Text Comissions
Speculative Histories

005

The Backstreet Boys

Nikima Jagudajev

BERGEN
KUNSTHALL

The Backstreet Boys

1.
Enrolling in an elite college is like joining a club that leaves traces. It imprints a script, etched into your skin. I didn't get accepted into my first choice and, initially, that news destroyed me. Interesting though, how it makes sense in hindsight. That particular genius club was never meant for me, nor I for it. I might have died, or dropped out or overdosed at that school, famed for its competitive intellectualism and copious drug taking. If I had learned anything growing up, it was that second chances were never an option in my family. Luckily, I'd applied to my second choice just before I too was caught in the jaws of addiction. Caught, but still not totally without that sweet purity that leads people to think that I am 18, as opposed to almost twice that age.

I actually was 18 when the acceptance letter arrived at my doorstep. At that point the front door had gone from dark blue to a light, lime green and my stepfather had been kicked out of the house. There was literal confetti inside of the envelope, and a list of grants that didn't quite cover the entire $48,000 yearly tuition. Following my mom's advice, I made an appointment with the financial aid office to ask for more money. That's how I started my liberal arts education, suddenly a whole rung above my high school classmates, who joined sororities at the state university, and at least a rung below many of my classmates-to-be. This environment was novel, but I felt deserving. I milked it for every last drop of status.

But first, the financial aid office. It was on the ground floor next to the parking lot. I met with the main advisor, Karen, who offered me another loan and a job. I refused the loan and took the job. The summer before attending was the summer stuffing envelopes, entering data into Excel spreadsheets and faking doctor's notes explaining my absences. One morning I got high in the bathroom and was nodding out at the computer. My coworker asked if everything was alright. Eventually I was let go.

2.
College was wild, especially for someone with a high level of porosity -- easily affected so to speak. For four years I involuntarily fed off the energetic input of a bunch of lusty YAs. In the beginning, I was most excited about the outfits: the skinny jeans rolled up just above the ankle, the face paint, the droopy shirts that fell off the shoulder, the big scarves. I was stunned by how much pot they smoked and how well they rolled their spliffs. Their rooms were full of lamps and tapestries. I was confused, in awe and I didn't wait a second to consider any of it, I just dove right in and convinced them that I was the missing link, that I was the other best friend. It worked. I got a bit of spice and skepticism in the beginning, but soon they didn't think twice either and I was one of them. I chose them. I fought for them. I knew that without them I was a goner.

We ventured through the forest surrounding campus and hung out in tree houses. We attended keggers down by the river and listened to the emo boys play guitar by the fire. We took the shuttle bus into the city and found nooks in the library to set up camp, hours and hours and hours in the library. It was the bobo college experience. It was status, it was privilege, it was relief and it was fun. It was an escape, and then I found criticality.

3.
13 years later and my dedication to those dearest freaks has left me writing about our fierce bond as a prefigurative practice of 'unsettling the institution.'[1] Kim TallBear, from whom I borrow the phrase, talks about kinship as a way of unsettling the educational institute by prioritizing close knit bonds. Bonds that are strengthened over time will hold fast when friction arises. As contexts change, we become aware of our differences. Kinship keeps us connected amidst these changes. It keeps us from getting too comfortable. Kin, in the words of Donna Haraway, are "those who have an enduring mutual, obligatory, non-optional, you-can't-just-cast-that-away-when-it-gets-inconvenient, enduring relatedness that carries consequences."[2]

This story is about my surrogate family. The ones that I owe my life to, the ones that I live for, the ones that I die for. I am referencing feminist theorist Sophie Lewis' concept of full surrogacy as a kind of tentacular thinking that focuses on strangeness, intimacy, accountability and the need for a multiplicity of relations.[3] Instead of obsessing over biological fictions such as the power of DNA to reproduce the self, can we instead recognize, and have admiration for, life's otherness? What is offered here are unpredictable encounters with strangers; an invitation to get to know not only the otherness that is outside of ourselves but also that which is within; our many unknown selves.

Recently, over the phone, Sun mentioned that one of her favorite parts of being pregnant was the constant company. "I loved being two," she said.

4.
There are ten of us:
A computer engineer Aries, a genuine soul with a husky voice and a fast car.
A wild and solitary poet.
The leader of the pack, a Virgo with a timeless perspective on life as if they've lived it already a thousand times. The most devoted Sag that I have ever met.
A soft soul with a dedication to the earth that I come closer to as our years progress.
A Cancer that is also the sun; that takes on the world and is my opposite and my inspiration.

[1] Lydia Heberling, "Making Good Relations: Kim TallBear in Conversation with the Indigenous Studies Graduate Research Cluster," 21 May 2019, Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities: University of Washington, simpsoncenter.org/news/2019/05/making-good-relations-kim-tallbear-conversation-in-digenous-studies-graduate-research
[2] Steve Paulson, "Making Kin: An Interview with Donna Haraway," Los Angeles Review of Books, 6 Dec. 2019, lareviewofbooks.org/article/making-kin-an-interview-with-donna-haraway/
[3] Sophie Lewis, Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism against Family, (London: Verso, 2019).

A wild card who keeps me on my toes and genuinely lives their artistry.
A business person, an enigma, a mastermind, a nerd.
A biologist who knows all the things that
I don't and is almost as corny as this description.
And a Capricorn who loves them all so deeply and doesn't know how to express it.

After college we turned into the Backstreet Boys. It is our title and has nothing to do with our musical capabilities, our outfits or our genders. We're 90s babies. By 2013 our relationship turned virtual as we scattered across the globe. We stay in touch via a slightly too active text thread titled *backstreets back alright.* We send each other nudes, we keep each other politically informed and we gush.

One of our Cancers is expecting. The amount of hiving that has happened since the dissemination of the news is admirable. Collecting around our queen bee. Orbiting that huge belly.

You hold such grace.

I understand your rejection of being called 'mom' and how loaded that term is: the white, gendered, middle-class, Western prototype, a hetero-patriarchal neo-liberal ideal. You tell me your fears of your child being white. We laugh about it, but I feel the depths of that concern, the complications of what that means. Your father tells you that it's impossible for his grandchild to be white with the dark brown of his own skin, you say, "that's not how it works, Dad". But I want to continue from where your father left off, reflecting on the way that you think, listen and understand as both an intellectual and political practice, the way that you demand critical presence to paraphrase Kai M. Green.[4] Of course, your offspring is not you and who knows if they will decide to engage with what is absent or made invisible at the sites of socio-political intersection, as you have done. I can confirm, however, that you are laying damn good groundwork, tilling the soil beautifully and sowing some strong ass seeds.

In our current state of the world, identity categories play a vital role in that they provide state recognition, allow for programs such as affirmative action, and support group affinity. There can be a lot of joy in identification as well, even within its limitations. Thinking alongside Cathy Cohen, Kai M. Green and Marquis Bey however, here I am interested in looking at a politicized identity that proposes a doing rather than a being; "the *work* that we do *as* the identities that come to subjectivate us rather than presuming that identity is an immutable possession."[5]

Along these lines, 'mom'- what that title represents in the Western English-speaking world- *is*, understandably, not your cup of tea. But to me, the way that you reject this stereotype is revolutionary mothering.

So here I am, devoted to the concept of mothering as revolutionary praxis. But mothering not as a gendered identity or a white middle class position for all liberal women to aspire to, no - mothering as a way of cherishing life by the lives least valued by capitalism. Mothering as "a technology of transformation that those people who do the most mothering labor [teach] us right now."[6] Here again we are in a position of learning from those that have to fight the hardest to live. I would like to recognize the poor mother, particularly the poor Black mother, alongside "the deviant, the marginalized, the fugitive, the renegades, the rebels, the gender-benders, the queer" as offering narratives other than the dominant one.[7] It is from this position that I want to explore the nuances of Mothering.

We can only ever approach the fullness of a being or subject as they change over time and as space is made for that change to occur. In this regard, categories of identification are both limited and limiting. A trans* positioning or lens, to follow in the footsteps of Kai M. Green, is required to look at the nuance of a shifting subjectivity. Trans* in this context is different from transgender as the former is a kind of precarious and unfixed orientation in the world. It is a disruptive orientation that allows us to see that which has been made invisible and to understand how that seeing or unseeing is being shaped.

I relate this to a Black feminist praxis that does much of the same work. As bell hooks and Janet Mock have discussed, Black and trans feminism have always been historically imbricated; a liberatory place of overlap in service of marginalized people. These are not separate phenomena linked to discreet demographics precisely *because* they both mark a troublesome relation to power, rather than identity. Black and trans feminist work is a political praxis that does not rest on "what we purportedly are, but in how we mobilize ourselves and our politics in subversion of power."[8] It cultivates space for the "not-yet-imagined or the overlooked marginal voice to come."[9] This, like mothering, is a collaboration with the future. The ethos of mothering is in the listening and the cultivation of that which is specific to each individual child.

"I'll leave it up to you to write about the internal bruising," Niko tells me over the phone "tell them what it feels like to be kicked from the inside from 3 to 9am."

I have literally no idea how to write about that. I have absolutely no idea what that feels like.

They go on, "it's funny right, that I get all kinds of presents for bearing one child, and I get $8 an hour for taking care of ten preschool kids who call me mom when they wake up from their nap."

Yes. Mothering is culturally idealized under white supremacy, yet lacks any social or economic value; the formation of an industry around it celebrates the prototype with baby showers and registries, but the actual laboring is deemed worthless.

As we know from Silvia Federici, it is through reproductive labor that mothers provide capitalism with its labor force. In this sense, capitalism is nothing without mothers and yet, they are devalued by the very system that relies on them. Of course, if all mothers were provided with the means to raise children with abundance; unconditional attention, care, presence, children would learn a sense of fulfilment early on and would expect that out of life. But mothers do not receive actual, effective support. Instead, childbearing is strategically presented as

[4] Kai M. Green and Marquis Bey, "Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet: A Conversation" Souls, vol. 4, no. 19, 18 Apr. 2018, 438–454.
[5] Ibid., 442.
[6] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "m/other ourselves: a Black queer feminist genealogy for radical mothering." Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines, edited by Alexis Pauline Gumbs et al., (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 78.
[7] Kai M. Green and Marquis Bey, 446.
[8] Ibid., 445.
[9] Ibid., 446.

a labor of love and children are born into an emotional deficit. We seemingly have no choice but to make do with an insufficient system that keeps us yearning for unattainable, abstract goals. Sadly, as a result, we hide in the comforts of neoliberal normativity and, for example, feel safer with ideologies of reform rather than abolition. I recognize that we do not have the structural support necessary to provide children with emotional abundance, but I also understand that it is with the children of the world that the future begins, and it is therefore our collective responsibility to do our absolute best.

Mothers hover in the fog of potential, even as they are overlooked—and perhaps, at the moment, in so far as they are—their position holds the power to be extremely threatening. It is in the private interactions between mothers and children that the perpetuated patterns of emotional scarcity can be broken.

If mothering can potentially confront capitalism at its core, then teaching can take that and run with it. Like mothering, teaching is about nurturing subjectivity. It's about supporting the growth of someone else to help them find their way. Nurturing means making space, stepping back while staying available. It's about listening and being curious, and probably a lot of other things that a mother could elaborate on.

In the meantime, I want to talk about the places where we as students breathed life into the walls of the institution and found passion and creativity within the perpetual lack. I call it Re-schooling. The coming together to nurture and share our perversions, to practice dissent, not through speaking about political and social atrocities per se (not that that is forbidden, of course), but rather a prefigurative practice of aufhebung that revels in its proposed friction. We do this by cherishing our interests, connecting with those deep parts of ourselves that shine the brightest and coaxing them out into the world. Sharing our devotions. This is the laughter that fills the halls between classes, the games that take place on the blacktop, the locker decorations and secrets underneath the bleachers. This, for us, is the anti-bourgeois fuck you, the rejection of taboos, reclaiming gossip, joy, jokes, and sin. This is about the collective action of making space for those sweet particularities, the ones that are snubbed out, relentlessly.

We are unsettling and reimagining knowledge production—work that is grounded in a network of kinship relations that hold us and keep us accountable. Tallbear talks about the coined idea of 'consenting to learn in public,' a risk filled consensus-based process that integrates uncertainty and leaves the learner open, often vulnerably, to criticism and rejection.[10] For TallBear as well as Cherokee scholar Adrienne Keen who has popularized this phrase in Indigenous studies and social media circles, it is also an Indigenous feminist praxis that unsettles the individualistic and privileged mode of Western knowledge production. Keen discusses this practice in, and in relation to, her blog as a public place of learning. These posts are regularly viewed by thousands of people, many of whom are, like Keen, busy with political discussions about representation of Native peoples. She is enmeshed in this discourse, discussing, listening and learning amongst peers and other active thinkers. They hold each other accountable publicly; they recognize that learning, aka growing, is a collective process and not an individual feat.

My desire is to engage in conversation that I am not the authority of, to recognize that I am not the authority of any conversation but rather part of a process that moves, a practice that is not practicing for anything but rather engaging in life as it constantly transitions. I consent to learn in public.

For a long time, I was under the impression that there was a right answer and a right way of phrasing that answer. I assumed that I didn't know the answer because I was so far from the academic prototype. What is needed is pedagogy that centralizes those that are excluded from hegemonic educational institutions. For Paulo Freire, pedagogy is a means of "undermining the reproduction of conditions which 'to be is to be like, and to be like to is to be like the oppressor.' The public education system systematically dispossesses children and young people of languages, ideas, and subjectivities that are in opposition to those of state and capital interest."[11]

I filled my college course load with one man from whom I longed for affirmation. A full time Sociology faculty, middle aged, single, Marxist with two cats and a nice house. He had a rock collection and wore cowboy boots. He had white hair and a flakey head. I wanted his approval. I sought him out. I dedicated my time and my studies to him. I strove to impress. I fantasized about things that might happen in his office. I took care of his cats when he was away. I baked blueberry pies and brought them to class. I titled my dance pieces after concepts that I learned in Social Theory and he told me that his ex-girlfriend used to bake pies when she was distraught and took me to lunch as a thank you for the cats and in the middle of lunch said, "isn't it awkward when, at the end of the date the other person says, let's do it again sometime, when it obviously didn't go well?"

How is it that semi asshole aka emotionally withdrawn and underdeveloped men are so often credited with being smart and worth listening to? A rhetorical question, of course, and yet my disdain grows stronger with every memory and every new encounter.

5.

I'm up at 05:00 with the knowledge that my most fruitful hours are between 05:00 and 09:00. Lew once told me that whenever the mind drifts from sleep, for the sake of good sleeping patterns, leaving the bed is essential. I always feel slightly afraid of being awake when the world is sleeping, afraid of how lonely it might feel. I suppose that's why it feels a bit lonely all the time, badum tshhhhh. But I must say, one tea and two articles later, it's still dark and I'm enjoying the simplicity of these words.

One of the two articles, a lecture called 'Shame of the Higher Self', is a combination of psychoanalysis and Buddhism that describes a child's relationship to their parents as laying the groundwork for our relationship with love. According to the lecture, a child's desire for love:

[10] Lydia Heberling, "Making Good Relations: Kim TallBear in Conversation with the Indigenous Studies Graduate Research Cluster."

[11] Cynthia Dewi Oka, "Mothering as Revolutionary Praxis," Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines, edited by Alexis Pauline Gumbs et al., (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 143.

exclusive tenderness and affection from a parent, is often met with a feeling of rejection as the desire is not always fulfilled. This can happen whether or not the parent is actually rejecting the child. With this feeling of rejection, confusion arises. Love and acceptance from the parent becomes the most desirable aim, but this is amplified because love and acceptance to the degree that the child would wish it seems unattainable, the desired aim is confused with the parent withholding it. In the confused, immature mind of the child, the rejecter becomes desirable, replacing that which was originally desired. A further result of this confusion is that the rejecter seems unloving and therefore to be unloving becomes a desirable state. The child's psyche confirms that to emulate the qualities of the rejecter; cold, aloof and free of emotions is the position of power and a way of avoiding being rejected. As the child matures but the confused understanding of love as weakness resides in the unconscious and as that inner child yearns for love it is rejected by the self as shameful and unwanted.

I'll get into the love stuff later, but I bring this up now because the way that I yearned for the recognition of my professor was not dissimilar to the way yearning for the affirmation of the rejecter, the aloof and unavailable authority figure, is described in this article. I built him up as desirable and strong when actually that poor man lived in a bubble that perpetuated his paradigm because he wouldn't have managed without systemic privilege. Sure, he was somehow politically progressive, a Bernie bro no doubt, but how progressive can a professor be if their Social Theory curriculum only includes one piece by a Black woman, *The Master's Tools* by Audre Lorde? I'm so tired of people hiding in their privilege and avoiding that which challenges them. It is up to our teachers to recognize that learning is not an individual feat that culminates in mastery.

6.

I transcend; it is required of us to survive. My life is real; my soul is calm. I am in conversation with my specificities and I understand that they matter. I have self-worth that develops congruently with my commitment to myself. I get to know the intricacies of my thoughtful mind. I think and feel in relation and therefore it is shared. We try to formulate thoughts that are not yet formed. We consider each other's input generously and critically. We take each other seriously especially when we are laughing. We agree to the right to "subsistence within an irreducible singularity."[12]

Just before going to bed, I had a much needed lengthy catch up with Jasper over the phone. We are half-sisters and half-friends and have been since she was born in the mid 90s. I always feel close with her after we talk, and I long for that closeness when weeks accumulate between conversations. The closeness comes in part because our dynamic is shifting. I am learning to ask for help, to express my uncertainties and fears, to trust that my messiness is not too much for her. I am met with not only deeply intelligent listening but also astute input that comes from her own plethora of experience and contemplative thought. We share a lot of the same pathologies and grief having grown up in the same household. She inspires me. I can listen to her stories and reminisce with joy and cynicism for hours. We go through many waves; I'm always so impressed with her mind, the age of Aquarius!

With a nine-hour time difference, we always talk late-night my time. It's a sacrifice that I am willing to make also because of her chronic insomnia. And sometimes when I am spiraling during the day, her sleepless nights are a gift to me.

Last night we did some deep processing. Trying to parse out our childhood as a way of coming to terms with our present ways of relating to and being affected by people that we are close to. I tell her a story that took place in our childhood home.

Ages ago, before the apocalypse, I was lying in bed losing it. My legs were crumbling beneath me, rolling up the wrong direction as the brittle bones cracked and splintered. The cough was dry and rough, causing my body to convulse, as if to rid the esophagus of a hairball but to no avail. My brain was yelling at me, pulsing inside of my skull at no steady rhythm, yelling, "call Kit! Now! It's Life or Death! GET WELLLLLLLL."

I had abandoned myself for numbness and slowly the addiction subsumed me. There is no part of me that chose that path of indifference. Like so many, I was not given the tools to know that I am better than that. When the divorce happened and Gram was finally out of the house for good, he left me with a gaping wound. Getting together with Kit was a classic example of filling the hole with another dick. This particular dick came with needles. This evening, withdrawing in my childhood home with my mom downstairs, was a desperate cry for help. I was tethered to the bed, stuck as if in a vat of mucus. My mind blurry except for a piercing need to score.

She came up to tell me that there was spaghetti for dinner and all I could do was yell, "I can't eat spaghetti right now!"

Now when I tell you that I need help, you meet me with reassurance, a reminder that I am not alone—you are not afraid, you hear me and come towards me, "we will get through this together," you say, "I am here for you. Not only will I take care of you, but I will help you take care of yourself." I believe you more and more every time. I tell myself the same things when I can, I tell the pain in my neck that I love it, that I will do whatever it needs, that I will take care of it and not force it out or pretend like it is not there. I listen to what it needs and I do my best, but sometimes I worry that my ability to love and care for my body does not develop as fast as I age and the pains and aches worsen. A frantic mind left alone. A body that cannot digest, a scared body that cannot relax, a body that cannot love itself. I need that hand stroking my forehead. I need that story being told in my ear, I need you puttering around downstairs in the kitchen. The fear softens when I think about so many that love me.

Discharge the ions daily babe.

[12] Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, trans. by Betsy Wing, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 190.

In the dark depths of my withdrawal however, Sun was not yet strong enough to be there for me, she was still clawing her own way out of a black hole that never should have been hers in the first place. Instead of moving towards me and consoling me, she moved away.

"You're acting like you're withdrawing from drugs!" She yelled.

After she abandoned me for the spaghetti, I tore through my stuff looking for an old pill container. I was prepared, as I somehow always am in dire moments. Inside was a suboxone. I took half and fell into a nauseous sleep. I never took the other half. I left the container on a friend's bedside table years later as a way of telling us both that I was really truly done. I hold no romanticization of that time. I will only move further away from that moment.

Sun could not be there for me; rather, my needs were met by her brokenness and this caused me to internalize a pathology that makes me the demon, the inflictor of pain. I internalized a belief that I am destined to hurt those that I love when I express my less agreeable needs. Time and time again, I was reminded that I am not allowed to take up space and that I am a monster who should be punished when I do.

I wake up from a nightmare, Jasper, on the other side of the world picks up the phone, bless.

"I can't stop worrying that I am going to revert to destructive tendencies as a way of temporarily freeing myself from the discomfort of not knowing how to express my needs and take care of myself in the midst of a romantic relationship."

I lay there sweating, my stomach churning from the heavy emotions and also perhaps the salmon I had eaten earlier that day.

"Yeah, I can relate," she says. "When I start having those kinds of anxiety spirals the best thing for me to do is to talk to my boyfriend about it. I'll tell him that I don't want to break up, but I need to know that I can walk away at any moment. The boundary and his acknowledgement of it reminds me that I am an autonomous adult. It's relieving."

7.

Weeks earlier, I watch Pippi make a fire in the attic of the sublet. Picking the bark off the wood and making a separate pile to use as kindling. Long fingers, gentle precision. It was their idea to bring all four mattress covers upstairs and make a nest next to the hearth. It's sweet and cozy and a little revolting in its intimacy. But we fall into an ease with one another. I am in a wild mood, almost annoyingly so. We wrestle which turns into a straight up pillow fight. It's hot, I break the seal with an open window and stick my face into the night. Crisp, so close to Svalbard. Like a fantasy of the wild, a nature that I haven't experienced since the Oregon Coast. Almost Christmas. Pippi says a thing that makes me stare, unblinking, serious.

"I have no idea what will happen between us, and I don't have any experience with relationships, but I do know that nobody will try as hard as me."

We wear ourselves out like kids that like to flirt. We stoke the fire and curl up next to each other. Cats nuzzling as the light recedes in the embers, moving closer to each other as the heat goes inside. We sleep and I wake up in the morning wired and ready for action.

The morning to pack and move house, my stay is up, check out at 11:00. I start packing and Pippi helps around the house, washing dishes, taking out the recycling, laundry, vacuuming, furniture placement, etc. "Where do these chairs go, where does this pot go, what temp for the laundry?" A guest of the guest, Pippi has many logistical questions. Sensical, of course, as I have been the one living here but something in the domesticity of these questions causes me to panic. Claustrophobia creeps in around my chest and neck; red alerts begin flashing in my mind:

TOO INTIMATE

TOO DOMESTIC

NOT SAFE

The Christmas music coming from their phone makes me sick. Too loud, too wholesome. I need to act, catch it before it's too late. I need to express myself but it is already too late, I don't know how without being evil, soul crushing, mean. I am disgusted with myself, with them. Very visceral fight or flight. I am unsafe because I cannot take care of my own needs, intimacy is unsafe because intimacy means putting myself on hold.

I close the door of the bathroom, good start, the floor is heated. I drown out external noise with a steaming hot shower. I feel the surface of my skin, I reassure myself, 'it's going to be ok'. What do I feel? I feel huge, like a monster that will involuntarily swallow the gentle critter in the kitchen. How dare they love me, what is this weakness? I am not allowed to have needs, I should be punished for acting out, they should be hard on me, withholding and unattainable.

I finish the shower with a moment of cold water to close the pores. I need surface, a boundary. I venture into the kitchen and mutter something about turning off the music. I want them to ask me what is wrong.

"Something is wrong," I say instead.

"I can tell, what's going on?"

This is how it goes: I creep towards you with a lot of caution, an animal with wide eyes; excited, nervous, skeptical, hopeful. You show me signs of love and acceptance and I am warmed; I light up and come closer. I celebrate this open heart. Moments of thoughtlessness on your part cause me to retreat but your considerate demeanor and your need to work through it reassures me in our process. I come closer still, sometimes unaware of how to prepare for the changing climate, how to set boundaries in order to feel safe. Boundaries that are fixed for definite periods of time, boundaries that can and will change.

For example, three days before I leave town I say to Pippi,

"Just so you know, I won't want to have sex again before I leave."

"Ok. That's no problem."

I relax knowing that I can say the things that I need to say and that they are taken seriously. I'm pretty sure we fucked all three days.

Boundaries are strange abstract concepts that I want to think about concretely for a moment, in the year of the Metal Ox, as things that delineate space differently. Perhaps like armor that I clad my organs in when I feel like being less porous, less receptive, less empathetic. Perhaps boundary setting is a practice of opening and closing the gateways, the body's windows: the eyes, the ears, the mouth, the perineum, the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet.

Sometimes, the boundary is my outfit, the choice of which is usually governed by climatic concerns. The climate here is the social context; the shifting relation that requires shifting boundaries. If we consider for a moment that all social relations are spatial relations without a defining form then we can understand the relation materially, as something tangible that moves through different configurations. "Space is, then, not simply 'out there' but joins in specific complexes of social relations and 'built environments" that shape the possibilities for contingency, but not infinitely so."[13]

Following this conceptual flow, I want to look at Nael Bhanji's depiction of the prefix *trans-* as a "spatial marker of possibility" that not only signifies movement across or beyond a schism but is also evocative of the "transgressions, transmogrifications, and transmutations of established norms."[14] What is important to me here is that the space of social relations moves. The space itself is in transition and not because of the nature of its components but because of the "texture of the weave" to quote Édouard Glissant.[15]

The question then arises, what is the materiality of relation? A question that can be elucidated by folding Anna Tsing into Glissant. The materiality of relation, or the texture of the weave, in this particular context, is friction. Friction being the "awkward, unequal, unstable and creative qualities of interconnection across difference"; the sticky materiality of worldly encounters."[16]

In her book *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Tsing writes about the environmental movement that eventually led to the collapse of the New Order and President Suharto's resignation in Indonesia in 1998 as an example of a transnational collaboration that was organized around and across difference. In the wake of violent corporate destruction of diverse Indonesian rainforests, Tsing describes how multiple groups and organizations as well as forest dwellers, the general public and non-human agents worked together for the sake of their livelihood. Not out of some imminent sharing of goals but out of necessity. A coalition forming over a shared need for change rather than a shared identity.

The coalition across difference is an amalgam of odd parts, of multiple registers of life experience. However, while collaborations create new interests and new ways of being through friction, this is not always in the interest of all moving parts. As we see over and over again, truths that are incompatible are often suppressed. Again, the underdog is subtly but intentionally overlooked until its resources can be extracted, consumed and exchanged for capital.

In close proximity to others my lines blur, my shape becomes unclear. From such a position I can be more than my stories that reduce me to categories of comparison and judgment, but my body is also the site of environmental histories. Socially recognized as an ethnically ambiguous woman from a low socio-economic upbringing, being affected is not always safe. Partially because I have been socialized to adhere to others at the expense of my own integrity and partially because I am subject to the deep-rooted prejudice of others, often subconsciously. Collaboration; contamination; messiness is not always safe as it can produce and reproduce patterns and relations of power. The boundaries that I choose to set allow me to move towards and away from closeness at my own rhythm.

8.

In June 2019, just before leaving the United States in its sad state of affairs, I spent a month or so in Portland with family, all of which are chosen, some of which are blood. It was the summer that, with a positive spin, taught me how to ask for help. I don't particularly feel like rehashing the details, but the gist of the story is that I was scammed, over the phone, out of $10,000. Not only did they take my money but I, under their psychological manipulation, labored to make it happen. It felt as though I was being held hostage at gunpoint when it was in fact only a phone call, hence the spirals of fear and shame that overwhelmed me after the fact. I quite literally could not deal with the psychological aftermath by myself, nor did I have to. Sun slept in my room for three nights, Jasper did the heroic phone work of searching for some kind of compensation, and Mad, Gen and Stick offered me small sums of money from their own pockets. Getting scammed was, as my friend said, "the most expensive therapy session you will ever have".

Telling my friends felt necessary as I yearned for reassurance, but I found myself choosing carefully who to share with because every recap felt like an encounter with shame. Dreading their judgment, I took my time in telling the Backstreet Boys. There is something about a group dynamic that makes it difficult to have close, meaningful encounters. Even though I was certain that each person would experience my story differently, I anticipated a collective response. I was afraid of that most immediate response, the one that bubbles up in the subconscious before it's glossed over by layers of acquired ethics, proper manners so to say, the "Oh my god, how could you let that happen!" aka "that would never happen to me" as if it somehow proved my inferiority, expanding the preexisting gap between me and this group of well educated, affluent... the judgments coagulate. They are not unwarranted; neither are they accurate. They are impersonal and get in the way of a deeper

[13] Jason W. Moore, Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital, (London: Verso, 2015), 16.

[14] Kai M. Green and Marquis Bey, 446.

[15] Édouard Glissant, 190.

[16] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015) 41.

connection, misunderstood as protection against intimacy, that scary serpent demon that lives in the depths of the ocean. So I hold on to judgment even as I would like to let go.

In some ways while our group text is a complete and utter support system, I also question its hermetic self-affirming role, steeped in neoliberalism. This comes from a place of cynicism as I cast myself as Other and lump them together in a collective pool of privilege. This feels confusing and frustrating as I want to be accepted, as if I am not already, and simultaneously separate from. This confrontation with confusion is a blessing though, an opportunity to stay with the trouble as my attachment to these folks makes it impossible to run away or avoid. And still, being reminded that there are foundational differences in our belief systems feels alienating. I get angry and jealous when I witness one's privilege through their display of ignorance. But I too have the ability to play that card. Being caught in my ignorance can be horribly uncomfortable and has caused me to hide at times, but it gifts me with diligence. Within our judgments and insecurities, we deepen the bond that accountability offers.

In 2016 I received a kinship proclamation in the form of an email from bff, Stick. It spoke to a deep-rooted fear of owning up to and sharing my messiness. It was confronting and stirred up a lot of dormant feelings. But it was done with consideration and was therefore life giving, the very friction that is the relation.

Hey babe,

First off, I am so excited to spend the summer with you. But right now, I have an email full of deep thoughts that I have been meaning to send you for... months? years? I don't know. So, here's a disclaimer: I'm about to engage in some real-talk. There are some dark parts and they come only with love.

After I left New York, I realized that I had felt overwhelmed by our relationship. Apart from all the sweet memories I have of that time, I also remember obsessing about you, what you thought, what I would like to say to you to change things. I remember, one time specifically, trying to express my feelings about that kind of relationship stuff and then you told me you really didn't know what I was talking about. If I remember correctly, I was trying to explain it in terms of us being competitive with each other. I couldn't believe that you didn't feel competitive with me. It made me feel like all the thoughts and feelings I had been having were insane. But I know that even though I can get stuck in one mindset, that I didn't just invent those feelings. So I guess I'm trying to open up that conversation again and reframe it.

Maybe I am just looking for approval and you can't see that or don't want to give it. That's fine. More than fine. I'm in the process of learning that I don't need everyone's approval! I love it that you weren't raised on approval, that you do things because they make sense for you, because you want to, and that you don't need to know what everyone thinks about it. But maybe sometimes I need you to come meet me halfway? I don't know.

I am asking for your perspective because alone I can only see it from my side, which doesn't really mean anything at this point anymore. Sometimes I just don't know what I mean to you. I know you love me. But I don't know what you don't like about me, what about me frustrates you, what or why you can't share certain things with me. Your aloofness about the deep shit, the dark corners, makes it hard for me to know what emotional ground I am walking on. It makes me scared there is something really big or problematic that I'm missing. I don't know how to feel because I don't know what you're feeling. And I think that's what made me freak out and obsess about you in NY.

It's funny to say this because it reminds me of all these thoughts about emotional dependence I used to have. Am I, or was I, emotionally dependent on you, actually? At the time I was convinced that you were emotionally dependent on me. I wanted you to acknowledge it, and see it as labor, and better yet, see it as labor that I was and still am happy to do, that I like it because I love you. So it's not about competition babe, fuck that. It's about emotional labor, and about how hard it is to know if you are finding a healthy balance of give-take. Back then, I badly wanted to talk about that, and I felt like you didn't, and it made me hold a lot inside. Can we talk about it now? Can we process this stuff together?

I was just at pa-f for elsewhere and otherwise. At one point we were talking about magic, the space within ourselves that is powerful, mysterious, and unknown. Violence, patriarchy, and capitalism have taught us that that space is worthless, hysterical, bitchy, crazy, deviant, dark, fucked up. These power systems make us wonder "deep down, am I just a crazy stupid bitch?" and they make us fundamentally doubt ourselves.

I remember when we were in the subway talking and you were like "oh, you don't trust me" and I was like "yeah, wow, I guess not". and the MAIN reason I want to process with you is because I really really can't abide by the fucking man getting in between you and I, mediating our access to the magical, and the dark, and the wild spaces between us. That fundamental lack of trust is not our fault. Let's clear that space somehow and make room for a new trust-- something we can grow from, not something we are avoiding.

Ok- I'll leave it at that. Just know that all this comes with love. I am not blaming you or criticizing you. I'm just trying to look a bit deeper so that we can both know when one, the other, or both of us are dancing in the dark corners and know to not be afraid... or like to be afraid while we are holding hands.

Can't wait to see you!!!

So much love my darling pointy bird,

Yours 4 ever,

…

Dear Stick,

Thank you for your vulnerability and for integrating the moments of doubt. I hope the world can learn from you.

…

We lay there watching Buffy, a 24-hour marathon. For hours we held each other with our hands. The center of our palms radiating heat from our hearts, our Lao Gong points open and electric like magnets shifting into place again and again along each other's bodies. Revitalizing communication without chatter. Pure devotion.

Perhaps my aloofness is a way of avoiding; a way of hiding my insecurities. Left to fend for myself, my sense of autonomy was over-developed as a child. I understand now that bonds develop through reciprocity. You can only be there for me as much as I ask to be cared for by you. I return to this email to revel in the serotonin boost that your passionate words induce but also as a segue into another conversation that has to be had. My turn to speak blatantly about the elephant in the room.

Dear Stick, I have eight questions for you regarding my addiction.

And in return, she wrote:

Hi sweetie,

This email thread is incredible. Glad you dug it out :).

Before I reply to your questions directly, I have to say that I was very aware of your heroin addiction and it has had a big, lasting impact on my life. I have never felt more fused with another human being than the day we saw each other after I got back from East Africa. You came into the house wearing a yellow coat and your head was shaved. I had heard about how your fall went (from who? you? can't remember) and - the exact series of events and words are a bit of a blur - but I think I just hugged you tightly and told you to stop and asked you what you were doing and then I felt a piece of me go into you. I've never felt something that is technically 'energetic' or chemical be so concrete. Without taking any credit away from you and the bravery and strength it must have taken to overcome that addiction, I truly believe that that piece of me in you was instrumental for your recovery.

Q3: How did my addiction hurt you?

I am not sure I would use the word "hurt." Worrying sucks, and I think that from a distance when I was abroad it sucked a lot more because I was powerless. But mostly I felt a lot of resolve that you just needed to stop and that was that. I think I have always been fascinated by you and all the aspects of your life, so certainly when this heroin thing bubbled up, I was probably more at risk than at any other time in my life (like some weird curiosity??) but I wasn't thinking like that at the time. I think I was more afraid than curious. I don't think I ever would have tried it and to be honest I don't think you would have let me even if I had wanted to.

Q4: How did you protect yourself?

I think the scary thing about heroin is that people protect themselves by associating the addict with the drug, as if it was some kind of character flaw that leads the person to be addicted, as if it couldn't happen to anybody. I think people use that to protect themselves. I would be lying if I said I never engaged in that kind of behavior. Once in class you walked by wearing big sunglasses and your red cowboy boots. Ty who was sitting behind me kind of laughed at you and mentioned what you had been up to the night before. I remember that you had kind of vanished and hadn't responded to my texts, or something. I was angry that you had disappeared, so I think I joined his judgmental attitude. I allowed myself to be angry sometimes, or to feel used by you. Anything to stop from caring as much as I did. But I also protected myself by being "all business" and just showing up with a hard no, and never wavered from telling you to never touch it again.

Q5: Were you skeptical of me because of my addiction?

Yeah, I think I questioned your motives sometimes and that there was a trust issue there. Like I said above, I was often afraid that you were using me. But I never thought that you were lying. I never doubted the strength of your character and soul. I always believed you were gonna beat it. I think I was just afraid of the mark something like this leaves on a person.

Q6: Did you see me as an equal?

This is a hard one. The short answer is yes, absolutely. The long answer is yes, but there are so many socio-racial-economic differences between us that I think I must have had to do some mental work to keep it that way. I am not above subconscious, intergenerational, and conditioned prejudices. I was raised with them. You're going to hate this, but I think some of the Christian ethics about everyone being the same under god helped me keep those prejudices at bay for the most part.

Q7: Did you not even think about it because you were preoccupied with your own life?

No, I thought about it. But as I write the answers to these questions I also wonder if I am indulging in a savior complex, in a romanticized idea of you and what your life is like. I think a part of me enjoys being so close to the fire. And at the time you were in the middle of the flames, to me, and I didn't want to be excluded from that. I'm just trying to say that you shouldn't think of me as selfless and devoted to you and suffering because of you. I was also getting something out of it. I'm not sure what it is exactly, and I'd be curious to hear your thoughts.

Q8: How is it that you were able to love me anyway?

BAAAAAAAAABE STOPPPPP ITTTTT!!!!!!!!! I've always loved you and I'm always gonna. You were great to be around, including then. You've always given me a lot, heroin or no heroin. I love you so much and it's because I love you that I was (at least in my mind) so involved. I don't think I could have lost love for you so in that sense I'm so happy you quit when you did because I would have experienced many years of suffering if you hadn't. This question is too self-deprecating and self-hating for someone who has done the hardest thing in the world. I loved you before that and I love you now. No question.

:)

I have had other "saviors" as well, but they are long gone. The beautiful thing about Stick is that when I stopped needing to be saved, she was still around to love me, and I got this amazing opportunity to be there for her too.

9.

Jay calls after a few weeks of not much contact and I cautiously tell him that I am falling in love with the gen z nerd that he has been playing guitar with. Jokes aside,

I am extremely emotional. It takes us both by surprise. There is, dare I say, discomfort. I want to share this news with joy and excitement. But in all honesty, it is more of a pained reveal.

"Why are you so emotional about it?" Jay asks with curiosity.

I sit with the question for a moment.

"First of all, I'm afraid that you're gonna judge me. That you are gonna clock it as just another fling, sort of meaningless and trite."

"I'm not going to judge you, sis, I'm just having trouble reading you."

"I guess there is a part of me that doesn't want to share because I don't trust the world with this precious information. People always have something to say and I'm afraid that it's not gonna be what I want to hear. Or like, I need to figure this one out on my own because it's still so fresh. It feels fragile and precarious and too susceptible to other people's careless passing comments, if that makes sense. It feels like boundaries."

"I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, I feel generally good about it too. Also, I've been thinking a lot about commitment and family and stuff like that and that's just so deeply confusing."

"That sounds amazing, and just to be clear, it's totally normal for people our age to be thinking seriously about family making, I would do the same if I met somebody right now that I had strong feelings for."

I like how straightforward and simple Jay's understanding is. It relaxes me and reassures me that in a very basic way, my needs and desires are normal and healthy. But there is more to it than that. I have been building family for years. This particular relationship, however, stands at a crossroads with love on one side and the potential for a horrific mess of patriarchal bullshit on the other—not because of what we *do* but because of who we purportedly *are*.
I refuse to fall into accommodating forms of state-making in which the private and the public become intermeshed. I don't want to replicate a condensed version of the heavy-handed state with all of its forms of power and control. It's hard to express the weight of the situation. It's deeper, more profound, urgent, dire—all of Hans Ulrich's favorite words—than anything has ever felt before. It is so acute and unavoidable. As if all the work that I have been doing for years to queer my romantic context so to say is being put to the test. Somehow it feels like this is the romance that I have always dreamt about but denied myself - because it felt too clichéd, definitely something to be ridiculed. Sad that genuine and healthy love is internalized as something to be ashamed of.

Remember when 'daddy' used to read my diary when we were kids? And later, on a walk or on our way to American Dream Pizza, he would reveal the name of one of my crushes. Pleased with himself and the effect he had on me. Mocking my privacy, flushing my cheeks and belittling my earnest passion, for the fun of seeing me squirm.

10.
As Cathy Cohen points out in her 1997 article 'Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens', the figure of the impoverished and deviant mother is a queer figure in the United States, whether that mother is part of the LGBTQI community or not. Ronald Reagan made it clear early on in his candidacy that mothering poor children and children of color was a crime. He invented the "welfare queen" in order to sell a neoliberal vision that social issues such as education and housing were individual as opposed to collective issues, isolating and demonizing the impoverished single mother figure. Around the same time multiple youth led revolutionary movements were taking place, specifically in the Caribbean and Latin America.[17]

This is to say that the politically explicit criminalization of poor mothers and the uprising of youth directly corresponded to one another. That same year in New York the First National Conference of Third World Lesbians and Gays took place with Audre Lorde as the keynote speaker addressing the attendees with a statement about their responsibility towards the next generation of youth. She focused on the collective making of the future, not just with one's own individual children but with young people in general. The Third World Lesbian Caucus reiterated this stance by claiming that all children of lesbians of color were their collective kin and they would continue to partake in the labor of mothering collectively.

Arriving in the US in the midst of the Reagan years, Sun was welcomed with a big fuck you. The criminalized poor single mother of two brown kids, an immigrant and subsequently invisible. She is the antithesis to hetero-patriarchal-normativity. Deprived of resources, she was kept in a state of lack because with power her kind are dangerous.

I can't imagine what it would be like not to have people, like literally nobody, no network, no workplace, no family. Sun cut communication with her toxic biological family in Austria and has been fighting for something different ever since. Little by little she built herself and community, devoted to that laborious and painful yet rewarding life of truth finding. A commitment to life that is so easily avoided by those that are handed privilege.

When I fantasize it's about a warm place, with tall trees and warm wind and nice smells with loved ones close by. I dream about staying. The truth is, I am not running away anymore because the family that raised me is no longer the same family; the ones that I love have changed and the ones that I don't are long gone. Sometimes I feel very far away and the question of how to make my way back concerns me. Back to closeness, to simplicity, to love. And yet, it's not back that I want to go because back also means toxicity; physical abuse, lack of boundaries, violation of trust, self-doubt, power games and a whole lot of dissociation.

As Audre Lorde says, and June Jordan and Toni Morrison reiterate, we have a responsibility towards the youth. They require our emotional intelligence and uncon-

[17] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, 70-99. [14] Kai M. Green and Marquis Bey, 446.

ditional attentiveness in order to fulfill their potential to make and remake the world. The power of mothers has been cloaked in the labor of love, which is disrespectful and downright atrocious, but we must remember that love is nonetheless our collective power. We can break the pattern of scarcity and offer children fertile ground, even from within this tragically insufficient context. We need to think realistically and thoughtfully about how to collaborate with the future, and we need to think about this together.

I remember Sun telling me about the fear that she had about messing up, that she wasn't good enough, wasn't strong enough, that she so badly wanted to do it right and was so often left feeling guilty and ashamed of failing. I just want to cry,

"You are not alone."

You are not the only one that "swallowed the venom of self-hate early on."[18]

[18] Fabiola Sandoval, "A Los Angeles Quartet: Daily Survival, Body Memory, First-world Single Mama, Identity and Mothering" in Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines, edited by Alexis Pauline Gumbs et al. (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 131.

The Backstreet Boys (2020–2021) by Nikima Jagudajev. Edited by Olivia Fearweather. Commissioned by Karmaklubb* and Bergen Kunsthall. Published by Karmaklubb* / IGWTLI publishing and Bergen Kunsthall.

Text Commissions
Bergen Kunsthall is proud to announce a new series of text commissions, furthering our discursive work around our exhibition and live program, exploring practices of artists and writers presenting newly produced content and made available online. This text is part of a series of text commissions for Speculative Histories. The text commissions will include texts by Caspar Heinemann, Nikima Jagudajev, Grace Ndiritu, Chris E. Vargas, Bruce Benderson and Leslie Thornton.

Speculative Histories
Speculative Histories is a series of artist commissions and events that proposes methods of literary fiction as a means to question what our institutions could look like today if other groups in society had been granted more power in the past. The programme includes historical and contemporary practices of feminist organising, intersectional anti-racist and queer perspectives, suggesting alternatives for institutional practices based on a re-shifted lens on the past.

Re-Imagine Europe
Part of Re-Imagine Europe, co-funded by the Creative Europe programme of the European Union. Re-Imagine Europe is initiated by Sonic Acts (NL) and coordinated by Paradiso (NL) in collaboration with Elevate Festival (AT), Lighthouse (UK), INA GRM (FR), Kontejner (HR), Landmark / Bergen Kunsthall (NO), A4 (SK), Disruption Network Lab (DE) and Ràdio Web MACBA (ES).

Curated by Scott Elliott, Bergen Kunsthall, 2021