cordite Poetry Review, Crawlspace, Diagram, Griffith Review, NiTRO + Creative Matters, Journal of Positive Sexuality, Language and Literature, Mascara Literary Review, Overland, Rabbit Poetry, Southerly, The Suburban Review, Sydney Review of Books, TEXT, Westerly Magazine* and the anthologies *Crip Stories: An Anthology of Disabled Writers* and *Admissions: Voices Within Mental Health*. She lives on unceded Boonwurrung land with her son.

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When trauma is no longer exceptional, crisis ordinariness prevails

While I experienced certain events in my life as traumatic, they were not exceptional. There was an ordinariness to each of life's catastrophes – what affect theorist Lauren Berlant, in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), terms "crisis ordinariness." Removing the sense of exceptionality from crisis, wherein people continually deal with incoherence arising from threats to the lives they imagine they *should* have, is at the centre of Berlant's claim that crisis ordinariness is "a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming" (p. 10). Over the last eighty years, trauma theory has been the predominant genre for contextualising life-shattering events in the historical present, as if there were "some ongoing, uneventful ordinary life that was supposed just to keep going" (p. 10) and in which people could place their confidence. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth (1995), for example, considers how the pathology of trauma is structured by the experience of an event which cannot be assimilated at the time and is experienced belatedly, such that the traumatised "carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (p. 5).

My traumas were fairly commonplace: mental ill health, domestic violence, sexual assault, loss of loved ones to cancer. There is no alternate world free of pain, and yet I held fast to the belief that if I made virtuous decisions, then God or the universe would stave off suffering. I needed to believe I could script outcomes through right behaviour, and the diaries of my youth are saturated with attempts to write myself into a coherent, governable subject. As a white, lower middle class, Gen X, Los Angeleno suburbanite, my teenaged self was attached to the attention-grabbing images painted in the glossies, to movie stars and ultra-visible worldly success. Over the years, I cycled through half-a-dozen antidepressants and therapeutic approaches that neither aided my depression nor prevented my suicidal behaviours. Owing to the treatment-resistant nature of my depression, I offer this testimony as a matter of urgency for others like me. I invite my personal archives to clutter the text as I write through symptoms of depression and systemic brokenness in an embodied mode of creative practice research anchored by queer and feminist theory.

Berlant (2011) describes attachments as clusters of promises that we wish to be made possible. I was attached to the lie of the good life – *la vie belle*, *la dolce vita* – which was the promised land for those who could jump through a prescribed set of hoops, purchase the right pre-Goop gels and powders, climb the proverbial ladder. We who were privileged enough to have cable TV and pocket money for magazines wanted this life which was marketed to us not for our own benefit, but for the multinational corporations who would grow rich off our subscription to magical thinking. Prestigious universities, sports cars, straight-to-the-top career tracks, mortgages, kids, pets, holidays, cosmetic surgeries: these were promises that clustered around the American Dream. Sara Ahmed (2010) proposes that when we direct our happiness toward objects which promise us happiness, the object becomes a gap-filler: "a prop that sustains the fantasy that happiness is what would follow if only we could have it" (p. 32). I diarised a wish list filled with "happy objects" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 34) when I was sixteen:

Wish List (~~Yes, I'm selfish~~) stop negativity
-Mac "Cyber" nail polish
-No Exit – Sartre
-Dune – Herbert
-R+J – movie fm 60s
-manicure/pedicure
-tetracycline
-internet -keyboard
-35mm camera + BW film (My journal entry, 23/11/96)

Looking at this list now, I see a girl inscribing a self through objects: markers of beauty, of cultural capital, a camera that would let me control the gaze. The diary served not just as record of longing but as technology of subject formation, an "auto" form where the self is drafted as consumer subject. Each item offered a fantasy of wish list fulfilment, assuring my teenaged self of a happiness-to-come. My crossed-out parenthetical – "(~~Yes, I'm selfish~~)" – demonstrates how my wishes required pre-emptive apology, a disclaimer for taking up space. Berlant (2011) argues that it is our attachment to such scenes of fantasy that limits our ability to affect meaningful self-transformation; by hoarding idealistic thought-attachments, we open ourselves to depression and incoherence. Even when our attachments return us to unhappy scenes of potentiality – to unrequited love, hypercritical parents or other negative tableaus – Berlant maintains that it is optimism that is operating as an affective form.

Growing up in Southern Californian suburbia in the eighties and nineties those of us in gifted programs were told that we could reach for the stars. My high school's motto: "Home of scholars and champions." My method: pulling all-nighters and starving myself. What we were sold through neoliberal capitalism is a false promise whose "dissolving assurances" include meritocracy, equality, security and upward mobility (Berlant, 2011, p. 3). In reality, career paths with guaranteed outcomes were replaced by the juggling act of the precariat; marriage as an institution revealed itself an inequal (and sometimes coercive or violent) accountant of invisible labour; and the myth of equal opportunity shattered in the face of nepotism, racism and systemic inequality. The chasm between clustered promises (Berlant, 2011) and reality was enough to provoke in me a trauma response; total disenchantment led to three weeks in a psych ward. Traumatic events imply a discrete time of suffering; my sense of powerlessness, however, was ongoing.

While traumatic events require adaptation to ongoing change, the events that we are experiencing are what Ahmed (2010) would call "sticky" (p. 40). Berlant (2011) asks us to step aside from the predominant genre of trauma theory and recognise the ongoingness of systemic crisis, or crisis ordinariness, "where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine" (p. 10). Trauma theory, Berlant points out, focuses upon "a system's blockage of full subjective experience" that limits "exposure to self-shattering loss" (p. 80). A person shuts down in the face of trauma, loss or grief, preventing the full force of impact. While trauma theory has been useful as a way to mediate events, Berlant observes that trauma theory denies us self-mastery: "We know that we cannot possess a trauma, but are possessed by it" (p. 80). Berlant's crisis ordinariness, however, calls for us to shelve

our cruelly optimistic faith in the so-called good life and acknowledge how we are mostly just treading water in an increasingly problematic world.

Where antidepressants fail, diaries reveal depression as structural failure

Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012) reframes "depression as a cultural and social phenomenon rather than a medical disease" (p. 1). Structured as a diptych – part one, "The Depression Journals (A Memoir)," and part two, a scholarly essay – it counters contemporaneous depression memoirs whose plot points hinge upon pathologisation and medication (for example, Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* (1994) and Lauren Slater's *Prozac Diary* (1998)), instead depicting the "excruciatingly *ordinary,*" banal, everyday impacts of depression (p. 16). Drawing on Marxist thought alongside feminist and queer theory, Cvetkovich treats depression as a reparative project that eschews tidy redemptions yet writes toward hope. Emerging from Cvetkovich's collaboration with other Public Feelings think tank scholars*, Depression* contends that critical analysis and direct action no longer mediate the impacts of political depression. Resisting medicalisation, Cvetkovich writes into the space where antidepressants are not the panacea, where depression is allowed to percolate, to gestate, to linger. Cvetkovich's refusal of pharmaceutical solutions returns me to my teenage wish list, which marks happiness as a commodity to be purchased, prescribed, applied. Items such as tetracycline, nail polish and Sartre were salient to my fantasy of self-transformation, in accordance with the neoliberal promise that one can consume their way out of suffering. Consumerism functions as "the arena of agency and desire held out by a culture that forecloses other options" by offering the illusion of choice (p. 46). Shifting blame from the structures that produce despair, consumerist logics positioned me as a problem to be fixed; I compulsively diarised each failed attempt at self-improvement.

Cvetkovich's (2012) episodic "Depression Journals" covers 1986 to 1991: a time of dissertation work, a book deal, job market precarity and activist engagement. Cvetkovich embraces diary-as-method, negotiating impasses with small acts of self-care, exercise and community connection. As Cvetkovich diarises on the pressures of academia, I recognise my own chronicling of dailyness that provides data on my unhappiness. Cvetkovich's diaries told "the story of how academia seemed to be killing me" because "to feel that your work doesn't matter is to feel dead inside" (p. 18). My diaries reflect a similar numbing: "No reason to live anymore. I cannot fool myself. I do not love or care for any. Music, men, books … nothing retains the meaning it once held" (My journal entry, 22/12/96). These entries are not just artefacts of personal failure – they evidence how neoliberal optimism sets individuals up for failure, positioning depression as personal defect. Despite concerns that the diaries could be deemed as "unseemly flaunting" (2012, p. 74), Cvetkovich nonetheless treats memoir as both "starting point and crucible" (p. 17) – a case study that makes personal lived experience available for social analysis. Although autobiographical scholar Philippe Lejeune once associated the diary with bad writing and "lack of direction" (2009, p. 29), he later recognised its research value. Kylie Cardell (2014) notes how, despite the diary's historical status as "a ragged edge to erstwhile 'public' discourse" (p. 4), the contemporary diary emerges from the margins as a performative, confessional mode that blurs private and public spheres.

Politically, Cvetkovich (2012) reads depression as a "manifestation of forms of biopower that produce life and death" by targeting and dehumanising populations – a "shrinking into despair and hopelessness" (p. 13) that delivers a slow death, as theorised by Berlant (2011). Resisting "magic bullet solutions," Cvetkovich champions "the slow steady work of resilient survival, utopian dreaming, and other affective tools for transformation" (p. 2), privileging sustained, collective practices that nurture people experiencing chronic precarity rather than demanding that we perform (or medicate) our repair. bell hooks (2014) similarly found in politics a balm for the depression and suicidality she had experienced as a teen: feminism gave her "a foundation of equality and justice to stand on" (p. x). For Cvetkovich (2012), performative writing and testimonies "mediate between the personal and the social" – exposing cultural violences that systematically make people feel bad – and create openings for collective response (p. 15). Cvetkovich's "Depression Manifesto" reads, in part:

> Discussions about the biochemical causes of depression might be plausible, but I find them trivial. I want to know what environmental, social, and familial factors trigger those biological responses – that's where things get interesting …
>
> But in addition to writing a polemic against drugs, I also want to write about depression because my own experiences of it have been so unexpected and so intense, the sensations so invisible and yet so spectacular, that I feel compelled to honour them with description. I want to know how it was that not just my mind but my body experienced such excruciatingly bad feelings. But also such excruciatingly ordinary bad feelings … (p. 15–16)

Chasing happy objects, the self-surveilling subject fails by design

Where Berlant (2011) sees optimism as a future-oriented social relation whose attachments are bound up in making life bearable, I looked to the future and saw nothing worth living for, instead finding comfort in self-harm. Berlant reminds us: "Even those whom you would think of as defective are living beings figuring out how to stay attached to life from within it" (p. 10). Pain was something I could hold onto: cigarette burns, razor blades, self-piercings. Pain distracted me from the emotions I could not bear. Pain was something I could control until I could not. To allow myself to hope, to acknowledge the possibility of manoeuvrability was to admit vulnerability, and so I clung to self-hatred which was an amalgamation of all the voices that ever told me I wasn't good enough. I sought, instead, annihilation. I wrote the following poem in my diary when I was institutionalised for bulimia nervosa, major depression and suicidal ideation – a diary that also contained a one-line poem ("I love you more than teardrops and rain") written in blood to make visible my hurt. I was 16, heartbroken for the first time, writing poetry that was terrible, haunting and comical, having lost faith in the future I had been sold.

> <u>Me/Thanksgiving</u>
> You undeserving wench
> ungiving
> You take everything

joyous from yourself
crush others
You don't deserve to stuff
your face with food
when you reject it …
DIE MOTHERFUCKER (My journal entry, 28/11/96)

Inside that journal I had pasted in one of my school photos and drawn a series of arrows variously labelling myself: "ugly bitch," "greedy," "fat ass" and "whore." Looking at this photo now, the arrows appear as weapons turned inward – functioning as stage direction for a performance of self-hatred, authored in dialogue with patriarchy, the male gaze and capitalist ideals. *Here is the girl who must be punished for her failures.* Each label was my attempt to stabilise an identity, no matter how abject, because any fixed point of self-knowledge felt an improvement over the vertigo of uncertainty. I desperately tried to author myself into coherence through negation by cataloguing all that a "good girl" should not be. The girl who wrote "DIE MOTHERFUCKER" to herself would enter one relationship after the next with men who agreed with her assessment, who aided her self-negation in increasingly literalised ways.

Leigh Gilmore (2018) considers the self-surveilling autobiographical self to be much like the prisoner in Foucault's panopticon, "who, through subjection to surveillance, learns to monitor himself" (p. 20). My diary was a site where patriarchal and capitalist discourses flowed through me, creating what Judith Butler (2011) would recognise as the performative construction, through self-negating repetition, of a gendered subject. The young girl in the photo, surrounded by inscribed vitriol, smiles falsely; I'm reminded of Sylvia Plath's diary entry of 10 January 1953 in which she writes next to her portrait: "Look at the ugly dead mask here and do not forget it. It is a chalk mask with dead dry poison behind it like the death angel" (2000, p. 155). I feel sorry for these young women who saw only malevolence in their images, whose estrangement from each their worlds – "the world of good habits and manners, which promises your comfort in return for obedience and good will" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 169) – rendered them what Ahmed calls "affect aliens." Cvetkovich (2003) describes how an "archive of feelings" might be located – beyond the usual archival institutions such as libraries and museums – within "personal and intimate spaces" (p. 244). Diaries are fundamental archival technologies for capturing affect and emotion within the space of what Anna Poletti (2020) calls "self-life-inscription": that is, a "making of texts that explore subjectivity *and* life" (p. 14).

Intimate partner violence is a driver for the autotheoretical impulse

As a high school dropout with no confidence, aside from fast-retreating dopamine hits of making men want me, I spent my twenties and early thirties playing vacuous sex object to survive repeated intimate partner violence. Any hint of intellectualism, any evidence of thinking, and I would be deemed "up myself" by the men who subjugated me; the only power I had access to was sexual, an illusion of power that brought me to my knees, doggy, reverse cowgirl or however else they wanted. I had zero standards, partnered with woman-haters time and again, certain that I deserved mistreatment. I feared becoming what Ahmed (2023) calls a "feminist killjoy," one who notices and names inequality, who causes a disturbance, who

unsettles men's happiness. The men I ended up with were, as a whole, morbidly jealous; addicted to illegal substances or alcohol; prone to violent outbursts, threats and stalking; and were chronically unemployed. Some liked to choke me and I let them. *Obliterate me, I don't care*. Anyone working in criminology will recognise these traits as strong predictors of intimate partner homicide – in her book *No Visible Bruises* (2019), Rachel Louise Snyder points to Jacqueline Campbell's (2003) Danger Assessment tool which gauges such behavioural traits in order to save women's lives – but I could not know this at the time.

Each of these male partners were threatened by literature. If they caught me writing, they'd assume it was about them; if they caught me reading, they'd say, "You think you're smarter/better than me," and I wouldn't open another book for years, except in secret, starving my brain to prove my love. In *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021), Lauren Fournier writes: "Eschewing theory and other intellectual modes as 'elitist' plays into the hands of right-wing politicians who, by describing liberals as the 'elites' … draw attention from the perhaps truer elitism of financial wealth and material power" (p. 107). The anti-intellectual movement is a means by which truth is suppressed, keeping people ignorant and defeated as I was when I had to "prove" my love to men such as J, whom I diarised about when I was 24:

> Never-ending barrage of shit last nite:
> – It's boring if you want to go to bed with me every day after coming home. Mix it up a little.
> – No wonder you have pimples. You eat so much chocolate.
> – You know how to get out of here? There's a shuttle bus & you can be on the plane by tomorrow night.
> So many threats and so much anger. Is it worth it? Don't know what to do w/ myself here. How to keep sane. Self-esteem constantly being hit to new lows. (My journal entry, 30/1/04)
>
> J talks of not being everything I need & wanting to be better – but always reverts to an angry, condescending tone. "Can't you tell that branch is dead?" (My journal entry, 13/2/04)
>
> Realised w/ J that a certain tone of voice he uses is enough to send my stomach into spasms & makes me want to hide or flee. (My journal entry, 29/2/04)

J, like a string of other abusive men, found my self-hatred convenient. Another month or so and my beloved would burn my possessions in a forty-gallon drum, threaten my life. As Anne Boyer says, "We are not born ethical beings. We become ethical, through learning and asking questions" (quoted in Fournier, 2021, p. 170). However, not everyone permits this process. The men that I dated forbade me to question their word as law, so threatened were they of disrupting the power imbalance which favoured them.

Answering the call for performative writing and testimonies involves performing symptoms and refusing shame

Where Cvetkovich (2012) admits to not knowing exactly what performative writing looks like, beyond it being "a call to memoir that I'm still trying to answer" (p. 15), I take up that investigatory call. To write oneself into public is to perform the self. Judith Butler (2011) locates the gendered self as a construction of iterable, repetitive acts carried out under taboo, restraint and prohibition. Poletti (2016) shows how these Butlerian acts are a kind of life-writing performance – where subjectivity and life come into being "through the utterance of narration" (p. 364). The private, unpublished diary sets the stage for iterability via narrative utterance, where processes of self-construction often remain hidden out of embarrassment or shame. Chris Kraus (2006) demonstrates what happens when the diaristic "I" refuses to stay private, flaunting its excesses through a "performative philosophy" (p. 195) that blurs the division between embodied sensuality, theory-making and art. Paul B. Preciado's (2021) pharmacopornographic body pushes performative excesses further still, showing that even the hormonal making of the self is staged under a regime that controls sexual subjectivity – a regime whose very business model is "the *invention of a subject* and then its global reproduction" (p. 36).

My diarised teenage poem "new years revolution" reads like a rehearsal of performativity itself – a promise to "revolutionise" the self. It is both manifesto and confession, exposing the compulsory optimism of neoliberalism. Depression and consumerism perform shadow play in this entry written four weeks after my discharge from a neuropsychiatric institute:

> <u>new years revolution</u>
> i am melting into a vast sea of emptiness
> the hollow sound echoing in my body
> resonates in the void chamber of life
> consumed and contained …
> must i submit to a lifestyle that lacks
> the sensuous pleasures of fulfillment?
> i sacrifice the entirety of myself …
> the cycle needs a flash of lightening
> to strike down the voice of control
> swallow it to be digested
> by the unexpected darkness …
> deny the hands that grasp desperately
> at my slowly dulling hair (My journal entry, 1/1/97)

In retrospect, the poem is less about resolution/revolution than the performance of resolution/revolution, a desperate bid to shape a coherent self. As I transcribe these depression diaries, I feel a rush of shame, an instinctive cringe, but also: I resist the stink eye of the staid academy, the stodgy institutions still cluttered by what Beau Windon (2025) the "Privilege Hires" (that is, the opposite of the "Diversity Hires"). By performing cringe in public, I test how far an academic voice can stretch before it is deemed "too much." Refusing silence becomes a method.

Cvetkovich's (2012) impasse – which has the "spatial connotations of being at a 'dead end' or 'no exit'" (p. 20) – offers for me a diagnostics, naming the stuck place I inhabited and the stickiness produced under the regime of cruel optimism. My diaries map that no-exit cul-de-sac, while this essaying stages the impasse itself as site for performative testimony. Looking back, I can see that my internalised scripts of brokenness were never only mine but were co-authored by a cruel system. The diary reveals this dual authorship: the "I" who self-abnegates and the neoliberal chorus which continually feeds the "I." Juxtaposing uncensored journal entries alongside critical theory – calling upon the emotional, so-called feminised voice – refuses academic sanitisation. To cite my hysterical voice is to claim hysteria as method, not weakness. Eleanor Bowen and Laura González's (2023) hysteric offers a model for resistance through becoming the symptom. My teenage diary – symptomatic of the systems scripting despair – is filled with clues for my scholarly self to unravel.

Moving conversations about depression and suicide into public spaces breaks silences, collectivising grief

If diaries offer a rehearsal space for depressive utterances, then the Big Anxiety Forum (2022) provided a public stage for testimony – an answer to Cvetkovich's call for public cultures of depression. I gathered alongside hundreds concerned with mental health, many of whom arrived as peer workers or artists and practitioners with lived experience. As I walked to catch my train that morning, tears of gratitude splashed from chin to concrete. I understood then how tightly I had held my own experiences with suicide in a society which dictates that suicide is a topic for hushed discussions, a word to land you in a psych ward, not to be raised in so-called polite company. Rather than addressing the epidemic and its clusters, people prefer it out of sight, out of mind. An event titled "The Long Table: A Conversation about Suicide and Distress" was scheduled in the largest space at the festival. Although this "Long Table" iteration was not facilitated by artist Lois Weaver, it was inspired by a 2017 performance installation where Weaver used the private setting of a dinner table as a non-hierarchal device for encouraging conversations about complex issues. By the time I sat in the audience that circled the periphery of the table, I had no need to join the conversation except as active listener, holding space. The stories of those who took a seat at the table were also my story, or close enough.

At one of the forum workshops, Daniel Regan premiered *To Bloom* (2022), a short film wherein he juxtaposes a found recording of his mother's lips as she talks about his suicide attempt, with footage of his own lips speaking about her death. Regan invited those of us in attendance to contribute our personal stories of loss, either through voice or video recording, which he later edited into a collaborative film. My voice breaks in *Stories of Loss* (2023) as I revisit the day my mother died almost 15 years prior, a time when life felt so thin. Regan's productions shatter taboos around talking about depression and suicide, death and grief. Like Kraus's flaunting of abjection or Preciado's staging of the pharmacopornographic body, the Big Anxiety demonstrates testimonies not as raw confession, but rather as crafted acts, performances that bring together speaker and audience.

For family members and workers willing to confront people facing suicidality, Cvetkovich (2012) argues that well-meaning intentions "don't necessarily translate, except haphazardly, into a cure for the insidious habit of self-hatred or feeling bad about oneself that lies at the root of so many addictions" (p. 206). Commanding a person to cling to life is only an ephemeral moment of reassurance because "knowledge and recognition aren't the same thing, because staying alive is a practice and not just a momentary feeling" (p. 206). Here the reassured might end up reassuring the reassurer: Yes, I will stay alive; yes, I understand the arguments for life; yes, I will say whatever you need me to say to leave me alone/close my case file/release me from this institution/let me go back to bed. What I wish a loved one had suggested, with compassion: Is it possible that you don't actually want to die, but rather for a certain part of yourself to die? Or is it that elements of your environment feel unliveable – that boundaries need to be drawn?

In an essay for *Westerly* titled "The Weeping Hands," Melanie Pryor (2024) describes the gulch between "rupture" and "rapture," where "the death drive is the cloud belly of every breath I exhale" (p. 22):

> Not wanting to be alive is not, to me, the same thing as wanting to die. Sometimes people speak about self-sabotage or suicidal ideation or melancholia, but as soon as I heard it described as the death drive, I understood that this is just another part of what it means to be alive. The longing for not being alive; the other side of the mirror. (p. 22)

More than death, my suicidal former self was seeking reprieve from my own recursive loops – the navel-gaze turned weapon, the self-surveilling of the failed neoliberal subject. The logistics of disentangling myself from damaging spheres of influence felt unsurmountable, oblivion the easier calling. Somehow, I survived long enough to learn how to erect boundaries, distancing myself (as much as possible) from influences that cause harm.

Studies linking gendered violence to increased suicidality illuminate what women's diaries have always shown

I was 32 when I put my head in the oven at an apartment I was renting with T, my boyfriend of five years. The kitchen was drafty, and despite laying my head on a towel for more than an hour as scentless gas flowed, nothing happened. Earlier, I had diarised on my computer:

> I want eliminate the pain I feel every day, upon every interaction. I feel "less than". I'm so tired now. I may sleep forever. I'm not sure. Last time I tried to kill myself by ingesting cactus. I don't remember if I cried or not. I do remember hours of pain and throwing up. Last night I took some Rx and booze and T made me throw up. Today I mixed it up a little. He's gone. I don't know if he believed me or not when I [s]aid I didn't take and pills; I don't know if I care. (My journal entry, undated 2013)

I felt loved-up by T until his worsening ice addiction flipped reality on its axis, triggering an eruption of lies, shady dealings and violence. More than once the police attended our apartment: the first time I made excuses for my split lip, broken spectacles; subsequent callouts saw me

hiding in the bathtub, feigning invisibility as flashlights shone through windows. I did not trust the system – which sometimes mistakes victims for perpetrators – to help. Having been exposed and subjected to domestic violence in early childhood, I understood abuse as precondition for love, mistook violence and control for care. No longer silenced by fear of recrimination or shame, I now clean the lint from my navel as I testify, naming what was once hidden.

In 1998, Vincent J. Felitti and a team of researchers published the results of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, which linked children's exposure to abuse and household dysfunction to adult health risk factors and disease. The ACE Study looked at psychological, physical and sexual abuse in childhood; dysfunctional household conditions including substance abuse, mental illness, imprisonment, mothers who were treated violently and parental separation; and physical and emotional neglect. As exposure to these categories increased, risk and prevalence increased for depressed moods and more. In particular, adults who experienced four or more categories of ACEs were twelve times more likely to attempt suicide than those who experienced no ACEs (Felitti et al., 1998, p. 252) – a likelihood that increases up to 51-fold with higher ACE scores (Felitti, 2002, p. 45). Women like me, who'd experienced four or more ACEs, made up 15% of the study's respondents. Women exposed to ACEs who are later exposed to intimate partner violence are at an even greater risk of suicidal behaviours. He Koiora Matapopore | The 2019 New Zealand Family Violence Study of 1,464 women considered women's ACEs, their exposure to violence and the relationship of these factors to mental health, suicidal ideation and attempts (Reid-Ellis et al., 2025). Reid-Ellis et al. determined that "exposure to multiple violence types may have a cumulative impact on mental health and suicide-related outcomes" for women which "typically increased as women were exposed to a greater number of interpersonal violence types" (n.p.). I see myself in these statistics: each act of abuse wearing at my sense of self, eroding my emotional and bodily boundaries until death seemed the better option. I would still be (re-)enacting early childhood scripts of abuse through unhealthy relationships if not for the social workers and maternal health nurse who instigated a swathe of life-saving referrals to family violence crisis services.

Men who are threatened by women's intellectual capacity can resort to psychological and physical violence. When J burned my possessions, G broke my wrist and T split my lip, they were enacting patriarchal scripts that position women's voices as threats that require elimination. Plath scholar Gail Crowther (2021) reports how Ted Hughes told his wife, poet Sylvia Plath, that "she was an ugly hag in a world of beautiful women, that he hoped she'd kill herself, and that he'd never wanted children with her" (p. 106). Setting women against one another and holding women against unrealistic ideals: these are weapons of patriarchy, the system under which women are designed to fail. Where Janet Malcolm sympathises with Ted Hughes in *The Silent Woman* (1994), I find her sympathies callous and victim blaming. Instead, I read Plath through my lived experiences of gendered violence. I tally up at least one ACE for Plath's combustible father and then consider how Hughes's abuses compounded Plath's risk factors for suicide. Hughes siphoned Plath's resources, placed her literary talent second to his own ambitions, and cheated on her after she gave birth to their second child, whom Hughes treated as "a usurper" (Plath, 2017, p. 830). I too have experienced men who are jealous of their own children, men who punish those children as a result; I have been weaponised and I have

had to battle to prevent weaponisation. Plath's diaries – as much as they have been filtered and controlled by Hughes and the Plath estate – leave a trail of red flags for the attuned reader.

Hughes's successive partner Assia Wevill is revealed in her own words through intimate writings made public – not as wicked temptress but rather as aspiring poet who, like Plath, felt intensely the claustrophobia of domesticity following new motherhood. Wevill (2021) was trapped by a "grim sense of duty to look after [Hughes's] children" while he wrote (p. 169) and suffered, like Plath, under Hughes's tempestuous moods. Hughes told Wevill "that his blackest, most demonic, most destructive moods come when he can't for one reason or another, write" (p. 176). Wevill recalls Hughes having at least four different visages: "When he's angry, or suspicious, his face actually turns black, or a dark brown/grey and the cloud colour and amorous impact of his eyes disappear" (p. 167). He ranged from generous and affectionate to "angry and mottled" (p. 195), much like my J, whose eyes could shine with love or rage like thunderheads. Two days before suiciding at the age of 41, Wevill wrote: "He feels as though he has already buried me – that feels hideously accurate. That which allowed him pervious graces was desire – and I know it's dead in him" (p. 195).

I linger here with Plath and Wevill because their archived voices offer a sense of community as I write through my depression diaries. Plath and Wevill's respective diaries reveal the hidden violences of the domestic, the everyday. Reading their journals alongside mine, collectivising what was held private, is one way that autotheory helps contextualise how what I experienced as personal failure was actually structural violence. Abusive men have a way of making women – who have been victimised by compounded violences – want to die. This is why my writing is political, an ongoing reparative feminist project in which I let go of the happy objects and false promises I once clutched. My diaries documenting my attachments – to fashions, media, lovers – now read as evidence of how neoliberal capitalism continues to unleash patriarchal violence upon women's lives. By bringing story into community, making public the unspeakable thoughts trusted only to diaries, I spotlight what is hidden out of shame and in isolation. I add the dirt that has accumulated in my navel to the unstoppable chorus of women's voices crying out. Playing dumb – literally, keeping my mouth shut – only ever paid off in broken bones, split lips and worse. Now that I have built myself a platform from which I may speak, buttressed by voices I am indebted to, I perform my testimony like a refrain.

Writing "auto" forms makes the personal political

In writing these diaries through theory, I invoke autotheory, described by Fournier (2021) as a feminist writing practice that amalgamates "autobiography with theory and philosophy" (p. 16). Stacey Young (1997) situates autotheory within the politics of women's liberation and civil rights movements. Autotheory "takes the actually lived life as important critically, and as worthy of reflection and nuanced consideration in relation to critical and creative practices" (Fournier, 2021, p. 251). Writing that deliberately exposes its citational seams of construction has been derided as mere "ventriloquism," but Anna Poletti (2020) reclaims this term, offering collaged life-writing as "a way of materially restaging fantasies and attachments, a mode of

temporarily bringing into being the possibility *of* a certain kind [of] life through assemblage" (p. 138). Autotheory and collage emerge here as key modes of feminist and queer resistance.

Autotheory transforms solitary confession and diaristic writing into public, collective testimony. Autotheory invites an intertextual, communal practice, where theory and literature dialogue with the "auto." Quinn Eades (2012) uses Caren Kaplan's (1998) phrase "out-law genre" to describe this interleaving of genres, where embodied writing meets memoir meets theory in resistance of patriarchal law. Out-law writing defies categorisation and refuses to obey; it is an anti-genre literature where body, mind and theory form an infinite discursive loop, impossible to untangle (Eades, 2012; Kaplan, 1998). Critical theory and creative practice form a harmonics via personal narrative, where theory resonates through embodied text. Story begets theory begets story, each forming the warp and weft of creative output. Elizabeth Grosz's (1994) Möbius strip metaphor captures this inextricable mind-body entanglement. Autotheory shatters the illusion that life is separate from art. Embracing this discursive interconnectedness between theory and self, I refuse to untangle the threads of my story, to place academic writing *here* and creative writing *there*. I write into an unpublishable space, against traditional academic publishing norms. I try on theory like I try on dresses, seeing if the language fits, twirling to see how it moves, whether it clings or tugs or catches.

This resistance to academic conventions carries political stakes. Libby King (2025) proposes that neoliberalism "moulds the narrative landscape to avoid analysis of its contradictions," making it difficult to articulate the experience of living under such logics (p. 5). My thinking-through-research practice demonstrates a circuitous path of sense-making, butting up against patriarchal scriptures repeatedly without relief, mimicking life – my endless ruminations from the rubble. Mindful of "the inherent cultural narcissism of the academic third person" (p. 2), King suggests that autoforms – including autotheory, autoethnography, autofiction and fictocriticism – act "as cultural interventions in the neoliberal town square" (p. 2); such blended forms carry the assurance that the author will self-consciously experiment with form while locating the self within broader sociopolitics. King argues that neoliberal landscapes perpetuate the illusion that self-knowledge is "narcissistic while playing the role of an all-knowing god [or 'omniscient observer'] is not" (p. 11). Writers of autoforms thus find themselves trapped countering charges of narcissism – a coercive tactic that obscures systemic realities.

Navel-gazing resists patriarchal silencing, exposing the body's situatedness

Lauren Fournier (2021) reminds us that the history of philosophy and theory hinges upon the politics of who has had access to legitimatised scholarly writing. Fournier argues that although second-wave feminism troubled the notion that women's writing was soft and critically irrelevant, domestic writing continues to be viewed as personal, while the public sphere remains the site for discourse and politics. Rebecca Harkins-Cross (2024) notes: "Traditional thought favours knowledge that is considered summative, and provable through substantiated methodologies, inferring any trace of subjectivity is a mark of excess, dilettantism and/or a lack of rigour" (p. 8). The academy's denial of affective knowledge returns me to queer, feminist affect theorists like Ahmed, Berlant and Cvetkovich, each of whom light up paths of resistance.

Erin Manning (2013) describes how "affective resonance" exceeds any particular body – as a force that activates, amplifies and collectivises – "tuning toward an outside where the mutations of difference are most forcefully creative" (p. 20).

Women who write their bodies into the text are often charged with narcissism, an accusation rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis that characterises women as passive receivers, incapable of meaningful contribution (Fournier, 2021). Poletti (2020) argues that masturbation "is *the* pejorative of choice when criticizing autobiography": self-pleasure veiled beneath charges of narcissism (p. 119). Laying charges of masturbatory writing implies the correlation of the unproductive self-pleasure with the perversions of nonreproductive sex. The prevailing arguments for life-writing's value depend either on authors convincing audiences of their experience's wider relevance or, for marginalised authors, the subject's availability for "intersubjective encounters with audiences" (p. 120). In each discourse, value is "founded on a rejection of self-pleasure by the autobiographer" in favour of "a specific morally valuable form of relationality" (p. 120). Poletti challenges this, arguing that what it means to have a life is dependent on objects and orientations as well as identity. Periperformative autobiography clusters together the influences and objects which constitute a self, insisting "that fantasy, hope, and attachment *are* life – a way of living – rather than an attempt to escape or survive it" (p. 138).

Melissa Febos's essay "In Praise of Navel-Gazing" (2022) rallies against discounting "stories of body and sex and gender and violence and joy and childhood" (n.p.), exposing how such biases rest on the false (Freudian) binary associating women with emotionality and men with intellect. Febos reveals the politics behind resistance to personal, traumatic stories: "Those who benefit from the inequities of our society resist the stories of people whose suffering is in large part owed to the structures of our society" (n.p.). Navel-gazing, Febos argues, is the opposite of egotism: it situates our flawed selves in this broken world:

> Listen to me: It is not gauche to write about trauma. It is subversive. The stigma of victimhood is a timeworn tool of oppressive powers to gaslight the people they subjugate into believing that by naming their disempowerment they are being dramatic, whining, attention-grabbing, or else beating a dead horse. By convincing us to police our own and one another's stories, they have enlisted us in the project of our own continued disempowerment. (Febos, 2022, n.p.)

Febos's essay collection *Girlhood* (2021) follows this politics of resistance, considering her "violent turn" from childhood to girlhood, "tinged by a darkness that the story of adolescent rebellion did not suffice to explain" (p. xi). Girlhood teaches us to please and accommodate others at our own expense; girlhood is where we learn to abhor our bodies and make concessions to patriarchal values without regard to the safety or feelings of girls (Febos, 2021).

The charge of narcissism, of navel-gazing, of masturbatory self-indulgence – these employ the same logics that constructed my teenage wish list as "selfish." The patriarchal script insists: women's desires are suspect, their self-examination pathological. Calling women's writing "navel-gazing" reduces it to masturbatory pleasures rather than the difficult work of examining

and constructing the self. As with Ahmed's happy objects-as-gap-fillers, neoliberalism fools us into looking outwards for objects promising happiness, rather than inward to consider why we need those gap-fillers. The navel thus serves as a site of prohibited knowledge – an umbilical tether between individual suffering and systemic violence.

Ongoing symptoms resist tidy endings

If the diaries of my youth catalogue happy objects, self-negations and intimate partner violence, then this text is a counter-archive: a performative rewriting of the neoliberal subject. By publicly examining the grime in my navel, I refuse the shame that once kept me silent. I cultivate my inner "art monster," as theorised by Lauren Elkin (2023), who writes: "The art monster, with her *diaristic indulgence* and her *personal clutter*, takes for granted that the experiences of female embodiment are relevant to all humankind" (p. 19). Instead of excising diaristic indulgence and personal clutter from my work, I invite the personal into my texts, refusing to separate head from body. This corporeal leakage draws inspiration from the influential French feminists Hélène Cixous's (1991) *écriture féminine*, Luce Irigaray's (1985) languaging of *jouissance*, and Julia Kristeva's (1984) notion of the "semiotic chora" as pre-linguistic excess that disrupts symbolic order. Ultimately, Febos, Cvetkovich and their feminist contemporaries and antecedents refuse patriarchal and academic conventions around what makes writing literary or scholarly, allowing their performative writing and testimonies to speak in the face of systemic brokenness. Like Cvetkovich, I practice life writing as research methodology, inscribing my life as case study, protesting how depression is treated as an individual rather than a societal problem, and learning to speak where I was silenced. When I was growing up, people would ask, "What's wrong with you?" rather than "What's happened to make you feel like this?" I have lived under depression's shadow long enough to mediate the worst effects, but I do not think depression is an inappropriate response to the world we live in. Ahmed (2010) proposes that having the freedom to be unhappy includes "the freedom to be happy in inappropriate ways" (p. 222). I think this is why I laugh so hard at the pain I have lived through: the salty balm of tears emolliates suffering.

Although there are a handful of forward-thinking journals who support the embodied writing that many queer, feminist and trans writer-scholars practice as a politics – journals like *TEXT*, where this work finds its home and which recently published a special issue evidencing "creativecritical" writing in practice (Markidis & Juckes, 2024) – traditional academic publishing often demands formulaic structures and clear contributions to knowledge. Working against such prescriptive modes – anticipating more writing-as-research that invites murkiness, spiralling and unknowing – I leave an offering:

A manifesto for unpublishable writing

Writing-as-researching into an unpublishable space, we write for the selves who were made to dumb themselves down, to think themselves small, to stop showing off. We write ugly, abject things plucked from real life, with a willingness to display emotionality and explore the sentimentality of (our) human experience. We take theory up and put it down, mashup the old with the new, high with low. We invite into our writing a polyvocal chorus, amplifying other

voices to inscribe a new canon. We will not erase our word-siblings, the voices of others aligned with our politics. “We write to invite and to goad, to bring the weight of scenes home, not to model” (Berlant & Stewart, 2019, p. 131). We write against what the audience is programmed to want. We write what we want to read as victim-survivors of crisis ordinariness, as people with lived and living experience of complex trauma, neurodiversity and/or mental distress. We think for ourselves instead of serving as subjects-to-be-thought-about. We will not accept that we are much too much or not enough. We will not be liked by everyone, but nor do we like everyone. Perhaps the audience we inspire are the same who inspire us, and that will be enough. Our word-truths on the page: enough.

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