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## Study in blue: trauma, affect, event

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As contemporary student activists in the United States embrace a vocabulary of *trauma* and *microaggressions*, some critics on the left consider this a depoliticizing move symptomatic of the university's growing thrall to neoliberalism. The author argues that such criticism neglects how talk of trauma and microaggressions attempts to affectively manage structural violence's failure to manifest in the form of discrete, identifiable, and extraordinary events. To illustrate this, she turns to the poetry of Claudia Rankine and the performance art of Emma Sulkowicz as aesthetic treatments of racial microaggression and sexual trauma, respectively. Rankine's and Sulkowicz's works belong to an emergent genre the author calls the *coincidence report*, in which subjects with no proof of structural violence except for their own feelings must cope with what happens when an event doesn't. Ultimately, both artists sideline attempts to reconstruct the event in favor of redistributing specific affects throughout their respective publics. In both cases, these affects are blue – that is, depressive (Rankine) and obscene (Sulkowicz). Subjects in the blue find themselves ambivalently attached to living politically in the shadow of an event even as they detach from the fantasy that political life is less disappointing, depressing, or deflating than it actually is.

**Keywords:** microaggressions; sexual assault; affect theory; student activism; Claudia Rankine; Emma Sulkowicz

You can't swing a dead Enlightenment philosopher around the public sphere these days without hitting an opinion piece lamenting the coddling of the American mind. First in line to be thrown under the bus in articles like this are university students, whom the genre routinely paints with its distinctive blend of sanctimonious alarm and zoological fascination (see Lukianoff and Haidt 2015). These particular kids-these-days are shrill, needy, vindictive tripwires who love hashtags and hate free speech. As it happens, this fashionable genre of cultural criticism – which Sara Ahmed (2015) has deftly described as “a moral panic about moral panics” – is hardly limited to a sententious liberal commentariat. Radical historian Robin Kelley (2016), for instance, has recently given students a talking-to in the *Boston Review*. Among the newest generation of student activists,

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Kelley writes: “Words such as *trauma*, *PTSD*, *micro-aggression*, and *triggers* have virtually replaced *oppression*, *repression*, and *subjugation*” (14). This sinister new vocabulary list risks, even invites, ensnarement in that tangle of neoliberal logics (diversity, multiculturalism, inclusion) that have crept like ivy into the American university over the past few decades. For Kelley, neoliberalism abridges volumes of structural violence into pamphlets of personal pain, with the result that where Kelley’s generation critiqued the system and fought the power, today’s students just complain about having their feelings hurt. What the kids need to get through their heads, writes the radical public intellectual, is that “the personal is not always political” (13).

That Kelley’s finger should end up wagging at an old feminist chestnut might give us pause. Indeed, one wonders among other things why the signifier *neoliberalism* should deserve so much credit even as students are given so little. (This, too, may be student debt.) As Lauren Berlant (2011) wisely puts it,

Critics interested in the ways structural forces materialize locally often turn the heuristic ‘neoliberalism’ into a world-homogenizing sovereign with coherent intentions that produces subjects who serve its interests, such that their singular actions only seem personal, effective, and freely intentional, while really being effects of powerful, impersonal forces. (15)

To be sure, *neoliberalism* may be a useful shorthand for indexing the uneven distributions of precarity, vulnerability, exploitation, and violence that make up our historical present. But as Kathleen Stewart (2007, 1–7) reminds us, “bottom-line arguments about ‘bigger’ structures and underlying causes” are hindrances more often than helps when critics take cracks at maneuvering their intellectual rovers over the alien terrain of ordinary affective life. Are we really prepared to say that all it takes to become a neoliberal shill is *to feel something*, and then to have the audacity to talk about that feeling in public?

I doubt it. But I would also wager that the greatest affront to critical sensibility perpetrated by notions like *trauma* and *microaggression* is not that such terms privatize structural oppression in the form of personal wounds (see Brown 1995), but, on the contrary, that they dare to lug *into public* feelings we thought we’d all agreed would be better off left in private, thank you very much. See, for instance, Jack Halberstam’s (2014) breezy dismissal of trauma talk as weepy-white-lady feminism’s frumpy rhetorical sweater. This isn’t to say that all contemporary critics take exception to feelings, or public feelings – not at least since the so-called affective turn (see Cvetkovich 2012, 1–14). But when tenured radicals balk at talk of trauma or microaggression, I suspect this is not because what’s at stake is affect, or even bad affect – compare love (Kelley 2016, 15–16) or anger (Halberstam 2011, 110), which continue to be all the rage – but rather because such talk registers what Sianne Ngai (2005) has called *ugly feelings*: ambiguously political affects with politically ambivalent effects. Ugly feelings are minor, equivocal, and impolitic, or at least impolite; they are bad at finding objects and worse at keeping them; and they suggest no political solutions, or better (worse?), several bad ones. These are affects to which many radical academics are still loath to extend precious intellectual credit, the kind of thing upon which one comments with gentle, practiced dubiety, *I’m not sure that this represents your best work*. Students aren’t just feeling bad, in other words; they’re also doing feeling badly.

This essay is invested in assembling ways of imagining affects like these as something other than warranting failing grades. That means taking affective scenes of trauma and microaggression seriously. What makes these affects unique, I argue, in comparison to the ugly feelings Ngai describes (envy, irritation, or disgust, for example), is their loose, capillary relation to something whose happening, while happening, nonetheless never manages to precipitate into the stable ontological crystal we call an *event*. In the traumatic episode or the microaggressive situation, something happens, but it might be nothing; or it might just be all in your head.<sup>1</sup> The event withdraws, or collapses, and in its wake goes up a cloud of low-grade, ordinary affects: ache, disappointment, perplexity, a bad taste in your mouth. Before long, it's all gone, dissipated into the affectsphere (Berlant 2011, 69); and no one returns to the scene of a crime that never happened. Over time, the political optimism keeping subjects hooked on the promise of an unassailable, airtight event that would finally mediate convincingly between structural violence and everyday life is quietly euthanized. There is no break, no rupture, none of the radical discontinuity French philosophers are fond of (see Derrida 2002; Badiou 2006). Instead, life goes on. Cathy Caruth (1996, 60–5) calls this the incomprehensibility of survival: the classic Freudian example is the dazed passenger who walks away unscathed from a train wreck of which she has no memory. Such incomprehensibility consists, however, not in trauma's overwhelming the subject with an event of unfathomable loss (as Caruth holds), but rather in an underwhelmed subject's having lost track of the event altogether somewhere in the sofa cushions of the ordinary. Afterwards, things may not go back to normal, but that's only because they never left.

In other words, this essay is interested in what happens when an event doesn't. I want to ask this question by turning to a handful of aesthetic objects: the book *Citizen: An American Lyric*, by poet Claudia Rankine, and a pair of performance pieces by artist Emma Sulkowicz. Both artists are formally experimenting with an emergent aesthetic genre I want to call the *coincidence report*. The coincidence report finds subjects venturing into the fallout zone of an undetonated event to collect samples of the incident's deformations (coincidences, flukes, misunderstandings) in hopes of finding something that will stick. Rankine's book improvises on a series of formally minor microaggressive encounters of the kind the mainstream media likes to call "racially charged," while Sulkowicz is busy doing the aftermath on a traumatic episode (her rape by a fellow student at Columbia University) that's gotten caught in an affective inflation–deflation loop. In both cases, events promising to furnish expert testimony of structural violence have ended up renegeing on their own eventness without thereby cutting the subject's affective feed. This genre shares with the incident report, therefore, a certain forensic interest in figuring out what went down, but without the latter's authority, traditionally vested by the police state or someone over in human relations, to fast-track an incident's application for eventual status. Since what's happened only *happens* to have happened, the subject is left with no proof but her own feelings.

But affect is a lousy substitute for evidence. By *affect*, I simply mean any way something might feel.<sup>2</sup> As a rule, but especially in traumatic or microaggressive scenes, affect is simultaneously *nonmimetic* and *recursive*. That is, not only do affects *not* resemble the events whose effects they nominally are (something slow might leave you out of breath, or a molehill might provoke a mountain), but feelings also need not feel like the feelings

they are (you can be frustrated about being bored, or confused about being aroused by being humiliated). In other words, even if under laboratory conditions an event could somehow be kept stable long enough to act as a viable stimulus, the subject's chances of having a consistent, predictable affective reaction would still be next to nothing. New shipments of affect keep coming in, of course, but what's on the manifest doesn't match what's in the containers, and instructions for discriminating between affects that are and aren't politically admissible are missing from the box. Hence reverse-engineering an event sturdy enough to support claims of structural or even personal violence becomes seriously risky business.

Ultimately, therefore, the coincidence reports these artists file respond to the event's dehiscence not with militancy but with disappointment, diffidence, and exhaustion: there will be no stitching it back together again. What's left are small practices of affect sharing. Burrowing deeper into the mutual dispossession of subject and event, Rankine and Sulkowicz each improvise different aesthetic techniques for redistributing among their respective publics the affects that have built up like fluid in the bones of the political. Rankine narrates the microaggressive episode in the second person in order to beckon readers into the depressive ordinary engendered by structural violence, while Sulkowicz dares her voyeurs to re-up their own affective investments in her traumatic scene by flirting with the pornographic. Both strategies, faced with the impossibility of definitively reconstructing the ballistic trajectory of an event, respond by cranking up the volume on specific affects so the whole neighborhood can hear. In both cases, these affects sound blue. Blue bleeds across these works semantically, from blue notes to blue movies to a case of the blues, not to mention paraphernalia sold by Columbia University. Lacing depression with obscenity, attraction with void, blue is what it feels like to be caught in the gravitational curvature of an imploding event: the painter Wassily Kandinsky ([1911] 1946, 62–4) wrote that blue retreats concentrically from the eye like a snail curling into its shell. Subjects in the blue find themselves living with living in the shadow of an event even as they watch the air leak out of the fantasy that this life is less disappointing, less depressing, or less deflating than it actually is.

### Feeling blue

The psychologist Chester Pierce (1970, 265–6) coined the term *microaggression* to describe how the offensive mechanisms constituting everyday structural violence, “as opposed to a gross, dramatic, obvious *macro-aggression* such as lynching,” tend to be small, incessant, and individually innocuous. Microaggressions are minor, subtle, accretive happenings that multiply and aggregate, like a coral reef of slow death (see Berlant 2011, 95–119), into the “chronic, sustained disability” we call racism (Pierce 1970, 266). They make up the raw material of Claudia Rankine's (2014b) *Citizen: An American Lyric*. *Citizen* began life with the poet's interest in John Henryism, a term coined by the epidemiologist Sherman James (James, Hartnett, and Kalsbeek 1983) to describe racism's physiological costs (in James's original study, hypertension among black men). Eventually Rankine's project took a turn from physiology to affect, and specifically the ordinary affects coagulating around microaggressive incidents: “I asked a lot of friends and people I'd meet, ‘Can you tell me a story of a micro-aggression that happened to you in a place you didn't expect it to happen?’ I wasn't interested in scandal, or outrageous moments. I was interested

in the surprise of the intimate, or the surprise of the ordinary” (Rankine 2014a). Eventually, Rankine (2014b, 54, 13, 18) would narrate these anecdotes in the second person: the cashier asks if you’re sure your card will work, or a colleague complains to you about affirmative action, or your new therapist who specializes in trauma counseling yells at you to get off her lawn before realizing that you are here for your appointment.

A comment, a gesture, a sideways glance – some surging happening sets off affective charges, and the subject quickly tries to rig together modes of sensation that will keep the event or object anchored to affect’s phenomenality: “Don’t feel like you are mistaken. It’s not that (Is it not that?) you are oversensitive or misunderstanding” (Rankine 2014b, 152). But even if the subject successfully manages to pin down an event for the time being, that event will be at best an *example* of racism, never racism itself. And all examples are bad examples, since counterexamples are always in the offing: “Don’t be ridiculous. None of the other black friends feel that way” (Rankine 2014b, 152). Deflated, you might take solace in the knowledge that “how you feel is how you feel even if what you perceive isn’t tied to what is” (152). But this usually feels more like circling the phenomenological drain. On the one hand, you feel what you feel, but on the other, the infinite recursivity securing feeling’s legitimacy forms an autistic loop that cuts the immanent contents of consciousness off from the world’s transcendence (see Husserl [1931] 1960, 18–26). Now the higher-ups in your head are conducting psychic inquests to ascertain if posttraumatic symptoms have conspired to form what Freud ([1939] 1964, 76) describes as a “state within the state,” a kind of shadow government putting the psyche one successful coup d’état away from psychosis. The ensuing reality testing takes the form of an interrogation: “Who did what to whom on which day? Who said that? She said what? What did he just do? Did she really just say that? He said what? What did she do? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth?” (Rankine 2014b, 63).

This feels like a lot. What’s hurting might be history: “Each body is a strange beach, and if you let in the excess emotion you will recall the Atlantic Ocean breaking on our heads” (Rankine 2014b, 73). Enslavement, surely, was an event if there ever was one, the beating heart at the center of a dense arterial lattice “of passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling” (89). You’d think these things would enjoy a historical positivity unavailable to whatever’s happening in your therapist’s yard or on line at Starbucks. Here you might be tempted to take a cue from Marianne Hirsch (2012) and posit the existence of something like *black postmemory* as a kind of affective switchboard for the transgenerational transmission of traumatic events – assuming, that is, that you could somehow demonstrate that slavery was a thing of the past. Yet as Saidiya Hartman (2002, 758) writes, “The distinction between the past and the present founders on the interminable grief engendered by slavery and its aftermath. How might we understand mourning, when the event has yet to end?” Slavery and social death, all the massive and targeted forms of detention, shipment, concentration, extraction, negligence, and disposal, constitute happenings that in becoming coterminous with ordinary life have dispensed with the need to become proper historical events at all. It’s as if slavery’s gotten stalled out in what Husserl ([1928] 1964, 48–70) calls retention, that continuum of running-off phenomena that give, thickness to the present (like the earlier notes of an ongoing melody) without ever achieving an escape velocity sufficient to warrant reentry

in the form of recollected memories. In other words, slavery qua historical event *still hasn't stopped not happening*.

What's left for the subject is negotiating ordinary staying afloat in "the deep waters of everything backed up" (Rankine 2014b, 83). One way this feels is blue: "You exhaust yourself looking into the blue light. All day blue burrows the atmosphere" (70). There is a shift here from black to blue, event to affect; one of the several visual artworks printed into *Citizen's* pages is Carrie Mae Weems's *Blue Black Boy*, from her photography series *Colored People* (1989–90). The blue subject rallies what modes of depleted intentionality it can afford and turns to face the uneventful wreckage piling up in history's evacuated wake. There is no shock, no flash; nothing crystallizes. The storm blowing from paradise isn't a hurricane so much as a depression, and here there are no angels (see Benjamin [1942] 1968). Above all, Rankine is concerned with the ordinary, the clear blue sky out of which whatever happens happens, that "blue ceiling calling a body into the midst of azure, oceanic, as ocean blushes the blues it can't absorb, reflecting back a day" (Rankine 2014b, 75). The poet has neither the time nor the energy to declare a state of emergency; nonsovereignty proves exhausting enough. Being in the blue means constantly restructuring the subject's eventual debt in hopes of scraping together enough affective cash to make it through the next microaggressive episode. This doesn't mean, however, that violence takes the day off. *Citizen* also records its fair share of arrest, detainment, and death, and one page of the book memorializes by name Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, and other black people killed by the police. In fact, Rankine has continued to update this page since the book's first printing to reflect more recent killings: my edition includes 18 names followed by 10 lines reading simply "In Memory," as if in anticipation of future victims of police brutality – the ink on the page literally fading to white as the eye moves down the page. This page could be outrageous, or shocking, or numbing, or none of those things. Whatever the affect, though, here violence is sinking into banality. Even a lynching can be scheduled for a sunny day: "My brother hangs up though he is there. I keep talking. The talk keeps him there. The sky is blue, kind of blue. The day is hot" (90).

This penultimate line alludes to the Miles Davis record *Kind of Blue* (1959), which Rankine (2014c) wanted "to rinse the world of *Citizen* in a certain way." At the same time, the poet remains wary of an "automatic association between blackness and music," with the result that *Citizen's* blue affects circulate only ambivalently in the penumbra of black radicalism's blues tradition. Black feminists like Hortense Spillers (2003), Hazel Carby (1999), and Angela Davis (1998) have all written of classic female blues singers as organic intellectuals improvising on the genres of urban black female sexuality coming into focus in the early twentieth century. As Davis (1998, 3–41) in particular argues, blues queens like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith affectively negotiated the hostile conditions in which emergent black sexual freedom found itself, including traumatic sexual violence and domestic abuse, with a vibrant spectrum of public feelings: not just misery or despair, but also disappointment, resignation, contempt, defiance, humor, coolness, arousal, and enjoyment. Though little explicit sexuality figures into *Citizen's* pages, Rankine's blueness shares with blues cultures these affectively promiscuous modes of attachment to depleting, diminishing, or simply damaging objects or events: "In the darkened moment a body given blue light, a flashlight, enters with levity, with or without

assumptions, doubts, with desire, the beating heart, disappointment, with desires – ” (Rankine 2014b, 70). But *Citizen* is also interested in the kind of blue where attachment almost totally flatlines: “Leaving the day to itself, you close the door behind you and pour a bowl of cereal, then another, and would a third if you didn’t interrupt yourself with the statement – you aren’t hungry. // Appetite won’t attach you to anything no matter how depleted you feel” (79). Think of the first track on *Kind of Blue*, “So What,” whose bridge is distinguished from the verse by nothing but the shrug of a half tone. Blue is always just kind of blue: vague, flat, just hanging in there. In music theory, they call this *microtonality*, that shadow economy of blue notes that are nowhere to be found on a piano’s keyboard, flattened out between black and white.

It’s normal, then, if what’s hurting is hard to put your finger on: “You are not sick, you are injured— // you ache for the rest of life” (Rankine 2014b, 143). But this blue ache is nothing like that defensive crusting-over of the organism that Freud ([1920] 1955) called anxiety. On the contrary, “you take in things you don’t want all the time” (Rankine 2014b, 55). Affects arrive, postmarked by an event, solicitous: “Every day your mouth opens and receives the kiss the world offers” (154). The real problem is that once an affect’s in, it’s exceedingly difficult to demonstrate that it ever came from outside the subject – exit here the subject’s chances of distinguishing between baseball and broken window. Sianne Ngai (2005, 201) calls this the “blur between subjective and objective enunciation.” The subject now becomes an echo chamber in which the precise affective frequencies constituting the timbre of an event are iteratively amplified: “The second you hear or see some ordinary moment, all its intended targets, all the meanings behind the retreating seconds, as far as you are able to see, come into focus. Hold up, did you just hear, did you just say, did you just see, did you just do that?” (Rankine 2014b, 55). But the elephant in the room might turn out to be nothing but an affective elephantiasis – you might always be deluding yourself, or being too sensitive, or just plain mistaken. This undecidability – and it’s a real, honest undecidability – is part of what makes the microaggression so politically difficult. Micro-ness and aggressivity are mutually constituted: what hurts is how small, how politically inadmissible the microaggressive episode is, and how petty the subject feels for making a scene in the first place. (Why did you think they called it a racial *slight*?)

Moments like these find the subject idling in the break between two equally depressing alternatives. So something happened, get over it; no, nothing happened, get with it. But sometimes, something shifts, and attachment, despite itself, recalibrates: “You smile dumbly at the world because you are still feeling if only the feeling could be known and this brings on the moment you recognize as desire” (Rankine 2014b, 153). Managing desiring when all eventual guarantees have vanished into the blue means learning “how to care for the injured body, // the kind of body that can’t hold / the content it is living” (143). It’s a question of small ethics in a desiccated political present. This is how I take Rankine’s use of the second person: in defying the microaggression’s generic script, the second person simultaneously dispossesses an episode of whatever little probative value it might have had (if a first-person witness is unreliable, a second-person witness never even takes the stand) and, impossibly, validates that experience, not through corroboration but through sheer repetition, uninsured and redundant: *Yes, you did feel that way*. This tactic may feel politically unambitious, or even politically unviable. So what? It just means

that “just getting along shouldn’t be an ambition” (55). Citizens of the ordinary don’t always hit the streets, or fill the square, or make it to the next meeting. Sometimes you stay home, where an event has fallen and affect can’t get up: “You hold your head in your hands. You sit still. Rarely do you lie down. You ask yourself, how can I help you? A glass of water? Sunglasses? The enteric-coated tablets live in your purse next to your license. The sole action is to turn on tennis matches without the sound. Yes, and though watching tennis isn’t a cure for feeling, it is a clean displacement of effort, will, and disappointment” (62). It’s a pleasure too small for politics. Or even if you manage to get out of the house, just getting along might feel a lot like going nowhere: “Yes, and you do go to the gym and run in place, an entire hour running, just you and // your body running off each undesired desired encounter” (79). Events wane; affect piles up. This is study in blue.

### Working blue

In September 2014, during her senior year at Columbia University, a young Asian-American artist decided to carry a 50-pound navy-blue extra-long twin mattress wherever she went on campus. She called it *Mattress Piece (Carry That Weight)*. On September 21, Emma Sulkowicz and her mattress – identical in size and model to the standard-issue dorm mattress on which she reported having been raped two years prior – were on the cover of *New York* magazine, figureheads of a growing movement against campus sexual assault that was striking a chord in the national consciousness, not to mention federal policy. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Education had sent a “Dear Colleague” letter to campus administrators, politely reminding them that sexual harassment and sexual assault were civil rights violations under Title IX. Earlier in 2014, the Obama administration had formed a White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, citing the oft repeated statistic that one in five college women will be a survivor of sexual violence or attempted sexual violence by the time she graduates (see Doyle 2015, 121–22n12). In September, when *New York* magazine ran its profile on Sulkowicz, Vice President Joe Biden was in the midst of spearheading a campaign called “It’s On Us,” one of whose actions was to produce serious, high-definition PSAs featuring somber-faced male movie stars imploring American men to practice vigilant bystander intervention. In October, students on campuses across the U.S. held a National Day of Action, taking to the quad with mattresses of their own to claim solidarity with Sulkowicz. In November, *Rolling Stone* magazine published a harrowing account of a young woman at the University of Virginia who was brutally gang-raped at a fraternity party.

The stage was set, in other words, for a courtroom melodrama of national proportions, complete with “moral polarities of good and evil, overwhelmed victims, heightened affects of pain and suffering, grand gestures, astonishing feats of heroism, and the redemption of virtue” (Anker 2014, 2). Trauma and melodrama frequently travel together, the latter tapping into a generous fund of national sentimentality and moral credit in order to underwrite the former’s lease on platforms of political urgency and eventual panache it could have never afforded on its own. In this case, trauma was sexual – which is to say, classic. As legal scholar Jeannie Suk (2014, 213) points out, even as trauma’s clinical origins can be traced back to early twentieth-century cases of shell shock or war neurosis, “it has been the women’s movement – with its focus on sexual violence – that has carried the language

of trauma into both popular and legal conceptions of harm.” Indeed, especially on college campuses and despite the wide range of contexts in which it might now be deployed, the word *trauma* is arguably never not also a metonym for *rape*, as if every traumatizing event opened horizons of psychic devastation so bleak that the subject’s only rhetorical recourse was to style itself as a violated woman.

Under these conditions, calls from feminist scholars to detraumatize and dedramatize and rape narratives measuring women’s moral value in direct proportion to their sexual vulnerability must seem eminently sensible (see Marcus 1992; Hall 2004; Doyle 2015). Yet as Suk reminds us (2014, 214–15), trauma’s promises to wed bad affect to political solvency are rarely sufficient to cancel out “the troubled ambivalence about whether the events supposed to be the subject of traumatic memories are real.” Freud ([1896] 1962, [1933] 1964, 1985), for his part, famously backtracked on his so-called seduction theory just one year after proposing it, eventually deciding that the infantile sexual traumas reported by his female patients were not real events but fantasies, courtesy of a crazy little thing called Oedipus. This controversy would be reprised in the acrimonious psychiatric debates of the 1980s and 1990s concerning whether repressed traumatic memories of childhood abuse could be subsequently “recovered” through therapy (Haaken 1998). And so it went with campus rape. The *New York Times* and the *Daily Beast* published pieces allowing Sulkowicz’s accused rapist Paul Nungesser, whom Columbia had found “not responsible,” to give his version of events, the latter magazine including pages of amicable Facebook messages between Sulkowicz and Nungesser in the months following the alleged rape. Meanwhile, heads were set to roll at *Rolling Stone*, where “discrepancies” in its UVA gang-rape story drove the magazine to enlist (none other than) Columbia Journalism School to conduct an independent review of the report. The article was fully retracted in April 2015, with the strong implication that the alleged victim, perhaps to win a male friend’s affections, had fabricated the whole thing.

Trauma’s checks, in other words, may bounce as often as they clear. But the tricky thing about trauma is not deciding whether or not, for instance, Sulkowicz was actually raped – and I believe she was – so much as managing the affective double take that follows the traumatic disturbance. On the one hand, it’s a tragedy, a crisis, a national epidemic; congressmen are called, petitions are signed, feet are put down. On the other hand, it’s an embarrassment, it’s a hoax, it’s fake news, or at very least, it’s overwrought, desperate, petty, frivolous, infantile, and indulgent. She probably just wants the attention. This ambivalence I take to be integral to trauma’s affective structure. It’s what made it possible, for instance, for Sulkowicz’s *Mattress Piece* to register in the national consciousness as, simultaneously, raw and overdone. So when it comes to proposals for detraumatizing sexual assault, it’s crucial to remember that trauma and drama are not the same thing. In many cases, I suspect, what passes for a deflationary tactic may have already skipped over the ways in which traumatic events prophylactically trigger and absorb their own deflations while in so doing *maintaining themselves as traumatic*. It’s these scenes, where trauma decompresses or melodrama mellows into something ordinary, awkward, standard-issue, and person-sized – call it a twin mattress – that interest Sulkowicz most. After all, the most literal interpretation of *Mattress Piece* is that whatever trauma is, it’s *not* unbearable.

One would never get this sense from, say, President Obama, speaking at the launch of the “It’s On Us” campaign: “For anybody whose once-normal, everyday life was suddenly

shattered by an act of sexual violence, the trauma, the terror can shadow you long after one horrible attack” (quoted in Somanader 2014). (Note the barely implicit parallels with 9/11.) But for Sulkowicz, what’s overwhelming is not that everyday life has been shattered but that it *hasn’t been*: trauma scuttles the event, but affect doesn’t go down with the ship. Often such continuity is more menacing than its contraries – especially in rape cases, where rape shield laws notwithstanding, clever defense lawyers continue to find ways to introduce complainants’ sexual histories as evidence of consent (Anderson 2002). But I am not certain that Sulkowicz’s pessimism about her chances of institutional redress implies an optimism about other strategies of recovery, either. Lynda Hart (1998), for instance, has brilliantly described how lesbian sadomasochistic practices can repeat, magnify, and modify scenes of sexual trauma into sites of sustaining fantasies and psychic repair. But Sulkowicz doesn’t even seem all that interested in working through. On the contrary, when feminism’s self-appointed gadfly Camille Paglia (2015) smugly opined that she would give *Mattress Piece* “a D” for being a “protracted masochistic exercise,” Sulkowicz (2016) responded sharply on Instagram (where her handle is, wonderfully, @emsulk): “Many people ask me how I’ve ‘healed’ from my assault, as if healing were another word for ‘forgetting about it,’ ‘getting over it,’ or even ‘shutting up about it’... The phrases – suck it up, move on, and get over it – are violence.” Affect isn’t going anywhere, and neither is Sulkowicz. *Mattress Piece* is a work of pure, almost formalist, endurance, an instruction manual for getting a handle on a collapsed event’s affective weight.

Sulkowicz would end up carrying that great blue weight all the way to her graduation ceremony in May 2015, where Columbia University president Lee Bollinger mysteriously managed to avoid shaking her hand as she and her mattress crossed the stage. A month later, Sulkowicz released a new work of performance art called *Ceci N’est Pas Un Viol* (2015), the title alluding to the famous pipe from René Magritte’s paintings *La trahison des images* (1929) and *Les deux mystères* (1966). Hosted at a publicly accessible website of the same name, Sulkowicz’s piece features an eight-minute video, split security camera-style into four screens, depicting a graphic sexual encounter between a woman of color and a white man on a mattress in a dorm room. The man, whose face is blurred throughout, looks white and pudgy; the woman, with her trademark blue bob, appears to be Sulkowicz herself. If *Mattress Piece* was about an event that doesn’t materialize, *Ceci N’est Pas Un Viol* is about the affects that do. In the video, something happens; one thing leads to another, or several things, maybe. He goes down on her, she fucks him, he hits her, she asks for it again; he chokes her, takes off his condom, and anally penetrates her, or that is what it might look like. She tells him to stop; each struggles for something. Some of it seems consensual, some of it not, some of it neither: the affects are vague, uneven, and jagged, elevated one moment, flat the next, almost as if they don’t always know what they’re doing here. He leaves, a bit abruptly; she remains on the mattress, curled up in the crater of an event that had already burned up in the atmosphere. Eventually she leaves the room in a towel, comes back, and dresses the mattress – navy-blue, extra-long, and about fifty pounds, if one had to guess – in Columbia-blue bed sheets. She’s made her bed; now she lies in it. What’s happened, if happened it has, is not the video’s to decide. All we know is that *ceci n’est pas un viol* – this is not a rape.

Or more precisely, as Sulkowicz writes in her artist’s statement, “Everything that takes place in the following video is consensual but may resemble rape. It is not a reenactment,

but may seem like one.” One must resist, therefore, any temptation to treat this performance’s title as if it simply referred to the kind of double negativity that Richard Schechner (1985) famously associates with all performance, as if this were not a rape in the same sense that the actor playing Hamlet is not Hamlet. In this case, one would still be laboring under the misapprehension that each affective flare the video’s participants send up bore a mimetic relation to some original event. But there’s something more interesting going on here than one thing’s *being like* another thing. As Sulkowicz (2015) writes in her artist’s statement: “*Ceci N’est Pas Un Viol* is not about one night in August, 2012. It’s about your decisions, starting now. It’s only a reenactment if you disregard my words. It’s about you, not him.” The accent here is on *ceci*, not *viol*. As Foucault (1983, 26–31) observes apropos of Magritte, what’s truly baffling about the sentence “This is not a pipe” is the meaning of the first word, not the last. Granted, this is not a pipe. But which *this* is this – the drawing of the pipe, the text beneath it, the whole painting, the occasion of its being viewed? Sulkowicz wants to know how *this* feels, whatever’s happening right here, right now, whatever’s circulating among artist, participant, video, and viewer – not an evental wound but the affects clotting around it. This comes at a cost. Focusing on affect at the event’s expense not only brackets the rape’s factual status (“well, *was she?*”) but also deflates the otherwise high-stakes poker game New York state law now calls “affirmative consent.” For if everything in the video is consensual, as Sulkowicz claims, then any mimetic relationship between performance and event would only demonstrate, however alarmingly, that something that looks like rape *might not be* rape. In John Locke’s ([1689] 1980, 63–4) original theory of express and tacit consent, what counted as the tacit consent was decided through the symbolic investiture of certain mute acts (for instance, owning land) which could then be taken *as if* they were express declarations. Here the relationship would be reversed: speech acts which expressly withheld or revoked consent at the constative level might nonetheless tacitly grant consent when taken as performatives, however infelicitous (Austin 1962, 12–24).

One therefore has to take Sulkowicz deadly seriously. This is *not* a rape. It’s some people having sex on camera, and it’s also you, watching them do it. Sulkowicz is working blue – and that something unfit for daytime television might be going on here has not escaped her many online detractors. In the over 5000 (mostly hostile) comments in the site’s open comment section, many viewers claim to have used (or tried to use) the video as masturbatory material, and not long after the site went live, the video was posted on popular pornographic websites like *Pornhub*, where it currently has over 87,000 views. As alt-right provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos (2015) put it in his review, “If you know what hentai is, you’ll be familiar with the spectacle of a blue-haired Asian woman screaming for it all to stop whilst not really meaning it.” But Sulkowicz is already two steps ahead: not only has she made the wonderfully counter-intuitive decision that the best response to being publicly reviled as a slut and a whore for nine months was to put a video of herself having sex on the Internet, but she charts the ensuing collision course in terms of the *viewer’s* affective trajectory: “Do you desire pleasure? Do you desire revulsion? Is this to counteract your unconscious enjoyment? What do you *want* from this experience?” (Sulkowicz 2015). Awkward camera angles, unflattering fluorescent lighting, flat or illegible affect, an absence of non-diegetic sound, and the always disappointing unspectacularity of unprofessional sex all bring *Ceci N’est Pas Un Viol* squarely within the longstanding generic parameters of amateur pornography, if not the celebrity sex

tape (Paasonen 2011, 71–114; Hillyer 2004). Even the piece’s trigger warning anticipates and grants entry to styles of pornographic spectatorship: “If at any point you are triggered or upset, please proceed with caution and/or exit this website. However, I do not mean to be prescriptive, for many people find pleasure in feeling upset” (Sulkowicz 2015). Indeed, following the powerful work of Celine Parreñas Shimizu (2007), Mireille Miller-Young (2014), Jennifer Nash (2014), and Juana María Rodríguez (2014) – each of whom refuses, in her own way, the political blackmail that deports pornography’s fraught racial and sexual enjoyments from any respectable critic’s domain – one might argue that *Ceci N’est Pas Un Viol* makes room for resignifying strategies calibrated to extract from sexually traumatic conditions genres of ecstasy, fantasy, erotic sovereignty, and even political resistance that might make living in the shadow of the event less unlivable.

These works are trenchant perforations of normativity’s prize fantasy – namely, that the machines of systemic violence really are as well-oiled as they look – and I share with them the breathtakingly simple acknowledgment that trauma’s being beyond the pleasure principle does not for all that put it beyond *pleasure*. Yet I hesitate where ascriptions of critical redeployment are concerned. Claiming, as Rodríguez (2014, 180, 140) does, that subjects “rewrite” the scripts of their subjection into opportunities for “recovering pleasure” assumes not only a discrete, however frequently reiterating, event of subjection through which pleasure was initially lost, but also degrees of self-consciousness and critical distance foreign if not hostile to the banality of many or most kinds of pleasure, as if pleasure’s function (pleasure has a function?) was effectively prophylactic or palliative. What a resignification model cannot handle, in other words – and what Sulkowicz dares us to countenance – is when enjoyment, or anything else that isn’t injury, comes about not the second time, but the first. It seems to me that this guarantee – that structural violence will hurt the first time around, unequivocally – is precisely the rug that’s pulled out from under the subject’s feet in the nonevent I’ve been calling trauma. I have similar reservations, therefore, about the political value these authors occasionally attribute to pleasure. I am unsure how pleasure *is* political, just like that, other than by the fiat of a copula; and I am desperately unsure, in any case, that anyone would want to live in a world where pleasure was justified only in proportion to its political bona fides.

This open-door policy for pleasure is what makes Sulkowicz’s blue movie *difficult*, as Jennifer Doyle (2013) would say – that is, one which it is basically impossible for well-meaning left-leaning critical academics to view without feeling personally politically compromised. The piece’s terms and conditions – “Do not watch this video if your motives would upset me, my desires are unclear to you, or my nuances are indecipherable” (Sulkowicz 2015) – are violated on sight. Our motives *might* upset her, her desires *are* unclear – and whoever heard of a decipherable nuance? But even this, if we’re being honest, is not what makes criticism hesitate; if affirmative consent were required for every reading, we’d all be out of a job. What gives us pause, I suspect, is pornography’s capacity for leaving its viewers feeling more than a little affectively handled. Many of those with whom I have discussed Sulkowicz’s work have admitted, in so many words, that they have not watched the video, not principally because they fear that a violent event will be depicted (although they may *have* this fear), but because they fear that, on some level, they will *enjoy* it. Perhaps this is because we are, many of us, still second-wave feminists at heart, terrified that if rape is the practice, pornography will turn out to be the theory. But this is Sulkowicz’s challenge to us: if the ground rules of *Mattress Piece* specified that

Sulkowicz could accept help in carrying the mattress but could not seek it out, here she's asking for it. That the affects Sulkowicz's blue movie asks us to risk having – not just good political feelings like fear or anger but also embarrassment, arousal, interest, and enjoyment – seem so wildly inappropriate to the event in whose grave presence we suppose we are supposed to be only proves Sulkowicz's point: namely, that a mismatch between affect and event is *what trauma feels like*. This is not a rape. It might be bad politics, or not safe for work. It might, too, be study in blue.

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## Notes

1. My use of terms like *episode*, *situation*, or *happening*, as well as this paper's broad concern with what it takes for something to become an event (or not), is deeply indebted to Lauren Berlant's (2011) work on emerging genres of the event in *Cruel Optimism*.
2. By *affect*, I do *not* mean by anything preconscious or unconscious, since I take it as axiomatic that affects *must be felt* in order to be affects at all. But this does not mean that all affects are equally available to propositional thought or thematic language. Occasionally, an affect is discrete, easily identified, and localizable within subjective experience, and then we call it an *emotion*: anger or sadness, for example. Most of the time, however, affects are vague, fuzzy, overlapping, inconsistent, or unevenly distributed between subject and object. These are ontological, rather than epistemological, distinctions: a fuzzy affect is fuzzy in itself, like a blurry photograph. Accordingly, in describing affects, one must often make recourse to the ordinary, whether in the form of idiom (getting the blues, riding high), slang (dgaf, fml), onomatopoeia (meh), or even gesture (facepalm). Hence this essay's frequent reliance upon ordinary language.

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