

The Diary Through Affect: A Project in Alternative Methods of Self-Engagement

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Abstract: Contemporary engagements with the diary regard it as being a finished manuscript that opens itself up to analytical scrutiny through generalized frameworks for reading autobiographical writing. Although the field of life-writing offers theoretical concepts and tools that tap into reading the affective moments that emerge in the diary narrative, there is an absence of a reading which senses and articulates affective patterns. Thinking through the question: “How does the diary function as a space of potential for both upholding and countering ways of attaching to and performing the genres of everyday life?” this thesis proposes an alternate reading of the diary informed by affect theory. In doing so, the research also implicates a process of creative engagement with my own work, which I frame through the method of research-creation. The outcome offers engagements that are at once new modes of understanding self-expression and experiments in the use of the diary space.

I have written committedly in diaries for a while now, yet it was only recently that I really began to think about my writing as something which I practiced, and the diary medium itself as a space which allowed

for this practice to unfold. In fact, it was not only the writing that made up the practice, but also my reading of the writing. It is perhaps more accurate to conceive what I call the practice as an ongoing and relational process of both the reading and writing in the diary space. Like one does with any practice that has been continuous and lasting, I have come to familiarize myself with the various aspects of my own diary. In the process, I have developed a manner of translating my life into a personal and intelligible form. Instead of regarding the diary as a written manuscript, I am inclined to think of it as a space that affords engagements with the self. The diary text becomes the residue of the writing process, and the reading of that text becomes a new engagement with the self. The text then, is the outcome which connects both parts of the diary practice, the thing linking the writing and the reading. In her own diary, Sontag identifies the reflexive relation between writing about the self and the very creation of that self. She ruminates on what the diary space allows for her, which is most notably the grounds for an experimental practice of self-creation: “In the journal I do not just express myself more openly than I could do to any person; I create myself.” (Sontag, 2009, p.285). For her too, the diary is not a void -a pure receptacle- where one freely dumps their thoughts and feelings in attempt to chronicle them. In the act of writing in the diary, the diary writer enters a reciprocal relationship with their writing. It is reductive to analyze writing as pure text, as it entails various processes of encounter, thinking and interpreting, and reading, all of which affect the writer’s conception of themselves. Along these lines, Sontag follows that writing in the diary not only chronicles her daily life but -in many instances- is able to offer the potential experimental grounds for conceiving alternatives to it (Sontag, 2009, p.285).

The sense of this potential was perhaps what swayed me to initially consider and theorize the diary as an inherently liberatory space. Thus, I started writing this thesis with the intention of laying bare what the diary had done for me, by offering itself as a space where a radically different type of writing could emerge. I aimed to contrast writing in the diary to other types of writing, delineating how its confessionalism implied resistance to dominant frameworks for categorizing experience (Bernstein, 1992, p.121). The use of an intrusive “I” as a method of self-reference in which writing your own lived

experience becomes a tool for undermining discursive -patriarchal- authority, was to me, an ostensibly liberatory characteristic of diary writing (Bernstein, 1992, p.121). However, during the process of situating my research and exploring relevant theoretical frameworks for my analysis, I was confronted with how writing from an “I” could in fact be discursively reproducing forms of narration rooted in normativity.

It was at this point that I encountered affect theory, which offered to me the speculative -as well as conceptual- tools that I could use to reimagine how I interacted with my diary. I was able to open myself up to alternative ways of reading, and in the process, found novel ways of engaging with myself. I specifically follow Lauren Berlant’s theorization on societal affects as they manifest in the everyday public and private spheres, and her subsequent application of these affects in the domains of writing and criticism. Examining diary writing from these frames creates a more nuanced construction of the practice. Rather than taking the diary to be a purely liberatory space, I hope to track the particular ways I have conceived and narrated my life, which is not inherently liberatory, yet may harbor the potential to be so. With that, I arrive at the question stimulating my research,

How does the diary function as a space of potential for both upholding and countering ways of attaching to and performing the genres of everyday life?

Following this question, I step away from traditional definitions of the diary as “day-to-day writing: a series of dated written records.” (Ben-Amos & Ben-Amos, 2020, p.2) and instead embrace its elusive potentiality as a space that invites one in. I am conceiving the diary as an environment that interacts with the person reading and writing, bearing the potential for creating change in that person (Poletti & Rak, 2014, pp.4-5). Answering this question necessitates both an analytical and a practical project. Theoretically re-imagining the interpretive frameworks that have been employed thus far in the reading of autobiographical texts is not enough. I must put into practice the forms of interpretation I am calling forth. This calls for an engagement with an autobiographical act that is at once familiar yet provokes inquiry. I find that my own diary functions as readily available source material for such an



undertaking. Reading what I have written by way of an analysis attentive to affects grants me a unique perspective on processes that I otherwise might have neglected. Although the resulting research is rooted in my own writing and experience and perhaps risks becoming too self-referential, I believe there is value in disclosing such a personal form of analysis. And this value does not necessarily lie in its generalizability or the prospect of further speculation arising from it, but in how it confronts other forms of theory that may be regarded as more intellectually rigorous. Miller's commitment to personal forms of theorization and criticism reassures me. The awkwardness and shame I associate with using the self as a subject and personal writing as a point of departure stem from the conceptions I have of what counts as academically sound (Miller, 1991, p.5). I am embarrassed not because the subject and how I take it up is inherently embarrassing, but because I believe it will be read with such judgments placed on it (Miller, 1991, p.5). In the process of writing, I realize that I do not care about those who will read my work from the normative frameworks of academic excellence. I rather care for those with which my own experience will resonate. To them, I hope my disclosure of experience offers some alternative form of attaching to the world through writing, whether it be in the diary space or somewhere altogether different.

### **Practice as Research**

I situate my research using the frameworks provided by affect theory, most prominently employing the work of theorists such as Berlant who have taken part in instigating the recent "affective turn" in a number of academic fields. Invoking Massumi (2015), my aim is to "think through affect", entailing a receptiveness to encounters and their various capacities as well as their potential to instigate change (pp.vii-x). This means that I will not only use the concepts of affect theory as a point of departure for my theoretical work but that I will also acknowledge how the research itself is not unfettered from affective dimensions (Gregg, 2010, p.5). Attentive to the fact that the research in question is not purely analytical but is rather a non-meticulous combination of both analysis and creation, I take the following process -of writing this thesis- as an experiment of sorts. Invoking prior investigations into research methodology that have been attentive to the play of affects in the various processes of conducting and

writing research, I am able to situate and somewhat base my own inquiries on already existing frameworks. In *Feminist Speculations and the Practice of Research-Creation: Writing Pedagogies and Intertextual Affects*, Truman (2022) visualizes a method termed research-creation, which blends the use of theory with speculative and creative practice (p.14). For Truman (2022), research is a process where the researcher directly implicates themselves in and opens themselves up to certain types of encounters (p.9). In proposing to research something, I am attempting to actualize it in a way I have imagined. Yet I do so not with the force of expecting a particular kind of outcome, but with an openness to the new types of worlds which might arise in the process of my attempts (p.9). In other words, I am doing research with the awareness that my speculation might generate a process of transformation, both in me and in the focus of the research (Truman, 2022, p.7).

Put most simply, the focus of my research is the diary, both as a space and as a practice. The diary space, -the space where the text resides- functions more as an object of analysis, while the use of that space -the practice- is implicated more as an act of research-creation. Truman (2022) describes research-creation as a way to artistically create an event of the thing one is curious about (p.11). The event here, which draws on Berlant's theorization of event, refers to a variety of emergences that both inform and are informed by the research (Truman, 2022, p.16). Drawing on both Berlant and Truman, I try to make an event of the practice of the diary, activating both the writing and reading of the diary as part of my research process. I keep the writing practice parallel to the writing of this thesis, and although the included entries do not mention or reference the research, my process is indubitably implicated. The reading practice takes a more involved part in the research-creation. Although it could be argued that in reading, I am not creating anything new, it has become apparent to me that shifting the type of reading I am engaging in can be fertile in the same ways that writing can be. Seeing reading as part of the practice allows for such a conclusion, as making sense of one's experiences happens in the antecedent processes of interpretation. Lejeune posits rereading one's own diary as an opening of a dialogue with the self. Reading the diary becomes a process of listening to the self, of engaging with one's own material in a different



moment, and in doing so becoming affected and affecting that self in question. He states, “Yes, there is a tragic sweetness to rereading one’s old diaries. And it is a real dialogue. From the bottom of my past I am listening to someone; and I feel something working its effects on us, him and me.” (Lejeune, p.326).

That thing that affects is not tangible, and yet it is felt. Writing in the diary always necessitates the remnant text, which offers itself up to be read. In the moment of reading, I activate the scene of writing from which the text is born. I reflect and interpret, but in doing so simultaneously recreate and reconstruct the narrative in the postliminary. Thinking through affect means that I am informed by and employ the conceptual tools used by affect theorists, but it also requires that I recognize how the reading brings about new affective encounters. As I am using the reading analytically, as research, I am mindful that the affects that may arise will be different to those that arise in a reading that is private (not implicated in research) The practice of reading here is both an engagement with myself, and an act of research. It marks an emergence of a new kind of reading, that will ultimately have affect on how I read my diary entries from here on out (Truman, 2022, pp.16-17). In this moment, a new scene of meaning-making is in process, and I believe that this scene harbors the potential for new interactions to take place within the diary space.

I have developed a particular affinity to Berlant, as well as Ahmed, as the ways in which they theorize experiential affects and their manifestations in the everyday have particularly spoken to me. Affect theory conceives and theorizes the world as being made up of interrelated forces and intensities that circulate and encounter -and in that process, affect- each other. Affects are entangled in our experiences, attaching themselves to us in ways that are felt and yet may not be easily articulated (Gregg, 2010, pp.1-2). Thinking through affect theory, I recognize that what I call my experience, and thus what I conceive to be my life, is colored by the various affects that occupy my everyday. This recognition is what prompts me to engage with my writing by situating my experience in the affective. My diary, as a space where I have written down this supposed experience, becomes both a source and tool for this engagement.

## **Narratives of Experience**

It has become almost instinctual for me to try and narrate my life, to make a coherent story out of it. At times this doesn't follow through because there is too much intensity around. I am in a certain mood, I am flustered, and I don't feel like writing, but I do because I feel like I must put my thoughts down. In these moments, when my narrative is swayed and transformed by the affects present during the scene of writing, I must perhaps embrace the discontinuity and incoherence.

Berlant argues that "The point here is that narrative constructions of identity should not be seen as normal, but as one way among many to understand events in terms of some kind of identification." (Poletti & Rak, 2014, p.18). Yet most life-writing takes a narrative form. Life-writing has attempted to group different outcomes of people narrating their experience together. Scholars of life-writing, mainly Smith and Watson (2001), who are leading figures in the field, have found the genre to have a less particular delineation than previous frameworks for reading autobiographical acts (p.2). Rejecting practices that fix the narrativization of a life to a particular mode of interpretation, such as readings of life narratives that regard experience as coherent as long as it follows the trajectory outlined by western canonical approaches, Smith and Watson sketch out an alternative understanding of writing from the self that is informed by postmodern and postcolonial theories (Smith & Watson, 2001, pp.3-4). Grouping various writings of experience under the classification of life-writing establishes an overarching framework for the analysis of life-narratives. Life-writing is a way of interpreting life narratives or other forms of self-referential writing, that considers both the experience and the writing of that experience as part of the process. This act of interpretation relies on following specific interpretive patterns or rules, and although Smith and Watson (2001) refrain from identifying life-writing as a specific genre or form, they readily sketch out a lens from which autobiographical acts of writing can be analyzed (p.14). As the autobiographical act originates from the relaying of a particular experience through writing, the framework from which that experience is read will undoubtedly influence its interpretation. Smith and Watson question the situatedness and instability of the notion, pointing to how one's experience cannot be



held separate from an “interpretation of the past and of our place in a culturally and historically specific present” (Smith & Watson, 2001, p.24). They invoke how experience relies on discursive schema, and thus how acts of autobiographical writing -of life-narrative-, are in many ways entangled with ways of sense-making that are produced historically and culturally, as well as personally (pp.25-27). Further, they outline that references to an “I” are always in process. Writing from that “I” is not a process of sketching out an ontology, as the “I” which experiences arise from and continues to change through its diverse encounters (pp.33-34). Life-writing attempts to read the “I” as being in process, as “a subject, a moving target, which provisionally conjoins memory, identity, experience, relationality, embodiment, affect, and limited agency.” (Smith & Watson, 2001, p.71). Imagining identity as a “moving target” creates the notion that identity can never be fully realized. It exists in one way at one moment and is transformed through an encounter in the next. Hailing affect theorists’ dealings with the questions of identity and Butler’s theory of performativity, acts of narrativizing the self are conceived as “performative—as enacting or constructing the life through the act of “life writing”—rather than expressive—as describing “a life” that exists prior to the performative act of writing about it.” (Fournier, 2018, p.643). The diary space gives rise to acts of placing the “I” in a particular narrative.

Echoing Smith and Watson, Kadar (1992) visualizes life-writing as “a way of looking at more or less autobiographical literature as long as we understand that 'autobiographical' is a loaded word, the 'real' accuracy of which cannot be proved and does not equate with either 'objective' or 'subjective' truth (p.10). Her observations resonate with how the diary as a space affords narration without rigid continuity, and yet in one way or another, still relies on the narrativization of experience in attempts to make sense of it. “In autobiographical acts, narrators become readers of their experiential histories, bringing discursive schema that is culturally available to them to bear on what has happened.” (Smith, Watson, 2001, p.27). The diary practice necessitates my becoming as a narrator (writer) and a reader. I perform both processes (narrativization/writing and interpretation/reading) with a tendency to narrate in order to cohere. In *Composing a Life*, Mary Catherine Bateson (2001) focuses on how people make sense of their experiences by

placing them within a narrative. People compose their lives, she argues, through a continuous process of reimagining the future and reinterpreting the past, to cohere the present (pp.63-64). Both the practice of writing and reading in the diary necessitate the narrativization of experiential histories. Attentive to Sylvia Wynter's proposal for practices of storying the human, I approach both the writing and reading as powerful tools for sense-making which bring about the construction of particular stories. Echoing Bateson, Wynter argues that "...we're materially shaping the world and ourselves..." whilst narrating (Truman, 2022, pp.5-6).

Yet, this shaping does not happen purely through discursive narrative, as experience is entangled in feelings that elude description, things that are not intelligible and yet may show themselves in the narrative in some other way. "Every day, all day long, the material universe affects us, literally as well as discursively." (Smith & Watson, 2001, p.25. When I say I don't feel like writing because I'm in a particular mood, I am recognizing that there is something at play there which cannot be represented in the same way as more tangible experiences. In *Who Needs Identity?*, Hall (2011) argues that "They (identities) arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the 'suturing into the story' through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatic field." (p.4). Hall identifies that alongside the discursive, there are imaginary origins of a narrativized identity. External affects are always implicated in what we seek to (re)present through writing. I am attentive to Smith and Watson's (2001) conception of "sites of storytelling". They "Think of sites as both occasional, that is, specific to an occasion, and locational, that is, emergent in a specific "mise-en-scène" or context of narration." (p.56). Sites can be understood as the situations that both engender and influence the narration of the self. Sites dictate if and how an autobiographical act will come about. They always imply a specific mise-en-scène, a particular arrangement and structure of the occasion -in its aesthetic and discursive dimensions- which situates the context of narration (pp.56-57). They are also locational, implying a geographical and



temporal place that the narration can be traced to. This place is filled with affects, that manifest momentarily in the encounter, as well as in the subsequent expectations that rise from that encounter. Thus, affects are implicated both in the present and in the fantasies of the future. I now look at how these affects have been heretofore theorized, investigating their usage as conceptual tools.

### **Conceptual Tools- Berlant's Scene and Genre**

"In Berlant's formulation, genre is how we organise the heterogeneity of sensation and experience so that we can each have a day and manage its demands and intensities and drabness in a way that retains a sense of meaningfulness and continuity, as well as a balance between cruising along and exploring what might be possible." (Duschinsky & Wilson, 2014, p.180).

To be able to tell a story from a site, the person writing -and thus narrativizing- must situate themselves and recognize themselves as being within the situation. This entails a reception of the conventions of a site: what one expects the particular arrangements of that site to look and feel like, what is deemed an acceptable encounter in that site, what kind of narratives emerge from that site and so on and so forth.

If we are to understand personal narrative as instrumental in making sense of experiences and encounters, it is expected that the narrativization will follow dominant modes of understanding and interpreting reality (Richerme, 2021, p.134). Berlant imagines the everyday as a play of affects, where emergent forces in the ordinary exist on several planes of interpretation (Duschinsky & Wilson, 2014, p.179). Although affects elude conventional forms of articulation, Berlant observes how we tend to organize them in attempts to manage and retain our sense of meaning (p.180).

Berlant is attentive to the nuances of narrativization, seeing it as something which emerges not only in writing, but something we -mostly unknowingly- engage in during our affective encounters. She employs the concept of the scene and genre, terms that arguably allude to narrative formations, as tools that can be utilized in interpreting the affective dimensions of everyday life (Duschinsky & Wilson, 2014, p.179). Her conceptions are attentive to the discursive as well as the fantasmic and imaginary.

She theorizes the every day as a jumble of scenes, where one is in constant relation with and is ultimately changed through encounters with disparate affects (p.180). Recognizing the scene entails recognizing that these affects are at play, that there is something in emergence which is felt but is perhaps not yet tangibly intelligible. How do we put into narrative something that is affective?

Narrativization of an experience or encounter is not a purely descriptive act, but one that is tied to an implicit recognition and subsequent interpretation of affects. We do not just represent scenes as they are, we encounter them through interpretive frameworks we have come to familiarize ourselves with. Berlant makes the case for spending time with a scene in order to make sense of it. We do this unintentionally when encountering scenes where affects feel familiar (Poletti & Rak, 2014, p.270). The tendency to narrativize and cohere experience manifests in the expectations we hold in encountering affects. Lejeune's examination of the diary as a collection of traces where the discontinuity of everyday events is managed via acts of repetition and variation is in line with Berlant. Unknowingly, he is pointing out how in writing in the diary, one is creating a stable narrative that follows and reiterates certain patterns of expectation (Lejeune, 2009, p.24). The concept of the genre addresses these -affective- expectations. Construed as the expectations with which we understand affective encounters. The genre is attuned to variation and modification and always implicates a certain structure and formation of affects. "Genres provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art. "(Berlant, 2011, p.6). Since affect is involved in all experiential happenings, genres invariably establish themselves in the narratives we write/create from those experiences. We can take the genre to be a cluster of promises that we become emotionally invested in (Duchsinky & Wilson, 2014, p.127). The investment prompts our expectations to follow patterns pertaining to interpretation. Further, genres can crystallize through their proliferation, and in the process, come to organize conventions (p.179). When we become invested in genres, we reproduce and reiterate their conventions in the narrative forms we ascribe to our experience (Berlant, 2011, p.4). For example, femininity framed as a genre "is a structure of conventional expectation that people rely on to provide certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances." (Berlant, 2008, p.4). Performing femininity entails mimicking genre conventions while producing variations within.



Each individual performance or scene of femininity is thus a performance of an intelligible genre (Berlant, 2011, p.4). Richerme (2021) contends that we place experience in narratives by referring to overarching societal structures as well as expected structures of a plotline (p.135). Her explanation draws on Bruner's (1990) observations, primarily on how we derive meaning from and identify ourselves with cultural phenomena through the narrative (p.125). When dealing with events scenes, we do not separate them from each other. Instead, the scenes become components of a larger interpretive structure -already laid out to us-, which we can use to retain coherence. Attitudes, actions, and fantasies all follow genre attachments. Attaching to fantasies, in particular, can bring about an idealization of conventional modes of living (Berlant, 2011, p.2). Fantasies that follow shared genre conventions possess the unique ability to make one feel like they in some way belong and have value (Berlant, 2011, p.6). Thus, in constructing or narrativizing an experience, we may be swayed to frame and interpret our encounters through the conventional genres of living. Our fantasies are not independent of conventions that frame our everyday life. Exploring fantasy -what we desire and dream about attaining- can in fact offer a glimpse into the way we tend to the world in general. Fantasies show themselves most prominently amidst struggles of managing attachments to the world, which we have made sense of through genres of living. In moments where meaning seems threatened or fleeting, fantasies can provide the "necessary" preservation (Duschinsky & Wilson, 2014, p. 181).

The following section of this thesis is a reading of entries from my current diary -which I started in the summer of 2021- informed by affect theory. I engage with the entries by employing the particular conceptual tools I have outlined above. In short, the concepts of the scene and the genre provide me with a new way of reading my own work. I believe this new engagement, which is at once a critical inquiry and a reconfiguration of the diary practice itself, holds the potential to change the way I engage with writing my experience from here on out.

### **Reading My Diary-Cruel Attachments and The Fantasy of Happiness**

“It is a loop: we are directed by what is in front of us; what is in front of us depends on how we are directed.” (Ahmed, 2017, p.126)

Wish I could be content with where I'm at in life, but I feel like I should constantly be pushing myself academically, professionally, and especially socially. The truth is, I'm exhausted, and I don't want to think about these things. Just need some time off at a place where I am not confronted by responsibilities and anxieties. Would be amazing to read in a small house in a Turkish village, away from the world. I want to quit my job and stop with schoolwork. I'm also so lonely, there are so many mental blocks I've put up that prevent me from talking to people without overthinking what I've said or trying to seem likeable. I wish I wasn't so down all the time, I feel like everything I've written here ends up sounding depressing. Wish my mind would just empty out for just a bit, or a long while. I could then fill it with only positive thoughts, a good attitude, no anxieties. I have a therapist appointment on Tuesday, hope it goes well so I can at least feel like I'm helping myself in some way. Gone are the days when my mum brought me linden tea and fruits. My roommates are laughing and I'm in my room sulking. Things will be better soon I need to promise myself that. Otherwise, I'm going to feel hopeless for a long while.

*16 February 2022*

Reading the above entry, I notice patterns of attachment that are exemplary of a relation of cruel optimism. Berlant (2011) terms cruel optimism as a way of relating to things we desire, in which the very condition of attachment to that thing becomes an obstacle to one's flourishing (p.1). We attach ourselves with optimism to certain objects and scenes, subsequently investing ourselves in the affective promises we have ascribed to that object/scene (p.23). Objects are not purely material, they are anything we can attach ourselves to, be it ambitions, gestures, values, practices...(Ahmed, 2010, p.30). Both the object and the scene play a role in how we construct the world around us -what we keep close, what we invest our energy in- based on what we desire. Fantasies help in the maintenance of investment in the object/scene, as the

promise of what is to be attained becomes enough to keep us holding onto our attachments. One of the first patterns that jump out to me in reading my entries is the frequent use of expressions that ultimately point to the future. The future-orientedness is ubiquitous throughout my diary, although the scene of writing is momentous, what is addressed always seems to be directed at things yet to come into being. The diary text is riddled with I wishes, I wants and I hopes, as well as positive manifestations about things yet to come. Cruel attachments breed constant anticipation, where the narrativization -of my life and experience- follows a process of becoming, yet never fully becomes. I am doomed to never arrive at the destination I invoke in fantasy. The first sentence serves as a summary of the cruel irony present in the rest of the entry:

“Wish I could be content with where I’m at in life.”.

Contentment is a state of satisfaction and fulfilment. I am wishing for contentment, affirming that I am neither satisfied nor fulfilled. When I wish, I am further maintaining my attachments to the promise of contentment, and yet the act of wishing itself implies discontent. The entry is indicative of how one can come to advance problematic attachments. Ahmed comments on how the notion of happiness can conjure up its own wish. We may not know what we precisely want when we wish for happiness, but we wish, nonetheless. The continuation of the wish is sustained through its failure of attainability (Ahmed, 2010, p.1). What I mean when I say I want to be content or happy is not important -what these notions mean to me tends to change with time-. Happiness can remain undefined, and still exist as a scene of desire that I ultimately attach myself to (Ahmed, 2010, p.2). Ahmed contends that the expectations we hold for happiness shape our vision of the future. Attaching ourselves to the promise of a happy future, we believe that there is a certain path that will get us to where we wish to be. Ahmed points out that this imaginary place -of happiness- acquires its value via its status of “not being here yet”. My attachments to the fantasy of a happy life in the future manifest as an ongoing project of living and constructing my life in the present. In hoping to get to that place, I organize my life “here” in the image of the “there”. Consequently, happiness shapes my present to become a forward narrative, constantly oriented towards the future (Ahmed, 2010, p.33). When that future never comes into being, happiness is experienced as a

site and scene of disappointment (p.30). I recognize that feeling of disappointment when what was promised never arrives. Berlant terms attachments to such disappointing fantasies as a “stupid” form of optimism. That “the faith that adjustment to certain forms or practices of living and thinking will secure one’s happiness”. (Ahmed, 2010, p.11).

Made myself some earl grey tea with lemon and ginger. Trying to feel grounded and happy in my current situation. I’ve been spending a lot of money recently which prompts me to worry about my future. If I can’t keep track of how much I spend now, will I ever be able to when I really need to? My privileges have caught up to me and I’m left feeling like an ungrateful rich girl who has always depended on others. At times I think I’m being too harsh on myself. This year I also want to work on self-love. I really do love the person I am becoming, even if at times I tell myself otherwise. I need to take care of myself more, make myself more earl grey tea with lemon and ginger.

*2 September 2021*

I quit my job this week. Feel like a huge weight has been lifted but the lightness is accompanied by a fear of intensified emptiness. Not that my job was fulfilling me in the slightest. But I need to find something to do in this newly acquired free time that is worthwhile. I don’t want to use this time feeling bad about my current reality. Making more art or writing more or reading or even taking walks. I was supposed to go to a bar for a performance today but I cancelled. Felt a bit flaky but I don’t care. I’m home alone, playing music from my phone because it sounds more real. Feeling bad about my body and eating habits. Want to work out and drink green smoothies. I need to love myself, but I don’t know how. Would love it if it was summer and I liked my body and I had an amaretto sour by the beach in the shade. Or at a porch overlooking the sea.

*26 February 2022*



When acts become things (objects/scenes) I desire and chase because I hold the belief that they will be instrumental in securing happiness, my attachments to them become cruel and inhibiting. I observe that most of my attachments mirror this crueler form of optimism. My desires to be happy, and my investments in things I believe will get me to happiness trap me in a cycle of self-betterment. Notions of self-love and self-care become toxic ideals, which in their very promise of reachability, become unreachable.

“Happiness becomes, then, a way of maximizing your potential of getting what you want, as well as being what you want to get.” (Ahmed, 2010, p.10)

The scene of writing becomes an affordance to the construction and subsequent performance of an “I” that holds the potential to actualize the image of itself in fantasy. In other words, the act of affirming a particular future to myself in writing, allows me to hold onto the promise that that future is palpable. The I hopes, I wants, I wishes are cruelly affirmative. Although my ideas of what a happy life entails may not entirely fit with the so-called genre of a “good life” that Berlant outlines in her book, I notice the emergence of my own variation of a good-life fantasy when reading my entries. Berlant identifies the good life as a moral-intimate-economic project, harboring an amalgamation of fantasies pertaining to family, politics, love, work, and identity... (Berlant, 2011, p.2). The good-life genre is a mix of conventionalized ways of living and interpreting.

“Would love if it was summer and I liked my body and I had an amaretto sour by the beach in the shade. Or at a porch overlooking the sea.”

Pronouncements of wanting to be away from responsibilities, of relaxation, of an ideal summer or a good relationship with yourself are all manifestations of a fantasy of comfort and security. A life where the precarity of the present does not bear upon me with such force (Berlant, 2011, p.11). Where the subsequent feelings of anxiety and exhaustion bred in my present reality are non-existent. These fantasies reflect an idealized good life that I formulate as a genre of happiness.

Happiness here comes to take an emotional, aesthetic, and political form. It is a feeling/emotion I wish to feel, a certain affective arrangement of the future I wish to experience, and the wish for a life void of neoliberal capital and state pressures (Berlant, 2011, p.3).

The boundaries of genres are porous. They allow for the cultivation of both particularity and unanimity. In other words, in attaching to the genre of a good-life, I am attaching to an intimate curation of my own desires, that are also always in convergence with larger structures of convention, of wanting to belong (Berlant, 2008, p.4).

It's my birthday tomorrow. I haven't written in here since I went to Turkey for a week and a water bottle leaked into my bag which got this book wet. I really need tomorrow to be a good day. I don't want to force it or get anxious over it but I feel like if I turn 21 on a positive note, it'll be a good year for me. I feel like I deserve the best. I need to care for myself more I think 21 is a good age to start doing that. I'm currently feeling a bit sick, sort of have a cold which I'm hoping will be better when I wake up tomorrow. Self-love starts with cutting yourself some slack. I think I've been pretty bad with that up until now, but I think I possess the ability to do it. I feel like what I write on here is bullshit sometimes. I want to write other things but I end up writing about how I should cut myself some slack. It all just sounds fake and conventional self-love stuff haha. What I really really want is to accept myself as I am and not care about how other people might see me. Even when I think I don't care I do. I don't want to do that when I'm 21. I want 21 to be the age where I don't pity myself. I want it to be the age where I do what I want because I want to, not to think too much about outcomes. Be mindful but think less. I want to discuss this in therapy. I want to grow a lot this year and love and go crazy and sometimes do stupid things but not care in the end. I want to get out of my comfort zones but without the overbearing anxiety that comes with it. I want to be impulsive but also know my boundaries. more self-care and respect.

*19 April 2022*

The entry before my birthday is exemplary. Turning twenty-one signals an advancement -and commencement- on the path to happiness. It implies proximity to whatever good-life I envision, if only I would take the necessary steps in following its path. I mention a variety of personal goals that in fact echo many of the contemporary methods and practices of happiness attainment (Ahmed, 2010 p.3). I even reflect on how customary it all sounds in that very same entry.

“I feel like what I write on here is bullshit sometimes. I want to write other things but I end up writing about how I should cut myself some slack. It all just sounds fake and conventional self-love stuff haha.”

I am in, as Berlant calls it, in a situation of profound threat (Berlant, 2011, p.2). Yet in the way I narrate my life, this condition is experienced in a less overtly hostile, less intense form. Again, in Berlant’s words, “our cruel objects don’t seem threatening, just tiring.” (p.31). In many scenes, I express exhaustion or a sense of restlessness and anxiety which seems to occupy my brain. The cruelty of my optimism is manifest in affects experienced as negative. I try to make sense of these affects by writing them down in particular ways.

“I’ve been spending a lot of money recently which prompts me to worry about my future.”

“Just like any time my life moves in an ambiguous direction, I am anxious.”

I interpret negative affects in a causal chain that supplies relative coherence to my experience. My “worries” fitted into a nice story where bundles of affects are packaged into particular emotions, ready to be narrativized (Ngai, 2005, p. 27). Even the scene of disappointment must fit expectations so that in encountering it, I know exactly what I am dealing with.

I’m back in the Netherlands. I have a new room which I am desperately trying to make homely, and will (in a few weeks’ time) have a house full of new roommates. Just like any time my life moves in an ambiguous direction, I am anxious. I want this year to be a good one. One where I spend less time thinking about and obsessing over trivial things in my

life. I don't want to care about what I look like when I'm walking down the street or if I sound stupid in class. I could write about many things that scare me like this but it's unnecessary, I already know anyway. I keep telling myself to care less, but when the time comes, I forget (or just can't think). Coming back from Istanbul I found myself searching for a safety zone. A place I could go to if things got too much. I'm going to attempt to stick to a certain routine this year, writing that down here is my first step- I'm affirming it. I don't want it to be a very strict routine where I stress myself out because I'm not sticking to it. I just want to feel sort of in control.

*29 August 2021*

Realized that I'm constantly trying to reach a (perhaps) unreachable ideal of myself that I've constructed based on specific people I see online and in real life. I'm constantly chasing things. I want to be better at that, I want to own this, I want to read more, I want to be more socially capable etc. I'm so not content with who I am even though I like to believe so. Maybe I'm more confident than before but I'm still not content. Maybe it's social media and comparison. Was doing yoga and kept on overthinking. Yoga is about being in the moment. I feel like I can't do that.

*14 October 2021*

Throughout my diary entries, expression of emotion is prolific, yet many times, the affects that so profoundly affect me go unmentioned or unrecognized. Unlike affects, which flow freely, eluding ascription of meaning, emotions in their very form require a certain structure and narrative from which they can attain meaning. We could say that emotions are captured by the genres we attach to, a way to give a name to the affective intensities we attach ourselves to (Ngai, 2005, pp.25-26). Emotions belong to us, by that, I mean that the "I" is the one who feels "this" or "that". When I express I am feeling ecstatic for example, I am attempting to articulate the messy jumble of various affects brought on by a scene of unpredictability, by capturing and grouping them as "ecstasy". I ascribe intention to what I cannot make

sense of by expressing it as emotion, fixing it in a more sociolinguistically coherent content (Ngai, 2005, p.27). Genre and emotion then, follow a similar logic of convention. Both entail a way of attaching oneself to something as the subject, the “I” of a specific scene, to make sense of it. So, when I express emotion in my diary, I am still bound to the same need to narrate affective encounters based on previous genre attachments (Ahmed, 2010, pp.8-9).

Moreover, the need to articulate the affective via emotions further crystallizes these attachments. Emotions that are specifically associated with negative affective states such as anxiety or irritation play a part in sustaining the promise and appeal of states such as happiness. What I express is that I am expecting to be in the moment, when all I ever do in writing is orient myself more towards fantasies of the future. I am as Ahmed would term it, not in flow. Self-classified as an “unhappy subject”, I chase what I do not have, and in the process limit my possibilities of experiencing the affects of scenes that make up my everyday (Ahmed, 2010, p.11). The way I utilize writing in the diary, is just another way of reiterating my attachments to the genre of a happy life. Each entry feels like a further crystallization of these cruel attachments.

### **Concluding: The Diary Space as a Transformational Environment**

The optimistic attachments of mine are comfortably cruel. They tire me out and yet I hold onto them with an intense possessiveness. Prolonged attachments end up constructing a false sense of continuity, or an attachment to the idea of continuity. The fantasy of happiness and the imaginary conception of a life that is good manifest as an underlying grammar and evolving aesthetic of my writing (Bateson, 2001, p.23). It is difficult to recognize this potentially toxic form my writing can take. It is difficult and yet I see the value in it, as it is an outcome of the kind of reading that I undertake.

The reading of the entries is exemplary of a practice where “thinking through affect”, but also with it are used to engage with the self. I welcome this reading, embracing the changes it may instigate in the ways I narrate my experience. As I mentioned before, the practice of the diary is a combination of the writing and the reading processes. Both processes bring about certain scenes of encounter which reflexively affect each other. In changing how I read, I may instigate a change in how I write. The diary space ultimately



becomes what Berlant would call a transformational environment, instigating change in those who interact with it. It is “an environment that enables people to unlearn things and learn things...” (Poletti & Rak, 2014, p.262). Rethinking the ways I use the diary space; I more readily open myself to radically different forms of attachments.

I see my project as research-creation because, by way of analysis, I am concurrently outlining this new form of reading. Thus, the analysis is not a purely personal project, but one that is valuable for imagining new ways we can engage with ourselves, simultaneously rethinking the way we narrate and interpret our experience. I suggest a “making peace with” the mess of affects that the scenes of everyday life ostensibly become (Berlant, 2014, p.64). As Berlant highlights, the narrative arc of some scenes are unintelligible. They cannot easily be fitted into a genre (Poletti & Rak, 2014, p.268) and the available genres of identification can at times be reductive in scenes where this unintelligibility pervades (Berlant & Prosser, 2011, p.187). In the moment of writing in these kinds of scenes, the tendency may be to turn to genres we are familiar with to retain some sense of the situation. The type of reading I have practiced here can allow for a resituating of these moments of attachment, potentially imagining new genres of experience (Berlant, 2014, p.ix). My engagements with my writing through the subsequent reading allow me to create a space within the diary where new ways of narration can arise thereafter. “Shouldn't life writing be a primary laboratory for theorizing 'the event?'" (Berlant & Prosser, 2011, p.181) asks Berlant. Her inquiry echoes my own: How does the diary function as a space of potential for both maintaining and countering ways of attaching to and performing the genres of everyday life?

The diary space harbors a transformational environment within. The way one practices writing experience and reading its vestigial narrative are subject to change. In the process of writing this thesis, I have readily become aware of my attachments to conventional genres of the everyday. The emergent narrative in my diary reflects these attachments, but the reading I practice offers hope that they are not set in stone. I find that the countering of these conventional genres then, happens first in the reading. “Self-knowledge is empowering.” Bateson argues (Bateson, 2001, p.27). I realize that the ways of situating this

self-knowledge are decisive. The practices of interacting with that space is what fundamentally determines how empowering we experience the self-knowledge to be.

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