

Transient Feelings: Autoethnographic vignettes on digital intimacy and interiority

DONNALYN XU, *University of Sydney*

ABSTRACT

In response to the shifts of communication following the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, this research investigates the disorienting experience of navigating loneliness and intimacy in the digital space. Creative writing is a relatively unexplored but recently emerging field of academic inquiry (Skains 2018, 84). Poetry in particular involves research into the language and textures of the world—it is a critical way of thinking that incorporates not just the signified meaning of words, but also the phonaesthetics, placement, space, and textual structure. This practice-based creative work is presented in the form of a nine-part autoethnographic prose poem that echoes the fragmented and asynchronous nature of digital communication (Bonner 2016, 11). Through stream-of-consciousness vignettes that could be read in any order, I emulate the experience of scrolling through a feed. I explore ideas of limitlessness in the face of apocalyptic endings, where our desire for more is troubled by having too much. This experimental and experiential paper is ultimately an interrogation of the tension between affective relations and isolation, where mediated bodies are troubled by longing, loneliness, and looking.

KEYWORDS

Intimacy, Loneliness, Affect, Autoethnography, Poetry

i.

When I was sixteen I coded my *Tumblr* blog to have an infinite scroll because I couldn't stand the sight of those page numbers, lined up like insects beside small arrows that said *< go backwards* or *go forwards >* I wanted to lie down and not go anywhere, just float aimlessly and feed my desire for limitlessness. The mechanism of scrolling is always punctuated by the snap of a wrist, in which I machine my body the way I animal love, or grief. I swallow everything in a series of bite-sized descriptions: palm against cool surface / metal on skin / scroll into endless abyss / soak, repeat.

ii.

In *Abbey*, Mitski says: *I am hungry I have been hungry I was born hungry What do I need?*

I listen to this song while lying on the living room floor almost every night, wondering how many essays you can write about your favourite singer before it becomes suffocating. In her study of Asian American asociality in the works of Mitski and Ocean Vuong, Summer Lee Kim states, ‘to be an Asian American woman is to have and cultivate a certain relation to one’s aloneness’ (2019, 32). To avoid writing another essay on Mitski, I buy a postcard print on Redbubble that says NOBODY NOBODY NOBODY NOBODY in magenta bubble letters. I blue-tack it to my wall, above eyeline. I treat myself to hours of silence and not-writing, in which the silence is just data collection on white noise and suburban rumble. Lying on the floor (again), I ruminate over the specific sharpness of cold tiles through my shirt; the echo of tires on asphalt outside; the wilting flowers from my twenty-second birthday, which did not feel very 22 by Taylor Swift. I say: sharpness punctures, puckers. At night is when. In the distance, I hear. The silent gasp of leaving every sentence unfinished is a blade of precision in the form of a blinking cursor. A wave folding inwards consumes itself [I cannibalise my own hunger]. In other words, I want and delete and want and delete and want and delete and—

iii.

While reading *Essays in Love* (de Botton 2006) and *The Lonely City* (Laing 2016), I come across two sentences that I obsess over later:

1. ‘Perhaps it is true that we do not really exist until there is someone there to see us existing.’
2. ‘My life felt empty and unreal and I was embarrassed about its thinness.’¹

I text the first quote to the group chat (‘what do u guys think abt this’) and transcribe the second in my journal, where the loopy scrawl of my handwriting makes it belong to me. I circle the word thinness twice, picturing my life as something flat and flimsy, malleable enough to press into shape.

iv.

The automatic looping of GIFs is layered with meaning in its seamless and perfect viewing in which the beginning and end are almost indistinguishable (Miltner and Highfield 2017, 6).

v.

For the past three years my desktop background has been the same image of *Garden Rose* (1982) by Mark Adams, pixelated and stretched across a refurbished 11” screen. It is a watercolour painting of a pale rose blooming, but the mesmerising part, the thing that draws you in, is the

¹ The quoted passages are left purposely ambiguous for the reader to consider how the two phrases could apply to either book.

spread of emptiness in the shadow of the glass where the sunlight's refraction bleeds through water. I have never seen anything so beautiful in real life (pockets of translucence, flower petals the colour of tofu) because only I know this image as home base. When I see *Garden Rose* in a viral post of Mark Adams' paintings on *Twitter*, it is strangely unfamiliar, though only slightly smaller, pictured in a high definition that hurts to look at.

vi.

In the final line of her poem *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* Sally Wen Mao asks me, very loudly:

‘The sun doesn't need more heat,
so why should you? The trees don't need
to be close, so why should you?’

I reread this poem over many years: after the first ache of healing fizzles into memory, after loss, through a slow-burn season of guilt. Alone again but in a new way, I travel nowhere. I think of birds heading north—drawn to the sun, or home, or movement. Never quite knowing which, but going anyway.

vii.

all softness
is defined
by the presence of touch

our relational bodies tell us
how we are supposed to feel
and i always feel it
until i don't

viii.

see: attached see: alternative ending see: message delivered with warm regards, best regards, the kindest, most loved. i repeat to myself: i am beloved i am a palimpsest of temporal aches archival prints layered over transient feelings spilling over, fossilised or hyperlinked into a new dimension i am repetition enacting a self into being i am waiting to be held to be smiled at to rewrite what we think of as skin, to glisten and unfold submerged in an endless stream lie down to breathe enter or return

[they say the language of the digital falls flat in the absence of what is ‘real’ but my face framed by the light of a screen is your face framed by this window is our elegiac failures of touch is our insufficient intimacy is oversaturation is chlorine blue fluorescent plastic, eyes straining out-of-sync, somersaulting heart]

ix.

in the dream, i am a cyborg. like a temptress in a Western sci-fi, made of rusted metal & almost-flesh. tbh i don’t like watching movies that much—in real life i’m never allowed to be someone i’m not & i’m so much of myself it makes me sick. but dream-me is pure holographic in her technicolour splendour: 90s jelly shoes & cheap organza & the winter sun passing through her skin like layers of cellophane. i want to cross all the years this light has travelled to touch the shape of myself in her body. her body, which is my body. this city of bodies, where i am the only spectator, always describing my images tenderly to no one.

References

Bonner, L. (2016) *Strange Intimacies* (Unpublished honours thesis), Sydney: University of New South Wales.

de Botton, A. D. (2006) *Essays in Love*, London: Pan Macmillan.

Kim, S. L. (2019) ‘Staying In: Mitski, Ocean Vuong, and Asian American Asociality’, *Social Text* 138, 27(1), 27–50.

Laing, O. *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*, Edinburgh: Canongate Books.

Miltner, K. M. and Highfield, T. (2017) ‘Never Gonna GIF You Up: Analyzing the Cultural Significance of the Animated GIF’, *Social Media + Society*, 3(3), 1–11.

Skains, R. L. (2018) ‘Creative Practice as Research: Discourse on Methodology’, *Media Practice and Education*, 19:1, 82-97.

Biography

Donnalyn Xu studies Media and Communications at the University of Sydney, with a double major in English and Art History. She has had work published in various literary journals and magazines, including *Overland*, *Voiceworks*, and *Art Collector*. She is a writer and an aspiring academic, with research interests in postcolonial theory, gender and sexuality, portraiture, poetry, and selfhood.

E: xudonnalyn@hotmail.com