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Feeling good: The casual academic's guide to purpose, pleasure and the meaning of work in precarious times

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Independent scholar

Cleo Mees

Feeling good: The casual academic's guide to purpose, pleasure and the meaning of work in precarious times

Abstract:

Feeling good is about the emotional experience of writing as a casual academic in the current Australian context. In a non-linear, hybrid style that combines theory with personal narrative, the author grapples with questions about the meaning and conditions of scholarly work, particularly in the midst of a climate crisis, a global pandemic, and a university system increasingly pervaded by neoliberal ideals. She examines the obligations writers feel (and have) to be happy or unhappy in their work, and seeks guidance in the work of writers like Sara Ahmed, Donna Haraway and Harriet Hawkins as her own convictions about the university shift. What ensues is a contemplation on the politics and daily experience of feeling good (and bad) as a writer in the university, expressed through a series of reflections and scenes from life that enact a mode of thinking that is both taken with theory and available to interventions from the sensory, relational everyday world.

Biographical note:

Cleo Mees is a creative practice researcher who works across writing, video and dance. She has a deep interest in improvisation, and is excited about the ways in which the scholarly can connect with broader artistic and political pursuits. Cleo teaches Media Arts Production and Cultural Studies at university and volunteers in animal and wildlife rescue. Her writing has been published in *Choreographic Practices*, the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, the *International Journal of Screendance*, *RealTime Arts*, *Running Dog*, *Critical Dialogues*, *ADSR Zine* and *ArtsHub*. She lives in Sydney, Australia.

Keywords: Writing, scholarship, neoliberalism, creative non-fiction, emotion

August

This morning we sat in bed and read our horoscopes to each other, and Rob Brezny's advice for Pisceans went something like this: You are asking the wrong questions, and therefore all of the answers you are coming up with seem wrong. But don't worry. Soon you will start asking the right questions. And the best way to get to the right questions is to completely discard the old ones (Brezny, 2020).

Brezny is almost always right.

*

The old questions, which for the purposes of this article I have now discarded, drew on my doctoral research and sought to make the case for playfulness as a crucial part of creative research. I had been interested in using the concept of play to validate less orthodox research methods. But by the time I got to work on adapting the thesis material into a scholarly article, my feelings about the old questions were changing. It was the Black Summer of 2019. Bushfires burned and burned up the Australian east coast. Smoke hung heavy in the air, the sun was daily a neon pink disc in the sky, and native animals were dying at an alarming rate. All around me people were taken with it. The fires, as loss and as omen, had taken up a place in all of our minds. It was becoming harder to believe in my old ideas about the playfulness and pleasure of writing in a scholarly context, harder to take for granted that my own (privileged) intuition about these things was trustworthy.

So the early drafts for this article became something else: half a reconstruction of the PhD chapter (play is good, play explains our pleasure in scholarly writing) and half a meditation on whether these ideas were even tenable (Should we prioritise the pleasurable aspects of play in research? Under what circumstances?). I called the early draft article "Playing Seriously" and submitted it to *TEXT Journal*. The editors sent me several pages of incredibly insightful feedback from two reviewers. I was grateful; I thought to myself, this is what scholarship is all about. I thought (somewhat dramatically), how could I ever have *wanted* to publish the old version? And I thought that in light of the feedback from these reviewers it made most sense to pull out the stitches and start all over again. To experiment more liberally with form, to *enact* what I was talking about, and also to discard the first half of the discussion and do the second half more thoroughly.

*

Brezny is almost always right. Below is a list of new questions. They are questions I have only recently been able to articulate, and together they have informed the final shape of this article, which is part experimental non-fiction and part scholarly essay. Here, I engage with the work of critical geographer Harriet Hawkins, especially her work on creativity (2017) and

feminist killjoy, Sarah Ahmed (2010a, 2010b), as well as Donna Haraway's recent thinking about trouble (2016). The article explores the value and purpose of pursuing a creative and/or scholarly career path as a casual academic in precarious times. But it also remains concerned with my earlier interests (which in fact are unavoidable components of this discussion for me): playfulness, pleasure and joy.

To the questions:

1. Is it true that, because I pursue pleasure in my research, I write stuff that is irrelevant?
2. Do I write better on paper than on the computer?
3. When I say I don't want to write "straight" articles, is this just because I am actually bad at writing them?
4. Should I move out of the city?
5. Am I going to fail at being an academic if I don't start applying for prestigious fellowships?
6. Would everything be different if we lived in Scandinavia?
7. Will everything be different once this pandemic blows over? Will it be different for better? For worse?
8. How do I stay optimistic and critical at the same time?
9. Should I try to write experimentally within academia, or should I give up on academic writing altogether?
10. Do I even want to be a writer? An academic?
11. Am I happier hanging out with people who aren't artists and academics?
12. Is it okay to pursue happiness in one's life?
13. Is it okay to pursue happiness in one's research?
14. Does happiness mean stability? Purpose and meaning? Pleasure?
14. How do you write playfully and deliciously, and still present the gold kernels of theory?

*

F. and I walk a new route along the railway line. As usual, we meet on the corner between our houses. The path beside the tracks is overgrown, busy with flies and nettle.

Since I moved in around the corner we've been walking by the river almost weekly. We wind our way around the quieter side, past the sporting fields where, every time, her bladder gets the better of her and she pauses to take a piss in the public toilet – always, expertly, managing not to touch any shared surfaces.

It is wonderful to be up to speed again. I have many memories with F.: entering abandoned buildings in Belgrade after midnight in search of our hostel in 2012; peeing ourselves laughing with a plastic cup of free wine in each hand at an architecture grad show where

neither of us knew anyone in 2009; the smell of her herbal deodorant when we were teenagers. For a few years we had to work harder to stay in touch. Now it is easy.

Today, as usual, we end up talking about our working lives. The pressure of it all. F. is also in academia, only she's in political science. Our talks remind me of everything I have tried to avoid for most of my academic life: the underlying belief that you have to be Extraordinary to be a scholar; the jaded mutter about undergraduate teaching that frames it as a chore; the pervasive idea that the path to happiness as a scholar is getting on the grants and fellowships train (as opposed to the teaching train), and that to be competitive for grants and fellowships you need an endless list of publications; that the writing of articles in your spare time as a casual academic is essentially unpaid labour, and that if you're a casual for too long they'll eventually stop hiring you. In short: that to be safe, you have to be competitive.

Lately, the deflation I feel from all of this is so strong it is almost a physical hollowing in my chest.

The path ends. Back on the street, we walk beneath fragrant trees and stop to smell them. F. has bought a house and for the first time in her life must consider which trees to plant. We pass the pink peppercorn; the yellow banksia; the port wine magnolia, with its juicy-fruit smell; the standard, deciduous magnolia, just now dropping its big pink and white pieces to the ground where they will grow brown and soft with time. We stop to talk to a neighbour – a distinct pleasure in the time of coronavirus.

*

Angelika Bammer and Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres ask where the distinction falls between scholarly and creative writing, and why we attend so much more closely to the *process* of the latter. We often ask professional writers when, where and how often they write; why not scholars?
"Should [scholarly writing] be beautiful? Why, toward what ends, and for whom? What do we do with the "tension between 'getting it right as scholarship' and 'getting it right in form'?" (Bammer and Boetcher Joeres eds. 2015, pp. 12–13)

Exactly, I think. Exactly.

*

Three months ago a new thing entered our lives: the Australian Football League (AFL). Emerging from the blanketed depths of first-wave coronavirus lockdown, we started booting an oblong, yellow ball down on the oval, which had become a true watering hole for all the community, and here it was that local team members happened upon us in ones, twos and threes, and drew us into the fold. In those first days I fumbled and flinched with the ball, and

you and I both returned breathless from the intensity of the training. Much was new to us: the mud in our mouths, the blood in our mouths, the steam rising from flushed bodies in the cold. The night-time pitch rendered vast under the floodlights, the thrill of the pack all moving as one, the fast give of small talk sliding into game talk. Foreign shorthand, indecipherable instructions.

Already, we belong. We have responsibility and camaraderie; pizza and carpooling. We have friendships that revolve around a project – around something shared. We return home from each mid-week physical ordeal high and exhausted, grateful for warmth. And no one at the club gives a shit (in a good way) whether I'm "making work", no one gives a shit whether I'm worth knowing, professionally. If you mess up you're not messing with your job security, and so long as you keep showing up, you keep belonging.

Maybe this is what critical geographer Harriet Hawkins means in *Creativity* (2017) when she says that the everyday, vernacular creativities are creativities in the truest sense, because they are liberated from neoliberal imperatives (Hawkins 2017, p. 52).

*

I wonder if the problem of writing is similar to 'the problem of reading', as Moyra Davey has put it (Davey, 2020). What should we read? Should reading feel good? How do we know what is worth reading? (We might equally say: what should we write? Should writing feel good? How do we know what is worth writing?)

In a way, this very piece is a conversation with a cluster of people I've read, and in figuring out what to write I have been equally confronted with the question of what to read. Maybe this problem applies to all scholarship.

*

Things That Feel Good:

eating
sunshine
endorphins
feeling turned on
a new insight occurring to you
watching TV
having free time at your disposal
laughing (I do so little of this)
writing on impulse
hanging out with N. and A. and S.

feeling accomplished
feeling accomplished and then relaxing
temporary solitude
massages
the first black coffee of the morning

September

I am back at the local library for the first time in six months. Like most establishments that have cautiously re-opened their doors, it feels the same but different. I fiddle with the caption for an Instagram post about a recent article I wrote. The aim is to be candid and modest, but also to drop the hint that I wrote something cool.

Draft Captions:

> *I loved writing this and feel it captures the writing goals and writing community that have lit up my mind lately, and now it is out in the world. *shooting star emoji**
>
> *I loved writing this and feel it really captures the writing goals and writing community that have lit up my mind lately, and now it is out in the world. *shooting star emoji**

I worry that "captures" is too fixing. I don't *really* mean to capture anything. Enter "captures" into Roget's Thesaurus – no luck.

> This piece, which I loved writing, shows
>
> Hooray!
>
> Yiewww!
>
> Woohoo!
>
> Yay!!!

I end up going with *Yay!!!*, publish the post, and open up my laptop to Harriet Hawkins's critical geography of creativity. Reading her work has been an intense experience. I am up to the bit where she says that labour in the creative industries is often talked about in terms of love, passion and self-actualisation.

Here she is, quoting Gill and Pratt:

> A vocabulary of love is repeatedly evidenced in such studies, with work imbued with the features of the Romantic tradition of the artist, suffused with positive emotional qualities … Research speaks of deep attachment, affective bindings, and to the idea of self-expression and self-actualization through work. (cited in Hawkins, 2017, p. 56)

And here is Hawkins paraphrasing Joshua Rothman:

> We have not therefore rid ourselves of the … romantic aura around creative work, rather our sense has grown more "social, practical and mercantile", as we demand a "spiritual wage" in exchange for the production of things. (2017, p. 56)

Later, she writes:

> Accompanying such aspirational labour – where pleasure, autonomy and income seemingly co-exist – is a sense of industry assuring individuals that 'their labour serves the self and not the market place' (Tokumitsu, 2014). The result enables the industry to pay workers very little, if anything, for long hours and highly precarious working conditions. (Hawkins, 2017, p. 56)

All the thoughts arrive at once. I am running over with excitement, can barely make myself read any further. The resonances between Hawkins's words and my own line of work are as disturbing as they are stimulating. Everything rings with a searing clarity.

Here's the thing: all those words in my Instagram drafts were *true*! I *had* written something that exemplified how I wanted to write in the future, I had *excited* myself while doing it, I had earnestly *loved* the process. But it also made far too much tactical, professional sense to phrase it that way.

I mount my bicycle. It has been a bone cold winter and today is supple and warm, bringing back too much love for bygone summers, and I pedal home to do some writing. Often, when cycling, I think of the passages about bike riding from Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* (1977). I imagine her biking around a sunburnt, 1970s Melbourne, between ramshackle terrace houses and overgrown gardens and that outdoor pool with its slab of hot concrete, with her grubby little kid on the pannier rack.

*

What Harriet Hawkins has imparted to me:

1. Two tropes recur in our discussions of artistry and labour: that of the alienated factory worker, and that of the passion-driven artist. The former is thought to work without much

choice or personal investment; the latter is thought to sacrifice almost anything for their work (Hawkins, 2017, pp. 27–28).

2. Creativity has been understood variously over time, and the image of the artist as genius and innovator – as one mandated to express what others cannot, as one who produces things that are profoundly new, borne forward on winds of inspiration and intuition – is actually relatively new. Before the Romantic period it was all about "learning from the masters", understanding technique, and helping to (re)incarnate what was already somehow alive. The ancient Egyptian artist was a servant to god and to royalty; the ancient Greek artist was a *crafts*person (Hawkins, 2017, pp. 30–34).

3. *Creativity*, as an idea, has become the darling of neoliberalism. Under the guises of urban renewal, authenticity and self-actualisation, governments and businesses push for greater productivity and dedication to work. As someone whose identity is often tied to their work, who is said to work "for passion", the artist is especially susceptible to these pressures. In fact, capitalism depends on the kind of identification with one's profession that many artists proclaim, and in order to make money off their work, artists often find themselves in the business of commodifying (whether implicitly or explicitly) the very life of the soul: contemplation, desire, expression, memory (Hawkins, 2017, p. 55).

4. *Bohemianism*, which originally described alternative lifestyles carried out in low-rent areas of 19th century Paris, is now applied to certain areas of modern cities that have a high concentration of queer people, of creative economy workers, and of people who are financially insecure (Hawkins, 2017, p. 54). Although arguably now almost everyone is financially insecure.

5. The financially insecure creative economy worker must master the art of networking and must develop excellent social skills in order to secure future (piecemeal) employment (Hawkins, 2017, p. 55).

6. (This is the part I read at the library—) Often creative labour is rendered in a vocabulary of *love*, and of play. We talk about our work as though it were truly the love of our lives, as though we barely feel we were working at all. Someone has even coined the term "playbour". Of all the people who work in the creative industries, and who proclaim self-actualisation in their work, very few see an actual pathway to security, recognition, and the sort of "agency" that artistry is often associated with (Hawkins, 2017, pp. 56–60). This suggests that the positive feelings we express about our work perhaps spring more from our sense of where we *aspire to go*, than from where we are – more from the future lives we *imagine for ourselves* than from the lives we presently live. I'm reminded of something Sara Ahmed said about happiness – that working towards whatever objects *promise* to make us happy is enough of a reason to call ourselves so (Ahmed, 2010a, p. 576).

*

"Writing does the thinking for you", someone once said. How true this is. As I pen a six-point summary of the insights Hawkins has left with me, I write my way into this unexpected rebuttal:

So what?! Why not be aspiring to something? Wouldn't you say that the majority of the world population has the sense that their life COULD BE better? More secure, more validated, more recognised? Isn't it normal to hold out hope that you are en route to some brighter destination, and to get some happiness from that?!

Then, the reply:
I guess it is normal, but it's a problem when that illusion is used to exploit you..?

*

We go and kick a football in the park and, as is often the case, all my feelings about whatever else is going on come out. I can't handle your compliments or your constructive criticism, and really this is because I feel a great deal of self-doubt about this writing project. After half an hour, I leave to keep working, and you stay.

Trudging back up the hill under the first spell of spring, I realise that reading Harriet Hawkins has been a heartbreaking experience. The houses here fall away from the road, downhill, cement stairways cascading into the gullies. (This was the same road where you and I met late at night three new year's eves ago, under the pretext of needing to exchange a book before I went abroad. Really we were just desperate to see each other. I'd finished work at the casino at midnight, just as the crowds were poised to flood the train line, and sped towards you.)

Somehow, in a few pages, Hawkins has captured every difficult truth about the conditions of my work as a casual academic who hopes to make a living as a writer. Reading her makes me know what I want to write, but it also makes me want to write nothing at all.

*

Current Fears:

1. This will be a very white article, about my white problems.

2. The thoughts will keep arriving all at once, and I won't manage to find a place for them. Although maybe this is in fact an excellent place from which to write this paper, which hopes

to conjure a chorus of ideas – more simultaneity than linearity, less an argument than an "atmosphere of mind" (Tartt, 2013, p. 347).

3. This piece of writing will be too short. It is a rewrite of an "article", and submissions that fall into the "article" category generally need to be longer than 6000 words. Sometimes there really is 6000 words' worth of stuff to say. But then, sometimes, there isn't. Sometimes the thing you want to say is just as effectively conveyed in a paragraph, or in a series of bullet points (polished gems on a string). It gives me confidence to learn that bell hooks has expressed similar thoughts about the length of academic articles (hooks cited in Olson & Worsham, 2003, pp. 119–120). In any case, if I want to create an article that is 6000 words long, I will need to write this many words roughly 30 more times.

*

Sunday afternoon. The house is quiet and the suburb sleepy in a new, hazy warmth. I am hungover, but somehow bright in the mind.

On Sunday afternoons I read to prepare for the class I will teach the following day. Today it is about the ways fans relate to deceased celebrities (Black, 2017). There are new concepts in it for me; I find myself drawn into the fold of the theory, into the burrow of that pleasant interior think-space. I wrap my mind around the term "reification" – its roots in Marxist critique, where it describes the construal of social relations as concrete attributes of people or objects, and its applications to our everyday lives, where it proposes explanations for how we make sense of the world.

Scribbling notes into the margins (as I have done since my first year of university) and crowding the corners of pages with ideas for how to bring the material to my students in a lively way, it occurs to me that I am having such a lovely time. For all my complaining, what pleasure it brings me to learn the contours of a new instrument for thinking about the world. (This is not to forget the potential violence of ideas; with that potential in mind, not all "thinking instruments" stand up to scrutiny.)

A. and N. return from the beach and walk the first sand of the season into the hallway. N. starts banging around with pots and pans in the kitchen, announces that dinner is not far away. The room turns iris-purple as I read on.

*

You angle the Toyota expertly through the traffic, windows down, and I'm teary behind my sunglasses. I try to hide it from you. We had agreed to do one hour of work before hitting the beach. The plan was to drop it after we finished – to leave it behind. But every time I work on this writing I get so sad.

> DISILLUSIONMENT (noun)
> A feeling of being disappointed and unhappy because of discovering the truth about something or someone you liked and respected. ("Disillusionment", Cambridge Dictionary, 2020)
> The condition of being disenchanted; the condition of being dissatisfied or defeated in expectation or hope. ("Disillusion", Merriam-Webster, 2020)

Maybe this is like the moment in Sara Ahmed's literary analysis where trouble besets the once satisfied housewife; where an awareness of her own and others' unhappiness, which patriarchy has so tried to keep at bay, takes up a place in her mind and, in so doing, makes an opening.

> If we do not assume that happiness is what is good – then we might read the link between female imagination and unhappiness differently. [1] We might explore how imagination is what allows women to be liberated from happiness and the narrowness of its horizons. We might want girls to read the books that enable them to be overwhelmed with grief. (Ahmed, 2010a, p. 585)

With the freedom, though – with any kind of new life – there is the sadness of losing your reference points. The sadness of seeing your dreams grow pale. I had fallen for the university so quickly. It blew open new rooms in my mind, and I had come to invest in it such earnest and tenacious hopes. From Sheila Heti: "Here is your sadness, turned into gold" (Heti, 2018, p. 16).

Or maybe this is like the moment in that podcast, *Nice White Parents*, where reporter Chana Joffe-Walt points out that white parents in New York City only started giving a shit about school segregation when the taxing middle school admissions system started failing *their own* children. Quite possibly, considering the history Joffe-Walt presents, they never really cared before (The New York Times, 2020). Does the same apply to me? Would I have lost faith in an institution, one that has only ever been hospitable to some, if it hadn't become hard for *me* – privileged as I am – to gain a place? Ahmed puts it thus:

> The happy queer, who has good manners, who is seated at the table in the right way, might be a strategic form of occupation in an uncivil world. But strategic occupations can keep things in place. … A revolution of unhappiness might require an unhousing; it might require not legitimating more relationships, more houses, even more tables but delegitimating the world that "houses" some bodies and not others. The political energy of unhappy queers might depend on not being in house. (Ahmed, 2010b, p. 106)

*

As I mull over these possibilities (or, more likely, truths), I realise that they tie in with another uncomfortable process: the coming to terms with my own ordinariness.

The thing to learn is that my life has value (to me, and to others) even if I am not Exceptional or a Genius. This is so at odds with the imperative in the university as well as in the arts to be extraordinary, original, a star. Once I make peace with it, I might come to find my own ordinariness wildly freeing: a licence to make choices I might otherwise never have made, to take greater pleasure in others' successes, to become curious about things I might otherwise not have had the space for, to spend time in ways that don't win me recognition. Ahmed writes that a willingness to find ourselves unhappy (or to pursue paths that don't guarantee happiness any more than they guarantee unhappiness) frees us to make bolder choices in our lives (2010a; 2010b). The same might be true of a "willingness to be ordinary".

Alternative Essay Title (or, the manual I need):
How to Harness Your Nihilism

*

In the opening of the film, *Again Once Again* (2019), the narrator poses a series of questions. They are delivered over a sequence of still images from what looks like a family slide collection. Over an image of children leaping barefoot down a sand dune, she asks:

"Is melancholy exclusive to youth, as contradictory as it may sound? A luxury you can only afford when you have your whole life ahead?" (Paula dir. 2019)

This, next to Hawkins and poet-geographer Sarah de Leeuw:

"The practices of creative geographies do not, and perhaps also should not, sit too neatly within the strictures and structures of the neo-liberal university or searches for happiness therein." (de Leeuw & Hawkins, 2017, p. 319)

On one hand, melancholy as luxury; on the other, melancholy as a commitment to dissent.

*

We drive an hour south early in the morning to play a game against the Bombers. By midday we are home, salty and hungry, and I take a hot shower. As the water sluices over me, sunlight falling in planes through the steam, I think about this writing project and muse that, even though I have always claimed to seek joy in my work, it could be that I have historically done relatively little for joy alone – little that doesn't somehow relate to what Wendy Brown might (rightly) identify as the "enhancing [of my] future value" (Brown, 2015, p. 34).

But not today. After showering I help A. sew a curtain, and then the household naps, and I allow the evening to lull me downstream in a way I haven't done for ages.

*

I retrace the route F. and I walked along the railway line. Squinting in the heat between fence and shrub, I reason:

1. It makes sense to feel things like sadness and frustration when writing, because writing is work, and work is not fun all the time.

2. It might even be important to welcome an ongoing level of unease in a university environment so shaped by neoliberalism, colonialism and patriarchy. We have to "stay with trouble" (Haraway, 2016); "we must stay unhappy with this world" (Ahmed, 2010, pp. 105–106).

3. I am writing in a time of profound precariousness: in an economic recession, in the midst of an international health crisis, and in an ongoing climate crisis. It makes sense, therefore, that the timbre of the thinking and writing would be a little sad.

But all of that said, I need something to hold onto. I need a bit of optimism. The act of writing has always provided that. It has always been a wellspring of solace.

*

TO DO:

speak to house owners, ask them to send water bill
mention garage key – locksmith
mention leaking tap – confirm with household
redirect mail check medicare
organise folders
volunteer – WIRES?
join the union

*

I first read Adrienne Rich in my second year of university. It was for a final essay in a course called "Theories of Writing for the Media", and I had chosen the essay question about feminism. I can still remember where I was sitting: in the boxy, brutalist library, at a laminate desk – a wall here, an opening onto a foyer there. It was her *Compulsory Heterosexuality and*

Lesbian Existence (1980). The ideas in that essay would stay with me: they would break down like compost and become inseparable from my own thoughts; they would shape the way I saw things, inform the choices I made, and – years later – guide me towards an awareness of my own queerness.

Of course, I didn't know this at the time of reading. I probably noticed a pang of recognition, the familiar swell of mental stimulation, the temporary suspension of time. But the impact of Rich's text on my thinking only became apparent much later.

As the spring wears on and my deep weariness continues, it occurs to me that Harriet Hawkins's *Creativity* may have been another one of those decisive texts; it may have had a bigger impact than I had first imagined possible. And while the Adrienne Rich experience (and others like it) drew me *into* an academic life, the Hawkins may be drawing me out. I'm losing faith. And, with it, I'm getting curious about other pathways. I'm considering getting a "job", not a "career". Working to live, and not the other way round.

*

Brezny's advice hangs around in my head. I have been keeping track of my questions, writing down new ones when they show up. Recent additions:

1. If I am so hung up on my high-autonomy, low-security job, should I just change jobs?

2. Is the implicit "research is better than teaching" hierarchy deeply classist?

3. Are questions about whether the labour of writing should *feel good* an unmistakeable reflection of my class?

4. Do people in other occupations worry about whether their work is fun? (Answer: You shouldn't generalise about people in other occupations.)

5. Can people make the change happen from the inside? (First Answer: We must hold out hope that they can. In the middle of writing one afternoon, I grow tired and decide to revitalise my brain by going on Facebook. A friend has shared a post that decries the moral compromise required for a legal career and says this compromise is the reason why she, despite having completed a law degree, never became a lawyer. In the comments thread, another friend – who *is* a lawyer – has replied with an argument about why, despite all the ways in which the system is broken, one has to keep trying to make change. Rather than sitting around being frustrated, the thing to do is to roll up one's sleeves and get active. This makes me think about the university and all my complaining. It makes me think about the scholars I know who are consciously trying to make change, who fight for their students, who are openly at odds with the inequity and careerism around them. It makes me think that the

thing to do is not to leave, but to find and hold onto like-minded people. Second Answer – Ahmed's words, circling about: "The political energy of unhappy queers might depend on not being in house.")

October

We take a holiday. The place is four hours up the coast, and we arrive at our bungalow after nightfall. Stepping out of the car, we fall silent at the sheer size and number of the trees, at the wind that sounds out their splendour in the dark, and at the profound absence of a thing we'd altogether stopped noticing at home: city noise.

In the morning, light falls in dazzling patterns through the green. We go walking through coastal rainforest. Vegetation cascades steeply downhill towards the sea break, a dry wind is all up in the branches. We are exultant, open-mouthed like children. As we traipse and point and turn to beam at each other, some deeper evaluation is taking place – for you as for me, it seems. This city rat race. These rental prices. I imagine changing my life, leaving town and taking up a job in animal welfare. It could be magnificent. But it wouldn't be easy.

We agree to give ourselves some time. Maybe come the new year we'll revisit this, and make a list of pros and cons.

*

Back home, I send an email to a composer whose work I recently wrote about. The email is just to tell him I wrote about him, and to send him a copy of my writing.

A brief email exchange ensues in which he expresses, with a casual warmth, something I had already sensed in his work: a belief that neoliberal ideals pervade the arts and universities, and that this is a serious problem. I feel something akin to both recognition and relief.

Exactly. Exactly.

*

Jean Rouch, a filmmaker with a strong concern for ethics and a strong attraction to mischief, said the following in an interview:

Interviewer: *Are you optimistic?*
Rouch: *Of course, and you?*
Interviewer: *There are doubts.*

Rouch: *Doubts are optimism. There is nothing more pessimistic than a puritan. The moment you have doubts, everything is possible.* (Yakir & Rouch, 1978, p. 11)

Is Rouch's doubt-as-optimism compatible with Haraway's "staying with the trouble"?

Does doubt as a sense of possibility get us closer to the "tenacious energy" that Haraway insists we need when she says that despair about the university and the planet gets us nowhere, if it is not countered by equal measures of playfulness, intimacy and a commitment to living and dying fiercely together (2016, p. 2)?

Haraway: *There is a fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference.* (2016, p. 4).

*

Michelle is a genius!

What?

Michelle is a genius

Oh yeah?! You mean Connie's Michelle, Michelle from work? *YEAH YEAH YEAH EL'S BALL*

OUT FRONT!

NIIIICE

YEAH EL

Yeah, she coded this program at work that just blew my mind

Aw yeah, sick. Yeah I just know her as a great character. I mean a person of great character

STILL YOURS STILL YOURS

BACK HER UP

YEAH ROSE YEAH ROSE ROSE

WHEN YOU GOT IT WHEN YOU GOT IT WHEN YOU GOT IT—

NICE HANDS

RUN THROUGH

*

Apparently there's now a shortage of hospitality workers—

Oh—

Because the dole is so good—

HAMSTRING SWEEPS GROUP ONE LET'S GO

Yeah of course

Yeah finally it's like a decent amount of money you know—

Yeah

And so why go back when it's still unsafe you know—

GROUP TWO LINING UP SOMEONE TAKE THE LEAD

THREE TWO ONE GO

*

I got my feet cracked yesterday

Oh yeah how good is that!! I get myself cracked all the time, I love it

Yeah

Tread water, tread water ... and GO GO GO

LOLA LOLA LOLA!

Good work babe

GOOD TALK GUYS

Yeah cause you don't realise how like out of alignment you get

Yeah

You should get your pelvis cracked if you can, oh wow!

YEAH-YEAH-YEAH-YEAH

Okay now don't lead too soon – aaand *NOW NOW NOW*

LOLAAAA!!!!!!

Notes

[1] While Ahmed refers to a "female imagination", and later in the paragraph speaks of "women", what she says here is relevant not only to women or female-identifying people, but also to those who identify as LGBTIQA+.

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