

love letters to the enemy; *four letters tracing the phenomenology of intimacy*

Over the last six weeks, the students and professors of Conjunctures have investigated the concept of intimacy, without being able to give it closure. Grappling with intimacy reveals it to never quite be a relation between co-equal objects, nor really much of an affect, but a rather protean sense of nothing more than presence. This means that the object that intimacy stands for, the intimate object, can hold many different positions in relation to the affective subject of intimacy: it can be an overwhelming sense of class antagonism; it can be the sense of the unavoidable bonds of necessity; it can be a negative sense of the diversity of relations lost to the ravages of technocratic capitalism; or it can be an orienting force towards the other, on which we build sociality and revolutionary possibility. Intimacy can be a condition for affects ranging from desperation to longing to nostalgia to solidarity to love. Each of our following four letters addresses one such experience, one experience that we can name intimacy.

Crucially, between the various cases we each call intimate, there are certain things that hold true, and which can help us navigate our four letters together, or at least which held true as we iterated on the concept over the period of the course. Firstly, intimacy is phenomenal and experiential. It is primarily an experience of spatial arrangement, which figures oneself as being in vicinity to another body. But this is also a spatial arrangement in a given time, be that time a total moment of crisis or a seemingly never-ending period of subsistence; in either case, the inescapability of the present is felt *as* the inescapable vicinity of the intimate other. It is not enough to say we feel close to another person, or that two people happen to be near each other: in intimacy, we feel the present and its *everything* in the embrace of the proximate body.

This problem of inescapability is introduced and made itself the intimate object of our first letter. Connie writes from a night bus, on little sleep, responding to Hira Nabi's film *All That Perishes at the Edge of Land*, all while utilizing the moment to narrate a sense of desperation. Here, intimacy is an awareness of all the things one cannot choose about one's own actions, for which specific intimate others (that week termed as "infrastructure" or "logistics") are held responsible as bearers of overwhelming circumstance: the village, the capitalist, the broken ship, the night bus. In so doing, she asks a question that follows through the other three letters: What does it mean to live or act when out is "out of options"?

Not to say one is ever *actually* out of options. One could simply not hand in the assignment, or sleep on the bus, or stop working on the ship, or die. There are myriad ways to engage in what we might term as *refusal*, in terms as absolute as refusal of survival. We might remind ourselves of Bartleby, the protagonist of Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street", who proclaims repeatedly "I would prefer not to", refusing work, food, and existence itself. Bartleby's cause-without-cause was, of course, taken up by Deleuze in 1989 as "the formula", a totally transformative negative utterance. Later, Hardt and Negri would briefly refer to Bartleby in *Empire*, in which they celebrate Bartleby's negative ability to refuse the work of capital and empire as the "beginning of a liberatory politics" before concluding that Bartleby's refusal might only be meaningful inasmuch as it can then positively suggest an alternative: "The refusal in itself is empty" (Hardt and Negri 204).

But in either case, whether refusal comes with a propositional payload or comes alone, to valorize refusal can mean to ignore that so few *do* refuse, seemingly because the intimate other suffocates the option. How could one refuse work, when holding responsibility towards the village, or to the brother, or to the ship-to-be-broken? This means that burdens and responsibilities become quickly interchangeable. Responsibility, as much as it can be for love, could as easily feel like a trap. *Why did I sign up for this?* But given the acceptance and melancholy of the workers filmed in *All That Perishes*, Connie then presents the possibility that the sensation of intimacy is not what leads *to* desperation but what comes *out of* desperation; It may be that intimacy is that which allows those caught in the conjuncture to make sense of the lack of agency they possess within it. We sign up for intimacy and its responsibility because without it the burden becomes entirely faceless; it is a choice to give a name to our choicelessness.

This leads us to our second question, posed by Lisa: How can a relationship defined by the sense of intimacy be authentic, or any relation found in moments of hardship and crisis? In other words, how can companionship be genuine under duress, when without choice? Lisa's letter, responding to the film *Nickel Boys* and Sadiya Hartman's book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, began to address this problem of the genuine experience of intimate relations by stepping towards the viscosity of intimacy, and how it is made manifest in the body. The figures of Elwood and Turner, of *Nickel Boys*, and Mabel, of *Wayward Lives*, experience the world head-on in an entirely subjective and embodied way, given how these characters are "thrown together", or in the words of Moten and Harney, "in the hold". They encounter the world and its limitations not in abstraction but through their flesh, through touch, proximity, pain and care. This allows us to articulate a Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology of intimacy.

For Merleau-Ponty, our experience of the world is always mediated through our bodies. "Everything that you know about the world," he writes, "you know from a perspective that is your own from an experience of the world without which scientific symbols would be meaningless" (Merleau-Ponty 9). Our knowledge, perception and sense of being inseparable from our embodiment. To perceive the world is to be *in* it, to be located in a particular body, at a particular time, in a particular place. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, then, is the study of this lived, first-person experience, before it is reduced to objective data or theory.

Merleau-Ponty also describes the phenomenological world as not "pure being," but rather as the sense *that shines forth* at the intersection of personal experiences and the experiences of others, what he calls a "gearing into each other" (Merleau-Ponty 21). This phrase captures how we exist relationally; our bodies and experiences are always in contact, influencing and shaping one another. The three characters Lisa responds to – Elwood, Turner and Mabel – embody this concept powerfully. Their being-in-the-world is defined by constant contact, collision and dependency. The "gearing into each other" that Merleau-Ponty speaks of is here not smooth or symmetrical but marked by violence, survival and necessity.

This relationality is intensified by historical and structural inequalities. Their "being with others" is shaped by what Frantz Fanon would call the racialized and colonial conditions of embodiment (Fanon 90-110). For Elwood and Turner, being black in the white supremacist world of *The Nickel Boys* means that their bodily experience of the world is already

interpreted through domination. Their bodies are not neutral sites of perception but targets of control, punishment and dehumanization. Similarly, for Mabel in Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, her queerness and black femininity further compound her alienation. Her body is not a transparent vessel of experience but a terrain of struggle, both her own and the world's.

This brings us to an important complication. If, as Merleau-Ponty claims, all knowledge of the world arises from our embodied, subjective experience, what happens when one's body is not allowed to *experience* freely, when one's perception is systematically denied, silenced or distorted by power? Or, as Connie earlier asked, when one's experience is desperately captured and held in the intimate other? This question is central to Sara Ahmed's phenomenological work, which explicitly addresses how race, gender and sexuality shape orientation in the world.

Ahmed asks: who can actually have experiences in this world, and whose experiences count as meaningful? Her concept of "orientation" describes how bodies are situated in space, some aligned with the world, others misaligned or pushed to its margins. In this sense, *phenomenological access* to the world is unequally distributed. The privileged body moves easily through space, its perspective treated as universal. Meanwhile, marginalized bodies – like those of Elwood, Turner and Mabel – must constantly negotiate spaces that are not made for them. Their embodied experiences are obstructed, constrained or rendered invisible (Ahmed 148-149).

Elwood and Turner are denied the freedom to experience their bodies as subjects because their blackness is treated as a problem to be controlled. Mabel, as Hartman describes her, longs to live in a world that allowed her to be comfortable in her own skin. Her dream is phenomenological at its core: she desires a world in which her bodily experience can be her own, not constantly mediated by the violence of racist and heteronormative structures. But this possibility is precisely what she is denied. In Ahmed's terms, Mabel's body is disoriented; she cannot inhabit the world in a way that feels natural or self-confirming, because the world itself refuses her recognition (Ahmed 151).

Here, the limits of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology become clear. His descriptions of embodied subjectivity assume that all subjects have relatively equal access to the world of

perception, that anyone can experience and make sense of the world through their body. But, as Ahmed and Fanon remind us, the world is not given equally to everyone. To perceive, to move, to “gear into” others is already structured by histories of racism, sexism and colonialism. The world Merleau-Ponty describes depends on a neutrality that does not exist for the racialized or gendered subject (Fanon 110). He gives us the tools to understand how experience is embodied and relational, but Ahmed reminds us that some bodies are never permitted to simply experience, they must fight for a right to feel. Phenomenology is thus never separate from politics; to describe how the world appears to us also means asking for whom the world appears and who is denied that appearance altogether.

It follows to ask: what phenomenology is required to name a *lack* of intimacy, or a *loss* of intimacy? To name intimacy as not something in the present but as something experienced as past evinces an approach that can contend with the issue of modernity and its objectivist arc, and might open possibilities of redeeming subjectivist intimacies hidden in the rubble of history. Our third letter, by Momo Sakai, critically examines the administrative system of the Six Thousand Ship depicted in Olga Ravn’s novel, *The Employees*, showing how the constant pursuit of maximum efficiency seeks to remove subjective human elements, especially emotions, doubts, and intimacy, by treating them as dangerous flaws. This systemic condition can be seen as the full manifestation of a tendency criticized by both Edmund Husserl in his early transcendental phenomenology and Byung-Chul Han in contemporary social theory.

Husserl argued that modern science, driven by its path toward Objectivism—the view that only objective facts constitute truth—lost sight of the genuine foundation of knowledge: the life-world. The life-world is the pre-scientific, subjective, and immediately lived domain of experience that we perceive as self-evident reality through our bodies and senses. For Husserl, neglecting this subjective substratum represented the core crisis of European science (Husserl 6).

While Husserl’s critique concerns the epistemological crisis of meaning, Byung-Chul Han’s analysis in *The Transparency Society* addresses the socio-technological domination of communication itself. He posits that modern society is transforming into a “transparency society”. This transformation is fueled by a compulsive drive to maximize “throughput” and efficiency by eliminating every form of negativity, which includes ambiguity, delay, and deep reflection. Han’s portrayal is that of a society of control, where everything is deemed valuable

only when it is rendered as accessible information, visible, and placed under systemic surveillance (Han 35; 39).

The committee's dominance aboard the Six Thousand Ship, as described in Sakai's letter, stands precisely at the intersection of Husserl's and Han's critiques. From a Husserlian perspective, the committee's attitude of treating employees merely as elements or parts is an extreme manifestation of Objectivism. It embodies the reduction of the human being from a living entity endowed with subjective experience to an abstract, calculable variable that merely constitutes an objective system. The entire system aboard the ship, in this sense, aims for the comprehensive dissolution of the life-world. The subjective realm, which grounds all meaning and experience, is violently suppressed in favor of pure, sterile functionality.

Furthermore, the committee's explicit plan to discover any emotional deviation early on and implement mechanisms for more finely calibrated control aligns perfectly with the logic of Han's Transparency Society. Intimacy, affection, and emotional vulnerability are considered opaque noise—unpredictable factors that threaten the systemic goal of efficient task execution. The goal of the system is thus to immediately detect, categorize, and manage this noise as an anomaly to ensure uninterrupted flow. Thus, the ship's operating system merges two serious philosophical anxieties: the annihilation of the life-world lamented by Husserl, and the complete dominion of the transparency society criticized by Han.

Despite this pervasive and seemingly total control, the novel hints at a powerful counter-possibility. The question arises: why do the humanoids—the perfect, non-subjective elements—begin to exhibit signs of emotion even though the system has attempted to take away names from humans and completely eliminate inefficiencies such as intimacy and emotion? In a world where AI is constantly learning and seeking to assimilate all of global knowledge, it is plausible that the emergence of emotion in these artificial entities is rooted not in a systemic error, but in a certain necessity that operates beyond the calculus of efficiency.

This suggests that intimacy may be more than a mere inefficiency; it might be an essential transcendental condition for existence (or for becoming fully human/humanoid), a condition that surpasses the pure logic of objective laws, calculation, and efficiency—echoing the philosophical lineage from Kant to Husserl. If the life-world, which Husserl sought to recover, is indeed the fundamental ground upon which all knowledge and experience are

built, then intimacy, as an essential constituent of that lived world, may be a basis of existence itself, non-erasable by systemic logic (Husserl 141). The modern paradox presented in the conclusion of the letter—using a cutting-edge AI like ChatGPT to review an essay written about the necessity of human intimacy—further complicates this issue. We cannot realistically return to the pure, unmediated life-world that Husserl envisioned. Instead, the struggle to preserve intimacy is no longer waged outside technology but is unfolding within its infrastructure.

Intimacy is being redefined by the very technical systems that mediate it. As the letter suggests, this redefinition forces intimacy to take a new, often uneasy form: an undeniable closeness between human vulnerability and technological frameworks. In contemporary society, the most fundamental elements of what it means to be human are managed by systems yet simultaneously, they persistently assert themselves, continually emerging through the infrastructure's gaps. The preservation of the human element has, therefore, adopted a far more challenging and precarious form.

This kind of phenomenological approach echoes Heidegger's early Neo-Luddism and later ambivalence towards the technological, as defacing categories of care and intimacy that precede capitalist modernity. This means we still work in gloomy terms; intimacy is something we symptomatize, either as itself a symptom of a condition of powerlessness, or as something lost to modernity. Nonetheless, we still see brief flashes of a redeeming possibility of liberatory intimacy, in the body, or the transcendental recovery of intimacy from the past. But perhaps the most exciting possibility unfolds in the formal quality of our letters, in the four movements between the first letter and the last letter, the performative address of the speakers ("hey gang", "warmly", "with human affection", "love xx"). This is the possibility of the lyricism we employ to name ourselves, to name our circumstances and conjunctures, and also to name the others we address. These assignments were written as intimate letters without choice; that was the nature of the assignment. Nonetheless, the salutations we choose to employ in these letters, in intimate address, speak to a sociality in which one chooses how to name that which we cannot choose.

According to Lacan, not even our name belongs to us. By this he means that, as subjects, we enter a world that names us—offering us a semantic field in which we will construct *our* world. Our name is chosen by the other, and only a few ever reshape or rename themselves throughout their lives. There do exist, however, many other reformulations of who we are:

students, professionals, teachers, lovers, children, parents, grandparents, enemies. These identities, too, are given by the other as well, insofar as we live within a crossing of names that precede our own act of naming ourselves. Universities, families, etc. We assume roles and move across them.

Phenomenology is that branch of philosophy that brings forth the essential into existence, according to Merleau-Ponty's very words in the introduction to his *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 7). That is to say, it provokes thought around the phenomenon that occurs mostly within the senses and orientations, in the moment prior to the emergence of language. This helps us think through the many edges and corners of the web of letters we write in an intimacy directed toward a world *almost* too blurred to read. First, we might think that to wish to name is also an act of *moving toward the world, or moving away from oneself in order to go toward it*, a form of relation with that which needs to be named, whether as a student, a political activist, or a lover. This act of orientation toward something suggests that intimacy always seeks a recipient, or at least a place to fall into that is not the self. Someone who can read us—or name us—in order to validate both: the existence of the content, and the existence of the one who elaborates it, as well as the existence of its echo far from us. The phenomenological reservoir behind this has to do with the choreography that precedes writing: the moment before one can name a memory. It is the action that speaks more of the context than the word itself. Let's say: the intimacy within these letters to our peers seeks to situate itself and to grant access to being read, precisely because it has not yet a shape with title.

As we once discussed among ourselves, intimacy must be made of artificial components, always in relation and in resistance to the concept of the naturalness of the intimate. The artificial here could be the very *poetry* of writing itself, or the eclectic narration between critique and politics, between the somatic of a writing body and the symptom of a social body waiting for information. Naturalization always carries artifice, and within that artifice we, as readers, find a bridge toward the fantasy of the narrative: how do we leap into a foreign scene that nonetheless speaks of a world of our own? At what point does the public start? And then: what are the fake stages through which we explore subjective truths?

Bringing in certain light ideas from Marx — almost as a premonition of the world that, two hundred years later, would appear before his still-gazing eyes (and invoking the ghosts

Derrida summons as the material past of the world) — intimacy reveals itself as a space of production. It is precisely there, where the intimate becomes scenic as a space, that phenomenology steps in to organize these problems. Intimacy situates itself somewhere, and takes direction toward an addressee. It looks, imaginatively, at an Other who needs it. In other words, intimacy takes place in the very sites where we name it: a love letter written at four in the afternoon in a café, beside a copy of *Late Capitalism*, with a call from my mother coming in, and a cup of coffee that cost me more than five euros and is already a bit cold. This situated conjuncture reads as a phenomenon in itself, because many of these things cannot yet be fully named—the Other, the social, are not yet part of the reading. It is simply the self—the one-for-itself, the one with the lukewarm coffee—who validates its own existence by naming it within a landscape that gestures toward another.

At the same time, if these letters problematize, what is the amalgamating force of the intimate that places text, writer, and utterance in a non-hierarchical distance? In the love letters and messages exchanged between Merce Cunningham and John Cage, this becomes perfectly visible to an eye that still keeps watching: the story of a failed piece, a new experiment, the shared readings of the crisis of common sense in their time, or the fabric of a curtain in some lost American theater—all alongside the saying of *I miss you*, and the admission that one cooks while the other washes the dishes (Cage). That correspondence, stripped of hierarchy because in the intimate everything matters, makes us wonder: at what point did we drift away from ourselves in order to sustain a fiction of control over what cannot be controlled?

letters among us

Session 2: Held by Logistics

Connie Walden

Hey gang,

I am writing this to you at least in part on a night bus at two in the morning. I expect the following to be less cohesive than I'd like as a result. Maybe because when looking at the sign-up sheet for this assignment, the only available session left in all groups was this session, on an already-too-busy week.

Desperation, this week, feeling out of options; I could also say it's because of my poor time management, hurdles found in starting ADHD medicine for the first time, the pharmacy not having my new Concerta prescription, the migraines. This last night, having worked as a sound tech at a karaoke event, having heard from the host "this song is the last song, I swear!" around a dozen times, desperate for the music to end, desperate to get home, desperate to finish this assignment. When I get home and keep writing, I will be frustratingly aware of how each minute I spend writing is a minute less I will get to rest before my morning classes, the too-littleness of time, the encroaching of its horizon.

Talk about first world problems! Chalk it up to my being some kind of antagonist class between bourgeois and labor aristocracy, like the rest of you. If I were being more honest, what I'm feeling strongly about is political desperation rather than these small pains of student living; it feels like my only option is to stay this busy, that I might stay in the Netherlands at all, that I might avoid heading back home to the States, which becomes increasingly scary for increasingly dumb reasons. And more and more often—maybe all the time now—I feel desperate for this historical moment to end, for the stupidity of this failing world to be over, for the (entirely fantastical!) day to come, the day people will be hooting and hollering in the streets, the day possibility becomes itself possible again, the day or month or year or century the ever-increasingly-late stage of capital becomes, I don't know, literally anything else. It feels like it's the thirty-second inning on a tie game and they're

trotting out the pitcher with a sore arm again. (Did you know baseball has unlimited overtime?)

To then listen to the workers in the shipbreaking yard of *All that Perishes at the Edge of Land* speak about “that desperation which alters all circumstances” is both humbling and appallingly illuminating. I want to briefly consider how this feeling of desperation operates in Hira Nabi’s film and in our theoretical readings for today. What does one do when one is out of options? How are the circumstances altered by that desperation?

In *All that Perishes*, I find that the desperation alters the relationship between the workers, the people, the proletariat, and the capitalist infrastructure around them. I would have thought it was the stupid fucking ship’s fault. Really! Nabi tries with the voice-over monologues to present the genius loci of the Ocean Master as well-intentioned and really just there to hang out with little fishies. See: it’s also dying, it doesn’t want to hurt you, it’s not an antagonist. This old-and-wise figure (which really was only 22 years old before its breaking) becomes half of an invented dialogue between the ship and the workers dissecting it. So when a speaker starts by saying “your question is sweet and naïve”, though they are probably speaking to Nabi, who presumably actually asked the question, the filmmaker redirects the claim, the burden of utopianism and naïveté, to the voiceless object of a ship. Nabi is indeed making the claim that Ocean Master is a sweet and naive gentle soul. But to speak of this ship as such is indeed only a projection, only a displacement of one’s own desire for gentleness and naivete, or one’s own desire for the massive thing which is claiming one’s life, from which there is no escape, to not truly hate you, for God and the world to not hate you. For this massive, massive ship to not hate you. Desperation in this instance seems to require an intimacy (I said the word) with the inflexible infrastructure which sustains it.

Nabi is not making this move alone; she’s retracing the workers of the film, displacing and investing their own desires alternately onto figures like the nation, the village, the parent, the comrade, the brother. All of these figures are of inevitability; there will always come another worker if one should leave, and he will be your brother. There will always be a village one remembers, and yet not be able to return to. These describe a total present, an optionlessness—call it capitalist realism or proletarian pessimism—which disturbs itself as much as sustains itself through the desire of the worker to bring money to the country, to the village, the brother, to do the work which everybody knows, of course, needs to be done. In

this condition of desperation it is seemingly impossible to be truly forsaken, inasmuch as one's own desire retools what the optionlessness is, narrows desire to a single point, calling that survival.

The paradoxical option of one that is optionlessness is of course total and yet surprisingly fragile upon the introduction of alterity, escape, refuge, transformation. In Khalili's foregrounding of the migrant ship as "not only a repository of hopes, desperate dreams and the courageous will of the wretched of the earth but also a weathervane for the fortunes of capital accumulation", the short phrase "but also" does a massive amount of work in uneasily suspending causality and keeping open the question of optionlessness, desperation, or in Khalili's terming, captivity (466). Are the migrants utilizing ghost boats and inflatable rafts optionless when they charter a boat that may sink? There is a real risk, of course, a real pressure put to the edges of the one option, survival; that surviving better might mean not surviving at all, itself an opening up of all the possibilities that are not survival, for better or for worse. And indeed, Khalili points

out that the possibility of migration is opened up within the conjuncture by the need for a reserve labor army in Europe; and yet the whole operation threatens to undo the conditions of optionlessness in the first place.

Larkin (who annoyed me to read) similarly notes that infrastructural projects, when they become possible as options, become seized upon as opportunities to try, to try anything at all. This might look like grandiosity, it might look like Lenin's light, it might look like highways made for no cars (333–336). Larkin describes these (frustratingly!) as simultaneously acting at an affective level as well as "at the level of surface, what Buck-Morss refers to as the terminae of the outside of the body—skin, nose, eye, ear—rather than the mind inside"—which is to say not at the level of affect at all (337). What a contradiction! But if we take the affective experience of options and optionlessness to be desperation I think we might be on the right track to understand this, the extent to which infrastructure exists as the border of material and political option, and a state of constant self-negation (which Larkin notes is the manner of liberalism after all).

I wish I could go on with the Chua as well and address the concept of “vulnerability” in relation to “intimacy” and, of course, the precarity of optionlessness when the second option might appear. But I would like to sleep and I am at word count; I am out of options.

Session 3: Wayward Friendships, Archival Intimacies, Otherworldly fantasies

Lisa Beverdam

Dear penpals,

To start this letter, I need to first admit that I needed to look up the meaning of the word ‘wayward’. As someone who grew up Dutch in a relatively big city yet not an international one, my English is sometimes not a I wish it to be. Even though I have written many essays in English during my bachelors, there are still words that leave me confused. So, I looked up the meaning for the word ‘wayward’ and its connection to friendships, and immediately understood and related to it. As a woman (and sometimes still a girl) in her twenties, I have experienced many friendships. Some I treasure, some I look back on with a warm heart, some I cannot live without, but also some I would describe as wayward now that I have learned this word. The big wide internet told me that the word wayward conveys a sense of something not easy to steer or control, a feeling I have experienced in certain friendships. This feeling of not being able to control it or not understand what about it was not working, trying so hard yet never actually feeling it. I am aware I am fortunate enough to recognize this feeling, as I have many friendships where this feeling is highly present.

The concept of wayward friendships needs to have a form of intimacy attached to it, otherwise it would be very easy to leave such a difficult and toxic friendship behind, I think. This form of intimacy needed for a wayward friendship also seems to be present in the friendship and relationship between Elwood and Turner in Nickel boys. A friendship born out of almost necessity. I have asked myself; would I survive a place like the Nickel Academy without a friend? Someone you can convey in, someone you can look in the eyes in a difficult moment and know that at least you have one another. Yet it is precisely this necessity that makes it a wayward friendship. Relationships should form naturally, not out of desperation, almost as if you’re using someone to survive. To me, these kinds of friendships don’t last and

certainly nothing good comes out of it. When Turner met Elwood's grandmother and hid the letter she brought for her grandson, a form of jealousy or anger rose to the surface that can only be present in toxic or wayward friendships, I think.¹ Yet, in this situation, could there be anything else than a friendship that is wayward?

Wayward friendships don't necessarily have to be with other people, they can be present in all kinds of things in life. It might sound strange, but I think it is very much possible to have a friendship with a place, a season or even an object. There lies an intimacy in the relationship only you have with certain things. You can have a friendship with winter, even though you hate it, because you're unable to control it, and yet you also love it. This can be a form of wayward friendships. The kind of friendship Mabel has with being a chorus girl might be described like this. Hartman in 'Wayward Lives, Beautiful experiments,' portrays this beautiful girl's life in such a way that it almost brought me to tears. The feeling of despair and desperation were so palpable it made me mad. Being a chorine gave a black queer girl during the roaring twenties incredible freedom, still it was one of the only paths to freedom. If freedom can only be achieved by a scarce number of roads, what kind of freedom is this? For Mabel, being in the chorus was just another way of surviving in a world that did not accept her; what she truly aspired was to live in a world that allowed her to be comfortable in her own skin.² In a way, the wayward friendship Mabel has with the chorus is the same as the friendship between Elwood and Turner; both are made out of a feeling of desperation and survival. There lie intimacies in these vital friendships; one cannot live without the other, yet the other is what brings one down. Moten and Harney would call this form of friendship being in the 'hold.' They make the hold of the ship (literal slave ships) a symbol for modern subjectivity and logistics.³ In the ships, people were thrown together and denied all sentiment, denied all the things that were supposed to produce sentiment.⁴ However, it is in this hold that forms of intimacy emerge, as Moten and Harney say: "Though forced to touch and be touched, to sense and be sensed in that space of no space, though refused sentiment, history and home, we feel (for) each other" (98). This describes almost perfectly the bond

¹ Nickel Boys. Directed by RaMell Ross (USA: Amazon MGM Studios, 2024), 122 min., 0:50:23

² Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (Norton & Co: New York), 2019. P. 330

³ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, "Chapter 6: Fantasy in the Hold" in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. (Minor Compositions: New York), 2013 p.92

⁴ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, p.98

between Elwood and Turner, forced together in the Nickel Academy. Born out of necessity, they care for each other. This is also the case for Mabel and her wayward friendship with the chorus. Thrown into this career out of necessity, to create any form of freedom she could find, she cares for the chorus, yet it is not what she seeks.

The wayward friendships present in Nickel Boys and in the beautiful story of Mabel show the intimacies present in being in a hold you cannot escape from. Having to make do with what you have, caring for it yet always wishing it didn't have to be this way. I wish Elwood and Turner to have met in a different place, one where they could fully care for each other without it needed for survival. I wish Mabel could have found her spark and place in a world that accepted her for who she was. Sadly so, waywardness is a beautifully tragic thing.

Warmly,

Lisa

Theme: Tech at a Conjunction: Alienated intimacies, Abstracted intimacies

Momo Sakai

Dear Crew members,

Reading Olga Ravn's *The Employees* somehow reminded me of Alexis de Tocqueville's words: "a despot easily forgives his subjects for not loving him, provided they do not love each other" (Tocqueville 2018). On board the Six Thousand Ship, employees are treated as "elements" or "parts," their relationships restricted to the smooth transfer of tasks. What is most human—emotions, doubts, intimacy—becomes dangerous, a potential disturbance to the system's efficiency, and therefore must be suppressed or deleted. This is evident in the committee's planning: "(a restricted, controlled environment) would moreover facilitate the discovery at an early stage of any emotional deviations, at the same time allowing more finely calibrated control mechanisms in respect of the exposure." (Ravn 2020, 119). Supposedly, the system is built for human happiness, yet it reveals instead who truly counts as "human." Only the obedient, and moreover, those unseen figures who benefit from the

mission, are respected. For the rest, the moment something “human” emerges, they are at risk of biological termination.

The Employees stages the opposition between technology and intimacy. The novel’s central focus is not the mission itself—never fully revealed—but the strange objects collected on the ship and the employees’ recorded statements about them. The committee documents these testimonies, but edits away inconvenient parts or even shuts down if an interviewee is humanoid. There is no clear analysis of each testimony, nor is it revealed what the board of directors reported to actually is. We learn the committee members are humanoids, acting like humans, yet we never discover who stands above them—human or humanoid. Emotion breeds suspicion, and suspicion leads to loss of trust, even resistance. Surveillance cameras are everywhere, yet they cannot fully capture thought or feeling, so the interviews themselves become a way to monitor their states of mind. In this way, intimacy is not only displaced but actively managed, reformatted as data for the system. This systematic erasure of the physical body mirrors the early cybernetic principle, where information was conceptualized as an entity independent of the substrate carrying it, allowing human intelligence to be treated as a pattern that can be separated and managed by the system (Hayles 1999).

Reading this novel, I sometimes thought about my ongoing study abroad experience. After nearly a month of classes, I still doubt whether I am truly qualified to be here. The main reason is my English ability. In Japanese, it is not too difficult to read specialized works in philosophy or art, but in English, even short passages take me a long time. *The Employees* is written in a simple style, yet finishing it required great effort. This experience itself showed me how English functions as a global infrastructure. Without English, participation in politics or academia is almost impossible. A brilliant paper written in Japanese means little internationally unless perfectly translated into English. This high barrier silences many small but urgent voices. It often feels as if, in the English-speaking system, we non-native speakers are treated like obstacles in the flow of communication.

This made me think, too, of Japan’s failed English education. Despite at least six years of mandatory study, very few achieve conversational ability. Students are trained for exams, not for intimacy across languages. Meanwhile, I have met exchange students who became fluent in Japanese after only two or three years of study, suggesting that their countries have systems designed to make foreign languages usable. Why has Japan continued with ineffective

methods for decades? Perhaps, as with the hidden beneficiaries of the ship in *The Employees*, someone benefits from keeping the country linguistically and thus informationally isolated. This isolation is a subtle form of control, where the automation of intelligence often works to enrich and impoverish along pre-existing lines of power and access (Pasquinelli 2023).

As I searched for a Japanese translation of *The Employees* (sadly, none exists), I learned that the novel originated from a text written for an art exhibition by Lea Guldditte Hestelund. This helped me finally place the mysterious objects within a familiar context as “artwork,” offering some kind of relief. It may not be ideal to connect something unknown to what I already know, since we are asked to keep a critical eye, but I still feel comfort when I can at least temporarily locate the unknown on my mental map. Naming the unknown is a way of giving it a place. Just as some employees name the objects, as one committee report indicates: “I can inform you that the crew employs countless unofficial names for the objects” (Ravn 2020, 60). To name is to create intimacy.

Although set in a futuristic technological world, this novel poses questions directly connected to our present. What is humanity? What makes us human? For whom, and toward what, is technology? Once, technology was supposed to free us for meaningful life. But now, as in Michael Ende’s *Momo*, we risk becoming addicted to the endless cycle of working to buy technology, and then using that technology only to work more.

At the same time, I could not ignore another story. Around the time I began reading Ravn, my daughter suggested I watch a Japanese sci-fi animation, *MILKY☆SUBWAY: The Galactic Limited Express*. In it, young petty offenders are punished by cleaning a subway that runs through space. Locked inside, they face elimination by a robot conductor who insists: “Beings like you are the greatest obstacle to the smooth operation of the train, and therefore of society itself.” This logic eerily mirrors *The Employees*. Their deviations are treated as noise, and their doubts as threats to the mission. They, too, risk elimination for disturbing efficiency.

Why, then, do stories from such distant societies—Denmark and Japan—return to the same fear? Perhaps this is not coincidence but a collective intuition: an awareness that technology, in the name of efficiency, threatens to erode intimacy, to redefine humanity, and even to erase

it. If so, these stories serve as warnings, imagined across different cultures, reminding us to ask whether intimacy can survive inside technological infrastructures.

And so I end this letter in a paradox: even as I write about intimacy, I rely on ChatGPT, a cutting-edge technology, to review my English grammar. Perhaps this, too, is intimacy redefined—an uneasy but undeniable closeness between human vulnerability and technological systems.

With human affection,
Momo

8th october 2025, two years and one day from 7th october 2023.

session 4: Palestine

Lucas Lagomarsino

deracinate

verb [T usually passive] formal

uk /dɪˈræs.ɪ.neɪt/ us /diːˈræs.ə.neɪt/

to make someone or something lose their connection to any particular place, background, way of life, etc.:

She sympathized with refugees because they were, like her, deracinated people

dear colleagues, and to whom it may concern;

unintentionally, a phrase appeared in my mind as a potential title that I would like to share with you: mythological condensation, in the sense of inherited objects that carry weight and meaning in their tradition, fantasy in their narrative, and that are part of the cultural net that contains the sensation of belonging. The Jewelers of the Ummah, A Potential History of the Jewish, has letters, *catarsis* and introduction. The jewels are not only aesthetic mysteries and markers of identity, but also currencies of exchange — with oneself, with the other, with everything around. the weight of inheritance or the weight of what holds value. this inconstant flow of memories and myths as anticolonial movement of memory itself, not the act of remembering, but instead the place where current and eternal colonialism first touches:

to disband, to separate until the intimate, subjective and intrapersonal bond with family, economic and manual labor memory dissolves.

mythological condensation stands against the choreographies of disarmament, those that seek to fracture validation and reduce the face to a document — one that marks you as illegal or citizen of the world. I wonder about the impossibility of describing the monster. what would it be like to shape the silhouette of those who systematically planned genocides, macabre future schemes, the conveniences of white supremacy? I wonder about their form in order to delineate them because to set limits now feels like a revolutionary gesture, even if only coming on my imagination or within our crisis.

in the letters of the book, introducing biographies creates the imaginary of an addressee, alive or dead. their real existence in the text is not what matters — the bond and their life do. their transit, the trace of their existence across a particular context in time and space, allows us to understand that what is conjunctural tends to repeat itself in cycles, in fragments, forming volumes of crisis and instability. the reference to the ancestor is not only to bring forth the other in their formlessness — it is also to summon lost time and space, establishing a precarious link with the archive. this notion of a precarious bond, even when filled in their lack of understanding, with theory, phd studies and intellectual frameworks, holds emotional load translated into language. the way of writing, the letter as catharsis, the description of a constant crisis throughout time, perpetuated by different maneuvers depending on time and space.

segregation, migration, extermination — this seems to be the flow that capitalism has installed even before it was named. since the conquest of the americas, the overseas expeditions and the fake expansion of the world, modes of transportation as access to the

other functioned as an excuse, somewhere between the macabre and the naive. he who discovers, takes — by definition. the myth condensed behind this could be that there is always an unknown to be understood, a non-place, an incompleteness that must be appropriate or a land to be devastated. therefore, I ask myself again, how can we give the monster a face? what would be the method that allows us to define the monster? an ontology of precarity might allow us to understand the emotional, physical and available conditions to write the history that needs to be printed.

it is impossible not to come undone before the scenes we were forced to watch, and to take part in from a distance that felt almost absurd. I remember helene the day I arrived at class, I entered the room, looked at her, and helene looked back with a stunned face, as if we had both just witnessed a scene of death. that day, the internet circulated an example of the horrific — let's say, in relation to what is far from life: the body of a child, whom I cannot even begin to describe with out feeling outside my own body, placed in a staged kitchen surrounding by ikea stuff. I think of how there are things we do not have the right to write, that there are certain stories that need to be written by others. not everyone can write everything. this anachronism of experience kills whoever had to live it. telling a story on behalf of another is, in any case, a possible gift — through biographies or letters that can barely speak what resonates.

like the echo of an image that keeps reverberating in the political and the monstrous. and I wonder again, can we give shape to those who can no longer write? can we name the face of tragedy?

the chorus has done the emotional labor that the audience refuses to do. it has processed impressions in the form of dialectics in order to build a dramaturgy close to dominant power. white, cis, and straight lines on the spaces. the choruses we are trying to bring back as traces of lost history are those that not only do the emotional work for the other, but rather, by doing so, imprint a queer, broken, strange response in the world. as resistance to possession, precarity becomes utopia.

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