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Holding Together Loss and Hope: Reflections on the Need for Art in Times of Crisis

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What can art do for us in times of crisis? Or, what can we do with it? In this piece I examine my own uses of art during periods of political upheaval, and suggest what might be learnt from these experiences. As psychosocial research demonstrates, paying attention to pleasure tells us much about ourselves and the world – and what it shows us, of course, is often deeply political. But how does paying attention to our pleasure effect our being-in-the-world? What are the consequences of this knowledge? Feminist and queer radicals have provided answers to these questions for many years, in theory and in practice. Building on these histories, Adrienne Marie Brown coined the phrase ‘pleasure activism’. Pleasure activists “seek to understand and learn from the politics and power dynamics inside of everything that makes us feel good. This includes sex and the erotic, drugs, fashion, humour, passion work, connection, reading, cooking and/or eating, music and other arts, and so much more.” (Brown 2019: 13) To identify the political potentials of pleasure is not to commit to an uncritical celebration of hedonism or excess. It is to recognise the ways in which power conditions our enjoyments, and to reclaim them in the service of progressive change.

Contrary to the diverse experiences of scarcity people live with on a daily basis – from scarcity of food, to scarcity of community – pleasure activism seeks to learn “what it means to be satisfiable, to generate, from within and between us, an abundance from which we can all have enough.” (Brown 2019: 15) Crises are times when scarcity is experienced acutely, with immediate and potential shortages of the things we need to survive. But they may also be opportunities to radically revise our understandings of what forms of scarcity and abundance matter. Crises are times when injustices become newly visible and political possibilities can rapidly expand. They are also when systems of political oppression are often established or entrenched. During such periods, recognising and attending to pain, suffering and sorrow is, of course, an ethical imperative. But, as I explore in what follows, paying

attention to the pleasures we seek and find at such moments is vital too. It offers specific opportunities to deepen our understanding of the crisis, and to open possibilities for new futures.

***Caroline, Or Change* (2003)**

After Trump was elected President in November 2016, I began listening to a CD I'd had on my shelf for ten years. Previously I had listened to it every so often. Now I was listening to it a lot – and sometimes, whilst listening, weeping into the sink as I did the washing up. This was *Caroline, Or Change*, a musical by composer Jeanine Tesori and playwright Tony Kushner, loosely based on Kushner's childhood in Louisiana in the 1960s.

The action takes place in November 1963, in the days just before and after the assassination of Kennedy. At the centre of the narrative is the relationship between eight-year-old Noah Gellman, who the year before has lost his mother to cancer, and Caroline Thibodeaux, this Jewish family's African American maid. At one level the show is about the never fully articulated solidarity of feeling between Noah and Caroline, and their unspecified relationship of care – sharing something together in their respective forms of melancholy. But the show is more broadly concerned with the possibilities and difficulties of change, both psychological and political.

It begins with Caroline in the basement of the Gellman's house, where she works five days a week. She sings, "Nothing ever happens underground in Louisiana. Cos there ain't no underground in Louisiana. There is only underwater." We see how Caroline survives her

many losses and oppressions. She does so, in part, by cutting off parts of herself – her desires, her memories – placing these parts of herself in stasis, under water. To want things, to desire, to look too far backwards or forwards – to seek change – is too dangerous.

In contrast with Caroline, Emy, her 16-year-old daughter, is becoming involved in the civil rights movement. At the end of the piece we learn it is Emy who decapitated the statue of a confederate soldier – the figure that had dominate the stage at the beginning. In this final scene, Emy occupies the position in which the soldier had stood, and sings of her mother. Throughout the show Emy has criticized Caroline for her lack of political action, for her meekness and deference to her white employers. For her inability to change, or to seek change. But in these final moments, Emy recognises in her mother a different kind of agency: the innumerable daily acts that have been required to survive. To survive her environment and its structural violence, and to raise her four children such that they may flourish. In its denouement, with mother and daughter's mutual recognition, the show commits itself both to Caroline's sadness, and to Emy's hope. They can, and must, be held together.

Caroline, or Change is one of the most moving representations I've seen of how politics moves through us, as we move - or don't move - through politics. In the context of Trump's election, Brexit and the wider ascendance of right-wing populism, it was something that I needed. Holding together loss and hope, living with them both, without collapsing one into the other. Of course, my strong attachment to the piece is also bound up with my own history. The musical materials of the piece – klezmer, Motown, Mozart, American musical theatre – speak very directly to my own musical biography. This, undoubtedly, is part of its power for me. It also speaks to my secular Jewishness; not to mention the family milieu in which I grew up, the child of two psychotherapists, in which questions of psychosocial change were part of

the sea in which we swam. With *Caroline, Or Change*, I've often had the experience of having returned to me, articulated anew, something I had already known. Such, I think, can be amongst our most powerful experiences of art.

As they take their places in our lives, artworks can of course become a medium for memory, as we return to familiar pieces at different times, under new circumstances. Moreover, if that artwork returns to a charged historical moment, as *Caroline, Or Change* does to Kennedy's death, it may deliberately perform a returning-to-us-of-what-we-already-knew, a repetition with difference. The pleasures of this can be considerable, and there is much that could be said about its psychological significance: its echoes with (and distance from) psychotherapeutic processes, as well as with everyday practices of memory and memorialization. In times of crisis, the value of such practices of artful memory can take on new inflections and urgency. Memory work of this kind can extend our sense of the present, a present that might otherwise feel overwhelming. It may provide reminders of how we and others have responded to comparable situations previously. Most importantly of all, perhaps, there is the psychic value of having complex experiences held together within aesthetic forms. Such artful holding, in turn, allows us to safely explore and reflect upon these experiences and, potentially, to do so collectively.

The range of opportunities for new experience offered by an artwork is conditioned by its specific material, formal and rhetorical characteristics. But these opportunities are also a function of the conditions under which it is "pressed into use" (DeNora 2000: 31) In the days following Trump's election, I listened to *Caroline, Or Change* on an antiquated technology: Compact Disc. This was not incidental to the value of my experience of the piece. Removed from the unbroken flow of online content – in which an abundance of material may threaten a

scarcity of secure meaning-making – offline art can enable contained temporal experiences. Removing oneself from an over-saturated present can facilitate connections to be made with multiple pasts. These connections, in turn, may enable renewed inhabitations of the present, and perhaps, thereby, new futures. Artworks themselves, in all their variety, afford multiple mediations of our being in the world. But, of course, the technology with which we experience them matters very much too. At times of crisis, the opportunities for experience offered by specific artworks (and by particular technologies) can become newly consequential: as we seek to re-experience our individual and collective place in the world.

Angels in America (1992 – 1996)

As it happens, in the early days of the Covid-19 crisis, during which I write this piece, I have found myself turning to another piece by Tony Kushner, on CD: his Pulitzer-Prize winning play *Angels in America*. This sprawling ‘Gay Fantasia on National Themes’ is centrally concerned with the rupture in American history constituted by the AIDS crisis. The action takes place over several months in 1985 – 1986. In its opening scenes the catastrophe is initially announced on a small scale, on a park bench, with the diagnosis of 30-year-old Prior Walter. Over the next six hours, the play expands outwards – spatially and metaphysically, including a scene that takes place in Heaven – exploring the meaning of AIDS for gay men, for America’s self-understanding, and for the very idea of historical time. The play presents AIDS as a biblical plague, disturbing the linear upward trajectory of American progress. Prior’s increasingly hallucinatory experiences climax at the end of Part I with an Angel crashing through his bedroom ceiling, summoning him to his prophetic mission. The Plague’s rupture of secular time constitutes a return of the repressed. With AIDS, America is called to

recognise its systemic exclusions and erasures: the repression of large sections of its population, and of a whole host of ethical, relational and political possibilities outside its hegemonic narrative of capitalist advance.

The piece was developed via many workshop performances in New York and California, generating enormous interest from communities living through this extended disaster. Art can hold together loss and hope in real time. It can also disrupt that sense of time, extending the present in ways that expand political possibility and, within conditions of sometimes abject suffering, make meaning-making possible. In Terry Eagleton's analysis, the possibility of meaning-making is foundational to hope:

For us to be able to speak of a cataclysm means that there must be something that survives it. [...] Hope is extinguished when language is obliterated. It is not true that language can repair one's condition simply by lending a name to it, but it is true that one cannot repair it without doing so. (Eagleton 2015: 123-4)

One of the roles of art during times of crisis can be to draw together, into some kind of whole, experiences of suffering that are too wide or too deep to be easily spoken. David France describes the experience of seeing the AIDS memorial quilt on the National Mall in Washington in 1987. "The effect was overwhelming, combining the community's losses for the first time into a massive map of sorrow, an exponential tragedy." (France 2016: 295) Part of the power of *Angels in America* for its original audiences, and subsequently, is its attempt to hold together a devastatingly unwieldy set of experiences, on a grand scale.

What Kushner's play meant to those involved in its long period of gestation during the early late '80s and early '90s has been documented in *The World Only Spins Forward* (Butler and Kois 2018). The book's title is a quotation from the final lines of the play. The scene takes place at the Bethesda fountain in Central Park in January 1990, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall. A queer family of care seems to have been established between Prior, two of his former lovers (Louis and Belize) and Hannah, a Mormon we have previously seen migrate from Salt Lake City to New York, to help her troubled son. Prior breaks the fourth wall in a way that hasn't happened previously. He updates the audience. Five years on, he is living with AIDS. He comes to this fountain often, his favourite place. As Lou and Belize argue about the politics of the middle East – an affectionate representation of the ongoingness of their political disagreements – Prior steps forward to end the show.

The fountain's not flowing now, they turn it off in the winter, ice in the pipes. But in the summer it's a sight to see. I want to be around to see it. I plan to be. I hope to be.

This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.

Bye now.

You are fabulous creatures, each and every one.

And I bless you: *More Life*.

The Great Work Begins.” (Kushner 2013: 280)

The play holds together loss and hope. It does so with an insistence on the ongoingness of narrative-making – including grand narratives – but necessarily new ones, pointed towards by Prior, one of America's new prophets, whose prophetic powers arrive with the suffering of the plague. Prior's experiences of loss connect the hope that emerges from them to the material conditions of the world. The narration of such experiences can open new political possibilities. "Authentic hope" (Eagleton 2015: 3) is grounded in the possibility of abjection. Here, the cruel optimism (Berlant 2011) of Reagan's 'Morning in America', and the catastrophes it let happen, is resisted with a new political community, a new political project - and a new relationship to historical time - heralded by Prior.

Holding Together Loss and Hope

One of the key texts for me in thinking through the relationship between hope and loss is Rebecca Solnit's *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Solnit 2015). She explains hope to be the deep sense that our actions matter, even though – or precisely when – we don't know what the outcomes of our actions will be. "Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act." (Solnit 2016: xii) Hope is in no way dependent on secure knowledge that things will turn out well. This is a point Eagleton elaborates by making a sharp distinction between hope and optimism.

Optimists are conservatives because their faith in a benign future is rooted in their trust in the essential soundness of the present. Indeed, optimism is a typical

component of ruling-class ideologies. [...] Bleakness, by contrast, can be a radical posture. Only if you view your situation as critical do you recognise the need to transform it. (Eagleton 2015: 4-5)

However, we also need to avoid the view that hope, even when grounded in a critique of the present, is always on the side of progress. Hope is the very stuff of political imagination (Gross 2019), running through all political projects from Marxist revolution to 'Make America Great Again'. In this sense, hope is politically neutral. Moreover, as Eagleton suggests, those on the Left suspicious of hope have justification, on the grounds that "Images of utopia are always in danger of confiscating the energies that might otherwise be invested in its construction." (Eagleton 2015: 40) Solnit, too, stresses that "hope is only a beginning; it's not a substitute for action, only a basis for it." (Solnit 2016: xvii) However, whilst hope can be mobilized towards any political ends, and cannot be a substitute for action, it also constitutes the grounds for agency (Gross 2019), and is therefore essential to individual wellbeing and to any collective project.

In their own ways, both Eagleton and Solnit draw on Walter Benjamin's influential account of historical time to suggest that politically progressive forms of hope require an activist relationship with the past. Benjamin rejected industrial capitalism's 'ideology of progress' but did not thereby abandon hope. Instead, hope lay in the possibility of reactivating unfulfilled potentials from the wreckage of history. As Eagleton explains, for Benjamin it is in the past that we find materials for hope. "In a dialectical flash, a moment in the present finds an affinity with an instant of the past, and in granting that instant new meaning is also able to see itself afresh, as a potential fulfilment of that earlier promise." (Eagleton 2015: 33) This, too, is what art can do.

Artworks for Benjamin resemble slow-burning fuses which generate fresh meanings as they enter upon new contexts, contexts that could not have been foreseen at the time of their production. Truths which have been secreted in these artefacts from the outset may be released for the first time by some conjuncture in their afterlife. (Eagleton 2015: 32)

Solnit also suggests the need to activate the past in expanding possibilities for the future, including via more memorialization of progressive change. “We need litanies or recitations or monuments to these victories, so that they are landmarks in everyone’s minds.” (Solnit 2016: xix)

These victories can take many forms. In *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*, Solnit shows how the pleasures of social action, shared meaning-making and collective purpose – stifled by unjust socio-economic and political circumstances – are recovered in the aftermath of catastrophes. Commenting on collective responses to the financial crisis effecting Argentina in 2001, one protester observed, “How strange it was a reconnection with something that was lost. Many ways of being social had been lost.” (Quoted in Solnit 2009: 162.) Disasters often uncover underlying injustices. They also reveal social instincts – and a wide range of social pleasures – that are curtailed by the political conditions in which people ordinarily live.

Adam Philips and Barbara Taylor also evidence instinctive social pleasures in their psychoanalytically informed historical analysis of kindness. They show how, in our age of competitive individualism, kindness has been denigrated and treated as a specialist practice

appropriate only for parenting, not for the public domain. They define kindness as “the ability to bear the vulnerability of others, and therefore of oneself”. (Phillips & Taylor 2010: 6) This is one of the reasons for ambivalence towards it – kindness is “hazardous because it is based on susceptibility to others, a capacity to identify with their pleasures and sufferings.” (Phillips & Taylor 2010: 3) But “in giving up on kindness [...] we deprive ourselves of a pleasure that is fundamental to our sense of well-being.” (Phillips & Taylor 2010: 4) What humans share is their vulnerability, “it is the medium of contact between us, what we most fundamentally recognize in each other. Before we are sexual creatures we are vulnerable creatures; indeed the strength of our desires derives from our original helplessness and dependence.” (Phillips & Taylor 2010: 10)

Recognising kindness as a pleasure reconfigures our sense of human selves, it “makes us more porous, less insulated and separated from others. Once you put kindness back in the picture there can be no such thing as the isolated self. [...] Fellow feeling joins us to various and diverse other people.” (Phillips & Taylor 2010: 53) In her work on happiness, Lynne Segal reaches similar conclusions. She critiques prevailing policy approaches to wellbeing, which frame happiness as an individual attribute, rather than as a relational experience that often “takes us beyond or outside ourselves.” (Segal 2017: 24)

Making visible the concealed, suppressed and potential configurations of human relationships through which our pleasures take place is politically vital. Artworks create opportunities to test and extend experiences of pleasurable relationality. One of the features of both *Caroline, or Change* and *Angels in America* I have enjoyed so much is the distinctive relational ontologies they each elaborate via their particular aesthetic techniques and choices. For example, at two points Caroline and Noah sing a duet together at night-time, even though

Caroline is now back at her own home. Where exactly is this conversation taking place? What emotional solidarity makes possible this magical conversation? There are deep tensions and ambivalences in this relationship, manifest within these duets. This is not sentimentality. But in the world of this piece – in which washing machines and tumble dryers can sing, and an extravagantly diverse set of musical idioms and identities is woven together – the internalisation of significant others makes possible connections across boundaries, holding together separation and proximity, loss and hope. In the universe of *Caroline, Or Change* – extending from “small domestic tragedies” played out in the Gellman’s basement, to the assassination of Kennedy, to a singing moon above the stage – “Change comes fast, change comes slow, but change comes.” If lost objects are transformed, they can be partially recovered.

Angels in America, too, makes distinctive use of the possibilities of theatre to explore relationality across boundaries. In an early scene, one that I find amongst the most moving, two characters who have not previously known of each other’s existence (Prior and Harper), meet in an experience which neither is sure is not a dream or hallucination. The play, of course, doesn’t need to take a position on the precise metaphysics of this encounter. The characters have formed a magical connection via an affinity between their experiences of illness, isolation and abandonment. As the play goes on to explore, what the AIDS crisis makes visible is both the profound interconnectedness of life – contrary to the possessive individualism of Reaganite ideology – and the possibility for radically new forms of kinship to arise in response.

The Care Collective (Andreas Chatzidakis, Jamie Hakim, Jo Littler, Catherine Rottenberg, Lynne Segal) refer to this as “promiscuous care”:

caring *more* and in ways that remain experimental and extensive by current standards. It means multiplying who we care for and how. Building on historical formations of 'alternative' care giving practices, we need to create the capacity for a more capacious notion of care. This is challenging because neoliberal capitalism's underfunding and undermining of care have often led to paranoid and chauvinist caring imaginaries – looking after only 'our own'. With adequate resources, time and labour people can feel secure enough to care for, about and with strangers as if they were kin. Such capacities are flourishing at the moment via the Covid-19 Mutual Aid groups, sprouting up in local areas during the pandemic, just as they did with AIDs support networks in the 1980s. (The Care Collective 2020)

The "ethics of promiscuous care" they call for could draw on many examples, from radical responses to AIDS, to the feminist "experiments in collective living" (Segal 2017: 192) of the 1970s. Alongside these historical precedents, artworks can function as experiments in collective living. The ontological possibilities of pieces like *Caroline, or Change* and *Angels in America* point towards existing and potential modes of interconnected life, fellow-feeling and promiscuous care: radical knowledges, practices and possibilities systematically excluded from everyday life. Whilst always requiring us to press them into use, artworks afford the opportunity for heterotopic experiences, even whilst – and perhaps especially when – addressing experiences of profound loss. We can inhabit these spaces of otherness for a few hours, and return to them as and when we need them. But such experiences can (re)activate forms of affect that inform our future plans.

In response to the political challenges posed by populism, ongoing economic crisis, climate change and epidemics, we need to tell new stories. (Haraway 2016; Monbiot 2017; Latour 2018; Gross 2019) At times of upheaval, new art will be made – narrating experiences of loss, and re-figuring human interconnection. But we may also need to return to art we know and love. Not only to reassure ourselves that loved objects endure and can continue to nourish us; but because some artworks, such as the two discussed here, are themselves powerful mediators of collective memory and affect – holding together absence, presence and possibility. Such instruments of memory can have an important role to play in helping us ‘craft’ our feelings (Frosh 2011) at times of crisis. In their capacity to expand our experience of the present, they may not only open new possibilities for our immediate affective states – but reactivate repressed or forgotten futures. *More Life*.

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