

Ultrasound and the Essay

Scott Ferguson

To each of us, through our own particular history, has been given the potential for participating in a unique series of disclosures: the capacity to bring certain creatures and certain things into the brilliance of a more-than-reality. This potential is not so much a talent as a responsibility. When we fail to realize it, we are bottomlessly guilty.

—Kaja Silverman¹

Rachel Reynolds's *Ultrasound*² is a haunting audio collage about pregnancy and the complex forms of "expecting" its embodiment implies. Moving through family interviews, first-person reflections, and an autumnal pop song, *Ultrasound* evokes what gets called "experimental autobiography" in literary circles or "auto-ethnography" in the social and human sciences. Yet Reynolds's extraordinary work belongs to still another mode of self-writing, the *essayistic* mode, a form with which she first became acquainted in my course "Trials of the Self: The Essay and Autobiography."

Far from the impersonal expository writing known to students today, the essay, as I teach it, traces a circuitous history that is at once critical, imaginative, and infused with subjectivity. From the French verb *essayer*, meaning to try, attempt, or test, "essai" was coined by Michel de Montaigne in late sixteenth-century France to describe his unprecedented series of short and obliquely structured meditations on such varied matters as experience, education, monstrosity, and death. With this, Montaigne not only gave life to a new literary and, later, audio-visual form, but also disclosed a distinctly modern sense of selfhood, envisioned not as some fixed and known entity, but as an on-going experiment, or *trial*, whose locus and significance become graspable only insofar as they are put into question. More important, Montaigne saw the essay as "consubstantial" with the essayist and positioned the medium of writing as the self's bewildering social grounds.

My course on the essay is deliberately heteroclitic and unapologetically singular. Exploring literary and visual works by Virginia Woolf, Frantz Fanon, Roland Barthes, Chris Marker, and Patricio Guzman, among others, it plunges students into a multi-

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¹ Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 48.

² Listen to *Ultrasound* at <http://liminalities.net/9-4/ultrasound.mp3>

faceted and multimedia history, treated not as a series of representations, but as immanent sites of encounter. Implicitly, the class works in critical opposition to essayist Phillip Lopate's anthologization of the so-called "personal essay," which not only reduces Montaignean auto-recording to humanist self-expression, but also maintains neat oppositions between internal and external, self and collective, through appeals to stylistic idiosyncrasy and "honest" communication.³ The key philosopher of the modernist essay, Theodor Adorno, would likely condemn Lopate's humanism for its totalizing rationality: its tendency to subordinate objective opacity to personal nuance and transform subjective revelation into an exchangeable commodity.⁴ Since Adorno's time, however, digital neoliberalism has swapped technocratic domination for public divestment and flexible networking, and this political-economic shift requires one to complicate such modernist rejoinders.

While a faithful modernist might still mobilize the essay's befuddling substance to break up Lopate's authorial ego, the age of liquid capital and the precarious flex-worker directs the present essayist to the form's radical *thrownness*. This thrownness—to appropriate (and transvalue) a term from Martin Heidegger—demands that the essayist treat singular trials as collective aporias and inscribe these difficulties in the essay's recalcitrant relationality.⁵ If the modernist primarily set the essay's formal unruliness against liberal capitalism's claims to rational mastery, it is, I argue, the contemporary essayist's aesthetic duty to gum up neoliberal logics of "plasticity" and deposit subjectivity back in the polity that has placed it perpetually "at risk." The critical wager, here, is not to flatly blame or negate a domineering neoliberal other but to fashion scenes of affective resonance and shared responsibility that portend more just forms of getting along. Such are the stakes my course: to give a generation of increasingly unprotected and indebted students the means for inhabiting subjective strifes as social riddles. The real trick, however, is to demonstrate these stakes concretely for students and help them turn past instances toward novel compositions.

To this end, my syllabus guides students through an alternative genealogy of essayistic writing, keyed to radical experiments in thrownness. I stress the radical character of thrownness to differentiate the course's aims from what historians of the essay such as Graham Good have described as the mode's inherent "situatedness."⁶ In such accounts, situatedness suggests the essay's embedded implication in contingent con-

³ See Phillip Lopate, "Introduction," *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, ed. Phillip Lopate (Anchor Press: Norwell, MA, 1997). For Lopate's humanist approach to the essay film, see "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film," *Beyond Document: Essays on Non-Fiction Film*, Ed. Charles Warren (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 243 – 270.

⁴ See T. W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," *Notes to Literature: Volume 1*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholson (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991), 3 – 23.

⁵ For more on "thrownness," see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1962), 219 - 224.

⁶ See Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (Florence, KY: Routledge Press, 1988).

texts and its reflexive use of inherited forms. This immanent situatedness is surely indispensable for the essayist, but thrownness, as I understand it, goes further. With this term, I wish to uncover the essayist's counter-intuitive and rather unnerving impulse to deliver subjectivity almost entirely over to forces of domination and objects of scorn.

If situatedness is akin to a submarine trek through treacherous waters, thrownness is a topsy-turvy skin dive into the same overwhelming currents. For the essayist, I contend, thrownness implies a resolute submission to one's antithesis: commonly, a source of unfreedom and resentment that conditions present injustices. In addition to forestalling short-term solutions and polarizing critiques, the result proves the impossibility of complete identification between subject and object and exposes the shared enigmas upon which power secretly turns. Paradoxically, then, it is the essayist's harrowing submission to his or her antithesis that demonstrates the limits of the thwarting object and clears a path for more heterogeneous relations to emerge.

In the wake of this "clearing"—to borrow another term from Heidegger—the essayist is freed to proffer the agonies and ecstasies that emerge during the thrown encounter as relational openings in their own rights. Thus rather than flood these fields with positivist nuances or instant solutions, essayist meets reader through the text's disquieting vibrations and these, in turn, augur new relations into being. Thrownness, in other words, names the essay's *absolute immanence*: not the superabundant "univocity of Being" celebrated by Spinozists such as Gilles Deleuze and his followers, but a *radical inclusivity* that singularizes historical injustice and makes everyone feel culpable for the mysterious wreckage. Beyond mere situatedness, then, thrownness requires an impassioned relinquishing of subjecthood into the arms of the collective, which insists upon dragging all parties into its drama and leaving no participant as they were.

Montaigne first introduced essayistic thrownness in his well-known but still inadequately understood meditations on death.⁷ In the course of these meditations, the nobleman shuttles anxiously between at least five different relations to mortality: a morbid fear of death and its worldly harbingers; a critique of European society's fearful refusals of death; a recognition that death is not opposed to life, but rather, constitutes its inner condition; a self-imposed imperative, inspired by Cicero, to "frequent death" and "learn how to die"; and, finally, a joyful embrace of dying and a reveling in death's many-splendored manifestations. Yet Montaigne's brushes with death comprise neither a holier-than-thou social critique nor a tidy story of Dionysian overcoming. Instead, Montaigne gives himself over to the collective he censures and positions his fitful essaying as a decidedly communal undertaking. Thrownness therefore operates in two registers at once in the Montaigne's essay: first, in its approach dying and, second, in its relationship to community.

⁷ See Michel de Montaigne, "To Philosophize is to Learn How to Die," *Michel de Montaigne: The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 89 – 108.

The truth is that, despite Montaigne's newfound taste for the macabre, his essay on death equivocates and despairs until its bitter end. This not only implicitly aligns Montaigne with the community he chastises, but also gives his singular fears of mortality a profoundly social character. Montaigne will repeatedly criticize those who "flee" death but his text finds subtle ways to suggest that its most wanted fugitive is the author himself. Montaigne then proffers essayistic writing as a novel way to commune around the enigma of dying. Influenced by the ancient Egyptian practice of displaying skeletal remains at celebratory feasts, the text beckons readers to delight in a host of ghastly figures while at the same time foregrounding how horrifying Montaigne believes such encounters can be. The transformative irreducibility of this gesture owes much to the essay's "processual" nature, the dynamic poetics that commentators from Georg Lukács to Réda Bensmaïa have regularly applauded. More pointedly, however, the essay's transformative potential lies in the vacillating affections that text and reader share during their varied plummets into the dreaded object, which is to also say, in the unheard-of filiations every thrown encounter stirs anew.

It is chiefly through more contemporary experiments with thrownness that my students learn the art of transmuting individual woes into common responsibilities. In this, Fanon's early essays are instructive. In "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," for instance—a now widely read chapter from *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)—Fanon begins with the devastating realization that reasoned critiques of racist and colonial ideologies have little purchase on everyday relations in mid-century France, even for those who most vociferously espouse them. Much has been made of the text's insights into racial objectification, including both the deep asymmetries endemic to European thought and perception and the feelings of inferiority that structure racialized minds and bodies across colonial and post-colonial regimes. Far less discussed, however, are the text's daring stylistics and the essayistic wager at their heart. While, in later works, Fanon appeals to revolutionary violence as a way of imagining the post-colonial psyche on fresh ontological grounds, the Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks* employs disruption, fragmentation, and an ambiguous free-and-indirect voice not merely to dramatize the impossibility of such an ontology, but also to conjure an experience of sublime subjectification whose fledgling consistency is purposefully left to the reader to render coherent. "I lose my temper, demand an explanation," writes Fanon, establishing the stymied rhythm that structures his work. "Nothing doing. I explode. Here are the fragments put together by another me."⁸ Flailing between a panoply of unbearable positions, a shattered Fanon proffers self-recording as damaged mosaic: a quivering patchwork stitched together by a subject whose uncertain identity oscillates endlessly between essayist and reader.

More astounding, Fanon commits his essay to a kamikaze-like thrownness, which avoids all pretensions to epistemological distance and tumbles headlong into the forces that constrict him. Caught between a bankrupt Western science and essentializing

⁸ Frantz Fanon, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2008), 89.

négritude poetics, Fanon pursues each horizon to the *n*th degree and shares the resulting paroxysms with the collectives that helped create them. In response to racist biology, for example, Fanon does the unimaginable: he assumes the role of an evolutionary bottom-feeder and welcomes everyone to witness the spectacle. At an instant, he becomes an insect and begins furtively researching odd relations he senses between words and objects. “I slip into corners,” Fanon writes, “my long antenna encountering the various axioms on the surface of things.”⁹ Later, he regresses to an amoeboid state but does so neither to immediately protest evolutionary racism nor solely to ironize its ridiculous premises. More perversely, Fanon turns primordial in order to claim his own becoming and yank everyone into the disorienting violence of the gesture. Or, as he explains with characteristic elegance and cunning: “Little by little, putting out pseudopodia, I secreted a race.”¹⁰

Unlike in his rapport with racist science, Fanon explicitly yearns for the virile selfhood promised by *négritude* aesthetics and their affirmative myths of racial origin. Still, as with his approach to evolutionary thought, Fanon pursues a confounding strategy. He indulges his desire for *négritude* solidarity, letting himself be possessed by the movement’s identitarian cosmogony and aggressive erotics for pages on end. In the process, however, Fanon has us feel the strain of his mimetic cravings and, with it, the unrealizability of *négritude*’s wish for diasporic unity. “Eya!” roars the doctor and philosopher, grasping at what are by now admittedly distant African roots. Riding the knife’s edge that separates every act of saying from the said, he exclaims,

The drums jabber out the cosmic message. Only the black man is capable of conveying it, of deciphering its meaning and impact. Astride the world, my heels digging into its flanks, I rub the neck of the world like the high-priest rubbing between the eyes of his sacrificial victim.¹¹

Students giggle nervously when asked to read such passages aloud. Yet in doing so, I assure them, they have already begun to implicate themselves in the unruly quiverings Fanon’s thrownness invites. In the end, the text leaves the displaced Martiniquais dispossessed and weeping. But the essay’s real salutatory openings appear along the way, as its author turns discomfiting encounters into differentially shared affections and responsibilities.

This brings me to Reynolds’s *Ultrasound*. In addition to being exquisitely composed, the piece goes further than any other created under the auspices of my course in directing essayistic thrownness toward present griefs. Completed during an otherwise unexceptional pregnancy, *Ultrasound* asks what it means to self-record at a moment when one is *becoming two*. Essayists have long been in the habit of exceeding, as well as falling short of, what counts as self-sameness. From the numerous “Marys”

⁹ Ibid 96.

¹⁰ Ibid 102.

¹¹ Ibid 103.

that populate Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) to the historical lacunae that drive Guzman's *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010), essayistic writing seems fated to interminably miscarry or surpass the discrete personage upon which modern life has been hazardously propped. Be that as it may, *Ultrasound* comes up against the fundamental limits of phenomenological ipseity, since the essay confronts such mysteries "on the most literal and physical level," as Reynolds herself puts it, even if, she immediately adds, her corporeal liminality tends more to "symbolize" her pregnancy than to directly "embody" it.

Given essayism's devout communality, it comes as no surprise that *Ultrasound* involves the whole damn village in its self-questioning. In so doing, it critically intervenes in the contradictory and, ultimately, untenable logic of subjectivization that subtends present neoliberal network society. In contrast to mid-century patriarchy's dreams of middle-class adequation and social security, today's globalized digital capitalism casts subjectivity as a plastic and self-maximizing potential and simultaneously undermines said potential by abandoning its uneven actualizations to competitive markets and private circuits of care. Such logics undergird Silicon Valley, the financial sector, and all things touched by neuroscience as much as Walmartization, school choice programs, and the prison and security industries. Together, these institutions join rhetorics of flexibility and self-realization with extreme forms of neglect and then supplement the fallout with privatized punitive practices.

Nowhere do neoliberalism's reckless divisions between virtual and actual, care and carelessness, coalesce more violently than in the pregnant body. The mother-to-be is not just another plastic and self-sufficient laborer-consumer. Unlike the one million blacks in prison or the million-plus contingent faculty staffing American universities, she is incessantly singled out as a point of social contention and held personally responsible for securing a collective future. For the progressive professional class, she is the savvy guardian of imaginative labor, whereas for the evangelical right, she is the guarantor of moral purity. Yet both sides level impossible demands at the pregnant woman which, with the help of often invasive technologies, sacrifice a messy today for a sterile tomorrow and reduce expecting to a narrow and unjust futurity.

Though neither explicitly nor straightforwardly, *Ultrasound* sidesteps this wanting futurity via a leap into essayistic thrownness. Without warning, the piece's first section releases essayist and listener into a montage of family interviews about the meaning of pregnancy. What emerges is a host of conflicting logics and sentiments concerning the essayist's present condition. "If I didn't define myself for myself," Reynolds momentarily interjects into the stream of utterances, "I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive." Still, in largely withholding her presence from *Ultrasound's* first segment, Reynolds willfully gives herself over to this gnawing other. Meanwhile, she immediately de-substantializes her initial appearance in the essay by attributing the foregoing self-assertion to Caribbean-American poet and civil-rights activist Audre Lorde. We alternately cringe, commiserate, and grin as future grandparents, an uncle, and John, the father-to-be, struggle to grasp the broad significance of human reproduction as well as the particular circumstances of the engrossed twenty-

five-year-old essayist they call family. The upshot is a critique of largely fruitless efforts to stabilize pregnancy's unsettling temporality, but one that, in essayistic fashion, unexpectedly embraces the problematic object in an effort to disclose the common pains of neoliberal carelessness and usher alternative associations to the fore.

The group's ruminations are peppered with genuine expressions of affection and concern, but at the same time, they suggest a fraught socioeconomic backdrop and an unmistakable historical decline. While occasionally articulated outright, this narrative comes through most forcefully in the interviewees' hesitations, redundancies, contradictions, and jokes. We begin, for instance, with the unborn child's baby-boomer grandparents, for whom procreation and family were allegedly always in the cards. After recalling early childhood fantasies as evidence of their predestined parentage, we learn that the boomers' own charmed pregnancies were not only "logical," but also apparently brimming with "ecstatic happiness" and "strawberry milkshakes." Hints of damaged pasts, lingering repressions, and a slew of groundless tautologies undermine this clockwork familialism—not to mention historical insight into the social context within which these pregnancies transpired. Indeed, this time period saw the dismantling of the Keynesian governance that underwrote the grandparents' optimistic coming-of-age stories as well as the middle-class dreams of generational improvement that linger as after-images in their tales of frozen confections. Of Reynolds's contemporary pregnancy, by contrast, these same grandparents are demonstrably less confident. They temper every gesture of love and support for Reynolds with inklings of distrust and worry, indicating—if only unconsciously—not simply the failure of neoliberal governance to secure the popular imagination, but also the social costs of ceding the burdens of collective rearing to private individuals, corporations, and families.

Whereas the future grandparents cathect around Reynolds's fate as student, mother, and worker, John turns overtly to the baby and, in a seemingly spontaneous articulation of neoliberal futurity, positions the child's uncertain destiny as a safeguard against social abandonment. Though John worries about the loss of solitude family life will bring, he also admits that a more powerful dread of long-term isolation outstrips such short-range concerns. "I wanted to have a kid because, then, I felt like I would have a family forever," he confesses. "And if I had a family forever, then I wouldn't be alone." In all this, John's hopeful tone plays against an underlying melancholy and bashfulness that, together, suggest he sees the limits of his reasoning, even if he is presently incapable of imagining otherwise.

A beat later, John underscores the social dimension of his desire for a child and family, when he decides to include his partner in the plan—as if she hadn't been part of his scheme from the start. "And I think there was, like, an element of keeping you, too," he divulges. "Got the kid, so ...," he pauses and lets out an apologetic chuckle, "you're trapped." Listeners are likely to squirm upon hearing these words, but not only because they threaten Reynolds's own claims to autonomy. More crucially, it is because their treatment of heterosexual companionship as a supplement to, rather than as constitutive of, John's familial projections tells us that his fears of abandonment go well beyond the domain of romantic coupling. With this, John points to the

fundamental unreliability of present social organizations to secure the general welfare and frames his family-in-waiting as a personal answer to these structural insufficiencies. Thus in a further twist of neoliberal subjectivization, pregnancy's idealized futurity serves as a private and rather ill-fated solution to what are admittedly communal problems and possibilities.

In *Ultrasound's* second segment, Reynolds's own voice answers her family members' musings and the problematic logics of futurity in which they are enmeshed. Yet it does so neither by denying pregnancy's restless potential nor by wholly dissolving divisions between private and public. Instead, *Ultrasound* implicitly transforms *expecting* into an immanent mode of relationality: a collective form of waiting that refuses neoliberal projections and promises to expand the pregnant body's presently limited significance and scope. "I am pregnant with everyone I know," asserts Reynolds, enfolding a vast social body into her increasingly womb-like essay. "Without acknowledging my temporary origin," she queries her inner multitudes, "how can I exist?"

Expecting takes multiple forms in *Ultrasound*—too many, in fact, to enumerate here. Most significant is the way expecting informs Reynolds's choice of medium. The essayist, I tell my students, should select a recording instrument best suited to their object: one that either shares sensory registers with the object or aesthetically departs from the thing and thereby offers fresh passage through its contours. Opting for the first strategy, one student in my class scribbled her essay on a roll of quilted toilet paper. In an effort to tarry with the alienating effects of life in a sorority house, she found her medium in the only room she could momentarily call her own: the bathroom stall. Choosing the second option, another student transcribed dialogues with Apple Computer's "Siri" about sex, political economy, and media history into prose. He then folded these transcriptions into a written essay preoccupied by the perplexing revelation that his hippy-turned-stockbroker father named him "Michael" (after Michael Douglas) in honor of Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987).

In *Ultrasound*, Reynolds brilliantly combines these two tendencies by referencing a device deeply associated with the pregnant body, but doing so with a medium that turns that device's sensory logics on their head. The piece takes aesthetic inspiration, and its title, from the fetal imaging technology that has, since the 1970s, routinely rendered the unborn sensible. Instead of translating high-frequency vibrations into flickering monochromatic pictures, however, Reynolds's evanescent soundscape forestalls the visualization process to question the medium's idealized imaginings and the sterile futurity it facilitates across medical and nonmedical contexts. With its sonic short-circuiting of visual objectification, *Ultrasound* then exploits the affective and spatial ambiguities of sound and suspends listeners in an uncertain state of expectation attuned to what remains unseen and unheard.

Rather than offer an explicit critique of medical imaging, *Ultrasound* throws us into verbal instantiations of the device's visual logics while the essay's critical fidelity to sound cascades through every register of its construction. During her monologue, for instance, Reynolds proffers the invisible tremblings of voice in place of the ersatz coherence of the spatialized body. "This is a person who feels the constant gaze of those

around her,” she laments, “and yet, at once, suffers a new and profound invisibility as eyes rest on her belly and read a falsely stable identity.” Here, as elsewhere, *Ultrasound* both critiques and transfigures the pretensions of vision through its own auditory appeals.

More meaningful is *Ultrasound*'s response to the manifestly optical rhetoric of futurity John lays out in the first segment. Though neither a developmental neuroscientist nor a pro-life crusader, John nevertheless shares their social desire to reify the virtual object in conspicuously visual terms. As John links this desire to his wish to retain his partner over the long haul, Reynolds's sound editing encourages listeners to connect both of these urges to her partner's greater longing for social security:

I remember being really excited by us making something, just the two of us. There's like a product. Rather than, like, these feelings that we have for each other—feeling a bond between us—there's, like, this visual representation ... of our love.

Ultrasound invites a complex relationship to John's assertions. It relishes their mixture of tenderness, embarrassment, and yearning and puts a great deal of pressure on their logic of futurity: namely, the desire to substitute a “visual representation” and future “product” for the nebulous entanglements of present “feelings.” Attending to timbre as much as to cogitation, to enunciation as well as to the enunciated, *Ultrasound* dwells in the felt actualities John eschews and, in the process, discovers unlikely continuities amidst serious differences. Such a rapport structures all three of *Ultrasound*'s sections and is perhaps best expressed by the relation it seeks between mother and child. “We are joined and yet separate,” Reynolds explains, “strings on the same instrument reverberating against and setting each other in motion.”

This, finally, is *Ultrasound*'s primary aesthetic gamble: to absorb its anxious dreamers in a quavering, music-like envelope, where everyone is implicated, boundaries wobble but never collapse, and expecting means never forsaking a shared actuality for a private world-to-come. Thus beyond metaphors, *Ultrasound* borrows something of the ethical dimension of music which, in a recent lecture on Wagner, critic Nicholas Spice has tied specifically to its sensory appeals. “Our ears are open in a way our eyes are not,” Spice argues of Wagner in a manner that holds equally for Reynolds. “We cannot listen away as we look away. With music, the question of distance is therefore an essential question. Where are we, and where is it? Where does it stop, and where do we begin? Which feelings belong to the music and which feelings belong to us?”¹² If the ethical risk of music is attributable to its locus-defying involvement, *Ultrasound* explicitly thematizes this wager and questions what it means for the essay's own futurity. “I anticipate the time when we are no longer physically bound and it feels differ-

¹² Nicholas Spice, “Is Wagner Bad For Us?,” podcast audio, *London Review of Books*, 35: 7, April 2013, accessed September 20, 2013, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n07/nicholas-spice/is-wagner-bad-for-us>

ent,” says Reynolds, addressing at once her unborn child and the listener. “When we no longer feel each other’s every vibration, how will we know? Who will we know?”

Queer theorist Lee Edelman has challenged neoliberalism’s noxious and, as he has it, heteronormative futurity through an emphatic mobilization of the psychoanalytic death drive. By this, he means to negate the figure of the “Child” and the “reproductive futurism” for which it has historically stood. Conversely, he wishes to affirm a queer, non-procreative, and death-loving *jouissance* that would reject talk of gay adoption, as well as the increasingly corporate and “family-friendly” spirit of contemporary pride parades. What *Ultrasound* shows, however, is that the choice between “homonormative” parenting and aggressive child-loathing is a false one and that queer theory needn’t so quickly toss the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak. Indeed, in Reynolds’s hands, we gather that there is nothing “straight” about biological reproduction and that ethical forms of expecting require, in Montaigne’s phrase, “learning how to die.”

Sex and death make constant companions in *Ultrasound*. Together, they course through the work like a fickle seamstress. Tearing and repairing human affairs as it suits them, they leave cryptic signatures on even the most straight-laced genealogies. What is more, Reynolds also subtly queers this twosome through the promiscuous citation practices she learned from Montaigne. Throughout his *Essais*, Montaigne quotes far and wide in order to unseat local customs and discover new kinships across diverse regions and histories. In a similar spirit, *Ultrasound* joins its own mode of expecting first to the lesbian poetry of Audre Lorde and then to the work of Pat Califia, the transgender essayist and sex work and HIV/AIDS activist. “I find solace in Pat Califia,” Reynolds avers, linking her own story of sexual abuse and rediscovery to Califia’s politically charged pronouncements about the perilous entwinements of pleasure and mortality. “He tells me

sex has always been life-threatening. Sex has always been a high-risk activity. Never be sorry that you have touched another human being intimately, drawn a part of them into your body. It is worth the price.

Ultrasound may not offer listeners an overtly “gay” experience of the pregnant body, but its unabashedly mournful tethers to a history of disobedient pleasures and social violence go far to disabuse us of reproductive futurism and its unjust claims to “normalcy.”

Ultrasound’s final section only drives home the essay’s queer sensitivity to death. Featuring a melancholy song by The Lightning Bug Situation titled “Fall,” it not only once again decenters the essayistic voice—this time, to an unnamed expecting father—but also nestles *Ultrasound*’s anticipatory relationality among cold winds, brittle leaves, and the bleak caws of a crow. The song is not without warmth and excitement. Understood on its own terms, “Fall” redeems its isolated couple through the father’s vulnerable overtures to his partner’s opaque vitality as well as through the song’s refusal to stabilize the location and meaning of their anticipation. While somber chorus-

es tell of the “baby inside you,” verses suspend any such certainty, continually altering and displacing the oscillating “it” that brings them together. In the context of *Ultrasound*, however, “Fall’s” adumbral vitality resonates well beyond the expecting couple. Radiating across heterogeneous and sometimes grim histories, *Ultrasound* calls out to any and all downcast listeners that fall under its ever-expanding horizon of kinship.

In the end, my contention that Reynolds’s essay offers an alternative to neoliberal subjectivization may constitute a gross over-reading, an indulgent bestowing of significance that, somewhat embarrassingly, says more about a professor’s current hang-ups than a student’s exceptional work. For this, the present author may, in fact, stand guilty as charged. My only hope is that in attempting to bring *Ultrasound* into what, in the above epigraph, Kaja Silverman calls “the brilliance of a more-than-reality,” I have managed to remain faithful to the self-recording practices I teach.



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