

we are geometric problems
in the slots of loveliness
— SEAN BONNEY

two THE COMMONS

Infrastructures for Troubling Times

The previous chapter explored the inconvenience drive that produces the adrenaline of an intimate attachment that feels personal, whether or not it's among people who know each other personally. The pleasure and risk of being with a new relation comes from the desire to be exposed to the friction of collaborative life. Still, a degree of vulnerable openness increases during any encounter, whether it's brief or enduring, memorable or nondescript, or one that flashes and crashes on repeat.

To sit with this generative and degenerative potential, *Last Tango in Paris* turns to the couple form to stand in for a double image of the social: first, the specific couple as a laboratory for becoming different together through what the intimates perceive as their revolutionary strategies and ideas; second, the couple form as itself a figure for a social movement where individuals

become transformed by working together to induce a sea change structurally. These models are not scalable into each other: as Spivak argues, there is a lack of fit between the personal and the structural standpoints from which the world is imagined and acted on.¹ So the question of revolution involves assessing the resonance among models of reciprocity. From either perspective, one cannot be sure in advance about the outcome of the social's extension into experiment, ideation, and trying things out.

This is why, during an encounter that vibrates, there is always an accompanying fear that inflames the defenses. *Tango's* couples imagine that they embody revolutionary social registers in which people actively embrace their nonsovereignty and go for it—"it" being love and social change—"without guarantees."² But as they discover, it's not only that you can't guarantee consequences in advance. It's that you can't be certain how you'll feel about or be able to live on in the disturbance you created, that comes from the substantial challenge to subjectivity, reciprocity, and worlds that, in some sense, you desired. Conflict is inevitable, reciprocity is always negotiated, all objects remain enigmas, and ends do not usually provide a sufficient summary judgment of a project's value.

In any case, during the stretch of attachment-testing, people can only think they know what they want or what they don't want. They find out later that their desires were proposals. They find out later that trust is hard, jolted by the surprises of the unfolding situation. What was behind the leap into amplifying the mutual? Are they trying to lose a habit of being, unravel and restructure an unequal social field, or build something out of actively shared energy to feel more optimistic about the world? Are they trying to make things simpler by calling it love or justice? Are they up for surprising complications, and which ones? Does having gone through it before make you better or worse at adapting and refusing to adapt? Is the aspiration to reorganize what sociality can be limited to a moment, a movement, a room, a feeling, a scene, an institution, a figure, an atmosphere, a life, or a world? What if the politically or intimately allied are just throwing themselves into an imprecise transition because the other way was not unbearable but no longer to be borne?

All attachment opens defenses against the receptivity one also wants to cultivate, in short. A whole world can wobble when that openness ignites insecurity about how to live otherwise. Such is the uncertainty that accompanies the inconvenience drive. Such is the ambivalence especially directed toward revolutionary movements that hit internal and external limits. For the past half-century, the "sixties" have taken a lot of the heat for false prom-

I've argued in this chapter that the inconvenient gesture of breaking analogy, rather than hastily, anxiously, or needfully asserting it, is a prime device for opening up the figural world of what's held to be common. Ian Bogost writes, "Sometimes there is nothing more refreshing than a startlingly bad analogy. It's like a crisp cucumber bursting from the dip of a bad day's sphincter. Like a restorative rain drenching the vomit of last night's bender. Like a cool breeze tousling the blood-matted fur of roadkill."⁹⁸ He doesn't mean this in a positive way. I do. The commons produces riffing on the other side of assurance: What isn't mixed? The political and epistemic problem for the politically autopoietic, which is what all world-creating subjects in coordinated struggle are, is that the placeholders for our desire can too easily seem solid and ironed out rather than affective figures for delivering a convergence process we can cling to and with which we draw lines of belonging in the sand, in the air, on the streets, in liveable spaces.

What remains for the pedagogy of unlearning that we derive from the aspirational commons, then, is to build affective infrastructures that admit the work of desire and the work of ambivalence as the tactics of commoning. What remains is the potential we have to common infrastructures that can absorb the blows of our aggressive need for the world to accommodate each and all of us and our resistance to adaptation, and, at the same time, to hold out the prospect of a world worth attaching to that's something other than an old hope's bitter echo. A failed episode is not evidence that a project is in error: by definition, forms of common life are always going through a phase, as infrastructures do.

ises and disturbances of the conventional world by student movements, Black power movements, queer and feminist liberation movements, and the anticolonial struggles that upset the standing of the nation form. Many people and classes remain attached to, furiously resistant to, and emotionally all over the place toward freedom imaginaries and the effects of these counterpower movements and demands.

Unsurprisingly, then, in the memory of the popular culture of Europe and the United States, the explicitly political contexts of *Tango* lose out. The film is reduced to its scandalously rotten sexual encounters and failed love stories. Anchored in the couple during a time of global and European revolution, the embodied and phantasmatic drive toward an alternative world somehow comes to begin and end between individuals, seeming merely personal even as the protagonists fetishize military uniforms, perform thoughtless racism, and take up legacy positions within the hierarchies of imperial and colonial life. Like many bourgeois who think life should be smooth, they end up asking the police to protect them from themselves.

But if, in the end, the logic of vertical, traditional power wins and clots what else was imaginable politically, in the long middle's moments of radical unlearning, things got pedagogical. Those of us who attend to the film's narration of Jeanne's styling of *le mariage* pop and Paul's will to induce an anti-imperialist, anti-Catholic, antinational, and antibourgeois upheaval at the granular level can tell a different story: that the personal here is both where structural and sensually endemic violence materialize and always a potential conversion space for not reproducing capitalist, imperial, racist, and patriarchal lines of descent. Here's the thing: that the both/and turned into the neither/nor does not mean it was a bad idea to try.

In this chapter the commons concept is akin to the long middle of *Tango*. It denotes an experimental scene of practical life and "affirmative speculation."³ But the focus is impersonal because it is about what the world generates for the beings in it and is not generated by them. The common is not on offer here as the solution to the problem of psychic or structural social antagonism, nor as a visionary motive for toppling the state and capital, nor as a synonym for belonging better and social healing. If anything, the chapter holds in suspicion the prestige that the commons concept has attained in the United States and the theory-cosmopolitan context. One might think of the encampments of Occupy or of assertions like the knowledge commons or the affective commons, as though the genre is a fact about the relation among things and not propositional or worked out in real time, as genuine equality must be.

Take as counter-exempla two figures, beginning with Thomas Hawk’s narrative image of the Detroit Public Schools’ abandoned book depository (figure 2.1). Any library or depository is a public resource of sorts, but a public is not a common: institutions narrow access to what circulates through the patronage norms of philanthropy, the ownership norms of most publishing institutions, and the obligations of the membership card. If you saw this image in color you’d witness so much dead analogizing between the “priceless” value of knowledge in the book depository and the beauty of the building: now all of it in negative, through the abandonment of a space’s upkeep demands, and the image of use as the destruction of resources. Carnegie’s aesthetic pride in the glorious interior décor shines: copper, gold leaf, marble, and so on. For all the signification of pricelessness, however, the Public Schools’ holdings create material and abstract scenes of crime for which one can be arrested—from knowledge theft to the building itself, which has been so abandoned that what’s valuable to the public now are not the collections of books but the sought-after metals that can be stripped from the infrastructure and converted quickly to scavenged cash. Property, theft: the “public” commons is a mangled fantasy.

Think also with Stephanie Brooks’s insertion of police tape into the zoned-public space of cultivated nature (figure 2.2). In her performance series called *Lovely Caution*, the camera goes around enclosing open spaces. Her spaces force the common into view as a distraction, a pastoral episode, a whiff of the unreal that is also just what there is. What is the “lovely” that blots out the “caution” usually printed there on the yellow plastic? Can we



1 Thomas Hawk, Detroit Public Schools Book depository, June 13, 2010. Color photograph.



2.9 Die-in at Boston Common, June 3, 2020. Color photograph by Brian Snyder. © Reuters.

of lifeworld self-protection in which culture and economic clashing mark a war for a genealogical or an Indigenous community’s survival. Linebaugh and de Angelis refer to a rhythm of worlding that resonates with this chapter’s project of tracking the growth of an affective infrastructure whose very existence acknowledges the inconvenience of other people in the midst of the struggle to transform life economically and subjectively. Embodied tactics are required for heterotopian praxis. The frictions of counternormative affective infrastructures can bring structural political imaginaries to their knees.

One might respond to my infrastructuralism with the idea that any specific address to transforming the aspiration called the *sensus communis* is at best a mere episode to hang a wish on. But that’s what an episode is: a goad to rethink seriality, continuity, analogy. Every transformative example implicitly disturbs an analogy, decouples coupling. Every broken analogy releases affectively bound energy back into the world. Andrés Green writes that when discourse stops binding “word-presentation, thing-presentation, affect, bodily states, [and] act,” the unbound affect might “snap the chain of discourse,” inducing a “qualitative mutation.”⁹⁷ The commons concept requires infrastructures for sustaining the mutations that emerge from the chains that are breaking in the popular resistance to austerity regimes and anti-Black and patriarchal capitalism.

At the current conjuncture, the “we” arises in contexts of structurally induced suffering-toward-death from anti-Black police torture and murder, food insecurity, medical bankruptcy, drug price inflation, the widening militarization of state tools for control and domination, the racist carceral habit, and so on. These are crises in the ordinary, but not probable and engrained: as Spahr catalogues, as Johnson presumes. Failed state democracies, racist ideologies, life-shattering pandemics, and ordinary fatalism about the suffering of the “essential” worker join the mass refusal to allow the ordinary of racist police violence and specific anti-Blackness to seem like a fate. These conjunctures have multiplied questions about what a life is, what targeted death does, and where and whether any “we” can be said to stretch across communities, bodies politic, epidemiological populations, sets of people with analogous feelings of exposure and vulnerability, consumer addressees, and citizens of the local now defined at all scales: neighborhoods, cities, states, regions, and nations.

All of these “we’s” are projections from specific visions of a zone of collective experience. The plural is always local but often masked as the name for the general. The same goes for the universal, which always ends up being specific, a failed abstraction. Is “we” ever more than a heuristic coupled with a desire? When is it a way of talking about the effects of a history of defining experience? What does it have to do with liberal and illiberal concepts of “the public”? Is the common effective or a shortcut in generating the plural beyond the moment of the “we” of historical community? None of these questions is rhetorical. No mass politics or any politics exists without some attention to the building out of the “we.” This is the power of feeling-with crossed with solidarity in the political sphere.⁹³ But the very fractures of inequality are also affectively and materially amplified during crisis, in the register of life and death.⁹⁴ As the next chapter argues, *life* comes to mean many things. And still there are “die-ins” on the Boston Common, making a bad copy of a literal and pervasive death (figure 2.9).

Peter Linebaugh proposes that “it might be better to keep the word [common] as a verb, an activity, rather than as a noun, a substantive”; he wants us to think about commoning land, life, history, and memory, rather than presuming them, so long as it doesn’t serve to further divide the world into local enclaves of value, as it mostly does.⁹⁵ Massimo de Angelis argues that the commons is always a doing that is a decoupling from the reproductive energies of a normative life’s standards of value, and not a replacement for capitalism.⁹⁶ This chapter is in sync with these claims. Again, we are talking about the aspirational use of the concept, its destructive function, and not the tradition



2.2 Stephanie Brooks, *Lovely Caution*, 2010. Color photograph. Printed with permission of Stephanie Brooks.

see a park now without the shadow of white hatred of genuine publicness and the police standing ready to rescue from it?

To Brooks, lovely is a quality, the common sense of the beautiful. It performs the conversion of a nonspace to a form realized in the common atmosphere, in the power of a caption to shift what it captures: a nonspace that is perfect because it’s there to be witnessed, fenced off, and not ruined by habitation, by other people. No people exist in either the nonspace or the fenced off, captioned commons: they are inconvenient to the concept, and also to the problem the concept tries to solve. It’s an idea whose material basis is the urgency that generates it. Private property, even as figure, is a policed space. At the same time, enclosure itself is a figure of a different kind of crime. Not of trespassing but of property as theft, of citizenship as a holding cell with unpredictable openings: a lenticular space.

Police surveillance is already within us, our conscience and our doing. As the title *Lovely Caution* suggests, at this point in time yellow tape needs no caption; it’s become performative, a truth held in common, that all lovely spaces remain lovely when they seem open for the kind of business that asks

people to honor the common spirit of the common. It turns out that this trust has no object to sustain it, that any place in ordinary life might convert in a snap to an event in which something alive or held close to life has been massively transgressed.

The main point here is that when the commons comes into representation, it cannot not represent the inconvenience of other people, even when the representation turns its eyes away toward something beautiful in an enclosure. It also can't turn its eyes away from the struggle against the law and other networks of congealed power that can both make you crazy and want anarchism to organize the transitional space; I learned to think the formal use of the commons as such a political tool while reading with the love and anarchist ferocity of Sean Bonney's *The Commons* and *The Commons II*, which radically take up, document, and shreddingly counter-hate the ongoing destruction of life by the hegemon's insistence that their rebarbative chaos is an achieved order on behalf of the good. There, and here, the commons concept serves as a preserve for an optimistic attachment to recapturing the potential for collective nonsovereignty and as a register for the gatekeeping and surveillance that organizes still so many collective pleasures.⁴

So, if the commons claim sounds like an incontestably positive aim, I think of it more as a tool, and often a weapon, for unlearning the world, which is key to not reproducing it.⁵ The commons concept in the contemporary context threatens to cover over the inevitable complexity of social jockeying, belonging, and perspectival conflict it mobilizes by delivering a confirming affective experience of a smoother lifeworld that derives from a pastoral past or present. In the United States and some global contexts, the more recent hope was that a democratic proceduralism would flatten the frictional encounter of different interests.

It's understandable to desire collective attunement or attachment that has been emptied of the dynamic of possession and dispossession that saturates property relations and the forms of desire that it cultivates. With theorists like Silvia Federici, I argue that the attachment to the common is too often a way of talking about politics as a means of resolution more than as a path through struggle. It too often stands as an aspiration to consensus that tries to make affectively simple the nonsovereign relation that is at the heart of true equality, where status is not worked out in advance but in real time.⁶ I understand that many indigenous struggles claim sovereignty as a fact and aspiration against the genocidal incursions of settler colonial states. As I argue in the introduction, my view is that sovereignty is at root a defense against occupation or dispossession, which is why it's become central to

occupy the Hood, Occupy London, Occupy Nation. In the meanwhile, occupy/common has changed into a way to describe collaboration and careworlds more generally. Critical work on ecology, states, indigeneity, political movements, knowledge, and research itself blazon Occupy to ally with the desire to transform infrastructures that organize specific resources and concepts necessary for life. It's a kind of dog whistle addressed to a movement dream.

It is hard to avoid making a powerful concept all-absorbent when all you've ever known is how to own, possess, and use action concepts in defense of your existence.

But if the imperative Occupy and ideas of the common have become virtual siblings at this point, their political association during the 2008 economic crash with protests against the reproduction of economic inequality has also been changing. Its legacy endures, for example, in Occupy City Hall, a pop-up common protesting the New York City Police Department's extreme funding privilege and ordinary violence against people of color and the poor.⁹⁰ Triggered by the video-recorded police execution of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, this appropriation of a zoned "public" space as a political common also mobilized the archive of anti-Black murders captured on video with cellphones, already on regular display, to dispersed and local publics. It explicitly created and reanimated knowledges of the genocidal and often barely extrajudicial extermination of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx life in practices such as lynching, as Ken Gonzales-Day has demonstrated across many media.⁹¹ This revision of the Occupy commons also takes energy from the video archive of weaponized joyriding that includes the police and took form in the white supremacist enjoyment-murder of Ahmaud Arbery in Satilla Shore, Georgia, on February 23, 2020.⁹²

Writing from the multiple crises of the present in 2020, I resist the desire for performativity for which the commons concept so often stands. Crisis hastily generates multiples of the "we." There have always been bullying, thin, and nostalgic "we's," of course, used for good and ill. Leading to projections of a unity of experience onto a mass, the imperative to posit the atmosphere of belonging works either as assertion or as a hope that if you name it, it will come. During the COVID-19 crisis, before the phase of antiracist protest, corporate and individual pronouncements proliferated with smileys, balloons, and exclamation points. Street corners, posters, shop windows, and TV ads proclaimed phrases like "We are in it together!" Who is "we"? What is "it"? Fantasies of democracy as the experience of collectively equal exposure to vulnerability tried to establish a ground where there is no ground.

still in the absence of confidence about connection, causality, and building out the world. The first step becomes literally that. No abstraction can provide resources for bearing each other and life's long middle. Unlearning the exhausted gimmicks of normativity, the bodies pause in the space without a satisfying outcome in sight.⁸²

And this is where we are: the "we" who are not one.⁸³

Those who desire to invent a transformational infrastructure to shape the world that is always in transition often look for something to appear more solid than it can be in order to anchor what's emerging.⁸⁴ Charismatic authority is one example of something solid-seeming frequently called on.⁸⁵ The commons concept takes up that texture, too, insofar as it stands specifically for cosmopolitan struggles against national-neoliberal privatization strategies such as the massive wealth grab by the 1 percent and "public-private partnerships." These displacements obscure accountability for the offloading of debt, dispossession, and direct violence onto the already structurally vulnerable and violated.

In terms of sloganeering, too, the twenty-first-century translocal cosmopolitan assertion of the commons as the ground of radical democracy became an aspirational performative, acting as a thing that can be collectively asserted, held, achieved, and occupied. New analogies were tried out in its name in the United States. The organizing rubric of the commons of Occupy became a way to point to public space reoccupied for constituent power and a trial balloon for the bodily copresence of direct action or "assembly" in the ordinary.⁸⁶ It signified something like affective mutuality and feel of what Jonathan Flatley calls a "revolutionary mood."⁸⁷ It replaced the uncanny sensation of "the touch of the state" with schooling in respectful social distancing and patience for rhetorical protocols that amplified solidarity and sometimes became intimacy.⁸⁸ It proliferated so quickly and intensely through allied cells of Occupy that within a few years it began to irritate some of its early users: "In late July, [Sandy] Nurse pleaded on her Facebook wall, 'Does everything have to be called "Occupy"? Come on, y'all.' A commenter on a similar post a few weeks earlier put the matter succinctly: 'Burn Occupy on a funeral pyre and move the fuck on.'"⁸⁹ Such processes of revision-in-association have tended to link concepts of political voice, atmosphere, proximity, and the public sphere to specific sensual qualities of the common as such: the toggle between the affective and political infrastructural imaginary creates space beyond itself. *The commons* still serves as a mere synonym for *public park*. At the same time, it is usually temporally specific and geopolitically local: the resource and spatial common of Occupy Sandy, Oc-

antagonisms about jurisdiction, and not anything like a natural right or natural state.

In this chapter I propose an alternative use of the commons object insofar as it has become something of a false performative. I use materials mainly from the United States, and from some white people's desire to create a commons free of the common. Although it's implicit in their work, I am arguing that they use the commons concept to dissolve their world from under their feet. The chapter closes by addressing contemporary crises of the "we" associated with orchestrated resistance to anti-Black state violence and communities of care that have been mobilized to keep life going medically, economically, and emotionally during the COVID-19 pandemic. It thinks constant transition not just as a fact but as the effect of the inconvenience drive: a life texture involving loss, contingent mutuality, and a desire to mobilize the resources of tradition and the work of having each other's backs. It functions not just as a care common filling a general need, but a zone of attention in which heterotopic forms of life might build out.

It looks to Muñoz's and Harney and Moten's undercommons of queer, Black, and Brown study and prefigurative solidarity, but not as a solution to the devastating faults and blows of the Euro-white idealist tradition. Instead it moves with the situation they describe to ask visceral questions about how the common as an idea of infrastructure has provided for settler colonial subjects both mystifications of freedom and a pedagogy for unraveling the corrupted world, while at the same time offering affective scenes and methods of living regeneratively and revolutionarily. It shows how some thinkers use the commons concept to move away from good-life fantasies that equate frictionlessness with justice and satisfaction with the absence of frustration. Broken analogies and live infrastructures are offered as transitional mechanics for dissolving the world from within the world. As with the previous chapter, it also asks how a bodily practice can provide "glitchinfrastructures" for inculcating unlearning.

Second Introduction: The Common Sense

This desire for the public to be a free, indeterminate space is embedded in the history of the common. We are tracking here uses of the commons concept to break the consensual historical present, not restore a collective's sense of sovereign right. What follows rehearses types of the commons and the affect called the *sensus communis*. It tracks their status as a placeholder for the scene and fulfillment of belonging; it recasts the imaginary infrastructure of

the public commons in a pedagogy for unlearning normative realism and rethinking structure as something in constant transition. It closes by addressing contemporary crises of the “we.” It thinks constant transition not just as a fact but as a life texture involving loss, smudging, contingent mutuality, and literally having each other’s backs, among other things.

The recently “resuscitated” fantasy of the common articulates many desires for a social world that is unbound by structural antagonism.⁷ “‘Common’ has a multitude of meanings,” writes Peter Linebaugh, “common land, common rights, common people, common sense.”⁸ The concept is so overloaded you might think that it’s empty, but you’d be wrong. *The common* usually refers to an orientation toward life and value unbound by concepts of property as constituted by division and ownership. It reframes *public* as something generally accessible for use. It also points to the world both as a finite resource that is easily depleted and spoiled and, in addition, as an inexhaustible fund of human consciousness or creativity.⁹ At the same time, at the moment of this writing, the proclamation of “the common,” what it works to manifest, is always political and invested in being inconvenient to the reproduction of power, with aspirations to decolonize actual social and economic spaces that have been weaponized by empire, capitalism, and power over land rights.

This means that the commons is incoherent, like all powerful concepts. Under its name, across the globe, communities tap into legacies of occupation to contest normative jurisdictional ownership rights and resource justice, and under its name, people often project a pastoral social relation of mutual attachment, dependence, or vitality. Concepts of the common attached to “the common sense” also point to irreducibly different affective angles: from the most normative view of how things are to the Kantian *sensus communis*. For Roland Barthes and Ann Laura Stoler, “common sense” is merely the bourgeois order of truth standing in for the universal, what Stoler calls “a folk epistemology.”¹⁰ For Raymond Williams, it is a “structure of feeling,” which locates affective mutuality in the atmosphere of the common historical experience of class antagonism.¹¹ In contrast, for Kant and Arendt the *sensus communis* involves nothing so referentially specific as the capitalist good life.¹² It refers instead to a sense of judgment about an intersubjective experience that is common above and beyond visceral responses to the material world and other people; the “sense” in this tradition of common sense is exercised in the capacity of humans to achieve the free movement of their faculties toward disinterested, impersonal, nonrepresentational, and yet “universally communicable” judgment on the model of an aesthetic attunement to something like beauty.¹³



2.8 *In the Air*, directed by Liza Johnson, 2009. Anita Skaggs in front of Misty Windsor Graham and Eugenio Perez. Printed with permission of Liza Johnson.

as it recirculates the scrap from the junkyard and the humidity from the lake into lungs and muscles. There’s pollution. There’s energy for making new genres of convergence. Is there something in the air that might protest the nervous fraying and self-numbing medication of the body politic? How can a discipline of the ordinary body toward pleasure and kindness create an atmosphere for a new economy’s good life that does not begin with where the wealth is and judgments of who’s deserving?

The film’s older figures appear too beaten down to protest the exploitation of supply-chain capitalism, and the abandonment of working populations by the wealth hoarders seems to produce less a politics than rampant and depleting nervous conditions, from irritation to short fuses and numbness (figure 2.8). The receptive posture of aesthetic attention helps the youths to loosen or unlearn their defenses against taking each other in. They train each other, then the adults, to reoccupy existence in a chilly place. Individuals may be exhausted, but as a whole they’ve not yet given up on the world.

So in *In the Air*, collaboration clears space for the common, which has no form but offers a point of return through the creative use of proximity, improvised synchronicity, and spiky kinships no less intimate for the ambivalence. In its recessive way the very purposiveness of gymnastics in this final scene makes for a brilliant postwork and antiproduktivist performance,⁸¹ with the musical number serving its traditional function as a placeholder for living otherwise. But the number is in the air while the bodies are quiet and on the ground. Not in the register of the manifesto, the film points to what’s there, not proclaiming the reparative solution that is part of the promise that the political holds out. Another use of flatness: to put a wedge in causality. Here the liberal world picture crashes to the floor as the group stands

hollow spaces of abandoned capital defined by coordinated movement, we are in a different world from the “rights” world.

For the most part their faces are still and composed, so muted as to be inexpressive; they have the stiff bodies of workers entrained by work’s rhythms. Johnson isolates only one participant, a young plump woman who makes a victory sign with her arms when she achieves a glorious split, celebrating a victory not over but through her body. Mainly everyone is focused on being in step, but not rigidly: both actors and audience, poised for next phase of movement.

The group embodies, then, not socially necessary labor time or normative intimacy, but something simpler and often inconvenient in ordinary time: socially necessary proximity looking for a way to be. Who would be there to receive a protest? No one: that’s how abandoned they are. They turn toward each other without metastatements. The analogy they perform among all persons in a world of people and architectures abandoned by capital becomes the condition of this convergence that isn’t a merging; and the propertied space that someone owns becomes a pop-up common defined by skilled, patterned movement that could become a transformational infrastructure. “Space is a practiced place,” writes Michel de Certeau.⁷⁸ Practice acknowledges the imperfect, the impermanent. As I have argued, the episodic common is not a form of mourning for the loss of the collective ordinary; it’s a test to see whether a future can be built through episodes, and what kinds; it’s a sensual experiment in breaking down what the body has learned about being in relation. Here, squatting in a space, the people become potential heterotopians.

The soundtrack to this scene is a 1998 song by the group Alice DeeJay called “Better Off Alone.” The song’s only two lines are, “Do you think you’re better off alone?” and “Talk to me,” a rhetorical question and an imperative phrase. “Better off Alone” has had a substantial life in clubs and has been remade and remixed a number of times. There’s little to it other than the desire to convert the rhetorical into an actual question.⁷⁹ Usually it appears in a space where people are alone together, singular and various, intimate and mostly anonymous, looking for a minor release from the solo burden of managing their pseudo-sovereignty. The song delivers the core message of popular culture, that “you are not alone,” and challenges its listeners to use their proximity to sense a better lifeworld and build toward it together.⁸⁰ In this sense the song is air and provides one.

What is “the air” in *In the Air*? As though joining Spahr’s inquiry into the common air, the film asks us to wonder about what’s the matter with the air,

Steven Shaviro argues that the Kantian concept of beauty or attunement looks not to any normative sense of symmetry or elegance as a ground for principles like justice or freedom: attunement is a perceptual event that bypasses cognition and hits the subject the way a song does, as a singular perception all at once that is, at the same time, universal.¹⁴

This is to say that, in all of its traditions, the *sensus communis* is deemed to be a higher gut feeling, if you will. It involves the recognition of normative or universal principles of being; it organizes a potential world around them; it moves the body away from satisfaction with the horizon of conventional experience toward a visceral self-experience of freedom that ought to govern the activity of all being in common.

So, too, the universal appears in political fantasies of the common that structure much contemporary political theory and action: as Žižek summarizes it, it involves protecting “the shared substance of our social being whose privatization is a violent act which should also be resisted with violent means.”¹⁵ To clarify, three kinds of vulnerable referent tend to motivate this urgent vision of the commons: (1) the struggles of disenfranchised citizens and migrants, whether in the undercommons or in contested indigenous habitations; (2) the substance of immaterial labor that taps into and depletes the world- and life-making activity of humans and by analogy all species;¹⁶ (3) the being of nature as such, which includes but does not prioritize humanity. Adding to this collection of defensive and generative associations is a fourth kind: the depressive uniformity Paolo Virno imagines, associating the contemporary commons with an actual, immanent, and already affectively felt global homelessness.¹⁷ The apriority he names as the *sensus communis* isn’t just a sense but a specific feeling of being affected: the condition of displacement.

In the early 2000s, these senses of the sense of the common helped to shape a politics of precarity in the global Occupy and the ongoing European, Latin American, and South Asian anti-austerity and counternational movements, which ask various questions: Should society be organized to expand wealth or to support life, and not just human life? How do we think about the redistribution of resource vulnerability in relation to the distribution of rest, strength, and enjoyment? What roles should political institutions have in fomenting collective life, or do we need a different structural imaginary to organize the figurative and material political complexities of stranger intimacy and interdependence? What’s the relation between structural violence and that which is physical and emotional, and how do we keep more disciplined protocols of control from masking the endurance of legitimated

force? In 2020, as we shall see, these questions of resource and publicness, of ideologies of protection, exposure, and care, reignited into some tangled social debates about how to deal with the inconvenience of other people facing anew dissolving and looming infrastructures of life and death.

You will no doubt note the unbalanced load of desire that the commons claim now carries. These perspectives mark a new phase of a serious collective rethinking of what, if anything, attention to the commons can contribute to producing alternatives to the wreck of the persistent good-life fantasy that “we are all in it together.”¹⁸ More on this phrase at this chapter’s close.

Commons talk, like precarity talk and austerity talk, in other words, tries to develop a generative counterformalism within and against national capitalism. In contrast, the commons projects of fugitive utopian performance associated with José Esteban Muñoz and the cowriters Stefano Harney and Fred Moten extend this problematic not only from the position of universal singularity, citizenship, common sense, or a like injury within a scene of violence, but also toward temporally different understandings of collective belonging and plural being in the historical present. How to develop, from a violently unequal historical inheritance and institutional experience to this very moment, a space where the collectivity-so-far can be extended and developed enough to change the referent of the world?

Harney and Moten’s undercommons is what Marc Augé would call a non-place, which is to say a space of time where the subjects of history en masse do not line up with themselves as individuals: it’s lenticular, and in the gaps between who you were and what the space releases you from, you’re a fugitive.¹⁹ Just as you don’t eat the same food in the airport, on vacation, in the hospital, or spontaneously because you’re not the ordinary cruising you’ve developed, in the undercommons the condemned can figure out another way to make collective space through movement. To be in those difficult and loving timespaces at one time requires using a strong tactic of aesthetic scenicness in order to extend Black study beyond social reproduction or correction; this undercommons mobilizes the material and speculative senses already pulsating in lifeworld solidarities beyond the space of faithfulness that the university or any dominant institution of social order delegates to its members as conscience, vocation, and managerial accountability, and tweaks of reform.²⁰

For Muñoz the scenic aesthetic is similar but oriented more toward the future in the present rather than, as in Harney and Moten, the being-present from which a mutually attentive and caring heterotopic space-practice can come. The surplus of Muñoz’s “brown commons” begins in an already realized affective commons that confirms the good life for a minoritized be-

(figure 2.7). She is a maintenance engineer for an abandoned architecture, hired to preserve the hoarded infrastructure of capital just in case it feels like returning for some more exploitation, resource extraction, and real contribution to the atmosphere an abandoned town can only remember as live.

The kids approach her. She barely looks at them, repeating, “What do you want? What do you kids want?” They refuse to speak and assume an expressionlessness interrupted only by the relay of side-eye. These lateral glances shift the film’s genre. As though rehearsed, the kids respond to the mother’s query by surrounding her and making her flip over them backward, as the music begins. They take their schooling out of the school, but they do not become teachers. No longer tracing the decay of the harsh real, where the remaining fantasy is getting through the day, the magical-realism musical that emerges in this scene derives life from whatever it is that brings people to the situation.

Everyone who has been in the film comes out of an imaginary space of the shot. Collectively, the dispossessed self-possess. Entrained or untrained, they do circus movement. Launching and landing pads mysteriously appear. For the most part the performers are white and working class, but not entirely. For the most part they are strong and skilled, but not entirely. Johnson doesn’t stage them as biographical subjects with names and desires, or as stars with untapped auras of magnificence: the elders join the kids as they all learn to use their bodies in sync, which includes counterpoint. Their coordination not only counters the saturation of everyday defeat by work and the absence of work, but also stages a becoming that might lead to belonging. If it works, the revised bodily habit of nonsovereignty creates a collective orientation, a shared subjectivity. It does not erase individuality but creates a mutually transforming affect-sphere where it has no “right” to be. In the



2.7 In the Air, directed by Liza Johnson, 2009. Sue Stevenson. Printed with permission of Liza Johnson.

are in many kinds of transition: in late high school about to be sprung and testing the world, still at home living with and against their families, and as student performers veering between kidding around, flirting, and admiring each other's skill and the focus of people in training.

The kids are learning to spin and to fall. They are learning to lean on each other (figure 2.6). A little light romance might be starting, but autonomy and abs are the focus. You have to be able to hold a whole body in the air while it swings. None of this feels like the pre-enactment of fantasies of stardom or love. It does not feel at all phantasmatic or allegorical: learning to be awkward, to be graceful, to leap, and to fall is a training in attention and also in revisceralizing one's bodily intuition. It requires making and breaking habits of response. It involves rethinking gravity. The air is not the common, as in Spahr. Training in collaboration is the thing that collapses breaking forms with making a common life.

This training includes ordinary physical dynamics themselves. Disturbing what threatens and what comforts, the circus schooling shifts what Virno calls the dread and the refuge that shape contemporary ideas of the commons as a relief from life.⁷⁶ It does this by foregrounding the difficulty and pleasure of maintaining footing during conversations, in the world, and during performance that requires people to show up for others' bodies.⁷⁷

The high point of the film is difficult to describe because it's so simple, but the point of rebooting relationality through remaking visceral response is that in order to reinvent the lifeworld in the present, one must transform what reciprocity can mean.

In the final scene the high school kids want a ride somewhere. The parents have been working, fighting, or drinking, appearing wasted and exhausted, sometimes aggressively deadpan. Finally, they track down a mother while she is doing her job. For a living, she sweeps an empty building by herself

6 *In the Air*, directed by Liza Johnson, 2009. Pegi Wilkes teaching Christa Castle Benson, Brian Rushford, Jon Chaner, and Heather White Chandler. Filmed with permission of Liza Johnson.



longing in a way that gives a taste of what's possible at the scale of lifeworld confidence for a concrete, yet indefinite, common "we."²¹ "We" is an orientation, an attitude. It is a name for critical queer of color and punk negativity that turns getting negated into acts and attitudes that move the future around. Muñoz writes: "I contend that the clinamen, or the swerve at the heart of the encounter, describes the social choreography of a potentially insurrectionist mode of being in the world."²² Choreography isn't in lockstep but attends to dynamics. The encounter as the place where the flint hits steel makes love and potential insurrection. Muñoz thinks with Jean-Luc Nancy's image of the touch that preserves the specificity of the Other in the register of a common form that's apprehensible but not representable except as a sense. A *sensus communis* from which an undefensive infrastructure can extend. A commons that begins with being-with.

The commons concept here is reparative against the world's destruction of the life whose labor sustains it, the exploited and negated humans who deserve a future that can only be found in organizing the courage to be more interested in than threatened by the commonality of difference. How does one stay attached to life given the constitutive experience of nonbeing or negative social value? The inconvenience of other people in the good sense is the ground on which the brown commons generates resources for a collective attachment to life.

This chapter comes to the form of the common from another side. It argues that what's best in the commons concept is its capacity to retrain affective practical being, and in particular in its power to dehabituate response and displace certain normative continuities and conventions. Instead of redirecting what is, the "we" we already have, it looks toward dissolving some institutional grounds that establish our continuity. It's not annihilative, as it involves care for the world and for beings whose conditions of flourishing are exploited and stolen, but its potential focus on specific undoings loosens up, disrupts, and reshapes registers and planes of existence. This chapter's cases focus on unlearning the overskilled sensorium that is so quick to adapt to damaged life with a straight, and not a queer, face.

In other words, in contrast to the universalizing yet concrete affective abstraction of the Kantian or the insider/outsider *sensus communis*, this chapter's political version of the common requires a transformed understanding of the shared sense not energized by the shared world of a traumatic history, nor an achievement on which to build. It is something other than a rage for the reproduction of an already cultivated sense of likeness. This chapter's common is as an action concept that acknowledges a broken world and the

desperate need for a transformational infrastructure. It begins a compendium of getting out. It uses the spaces of alterity within ambivalence to regenerate what can be done with the inconvenience of relationality.

This includes the pleasures of estrangement itself. Stanley Cavell comments on “Wittgenstein perceiving our craving to escape our commonness with others, even when we recognize the commonness of the craving; Heidegger perceiving our pull to remain absorbed in the common, perhaps in the very way we push to escape it.”²³ Many philosophical traditions in relation to the ordinary converge in Cavell’s thought: what’s important here is that the movement to be together better demands confidence in an apartness that recognizes the ordinary as a space at once actively null, delightfully animated, stressful, intimate, alien, and uncanny.²⁴ Rei Terada makes even a stronger claim about aversion to the given world, arguing that some thinkers respond to the “endemic normative pressure on thoughts and feelings” by turning away toward a relief in abstraction or dissatisfaction that she calls a kind of queer phenomenophilia.²⁵ With these thinkers, this chapter turns to the desire for displacement or separateness from the inconvenience of other people, from the overpresence of the world, which is not the same thing as not loving or wanting the felt relation as such.²⁶

Crossing Boston Common: Or, Emerson’s Worm

Boston Common exemplifies the nonexistence of its own concept (figure 2.3). The oldest named common in the United States, it carries in its various monuments an American archive of racial and economic crimes against human flourishing along with the affective promise that, even within capitalism, public premises should exist on which to develop a sensorium for the sense of a common.

The vicious ironies of this fantasy have not gone unrecognized. In “For the Union Dead,” for example, Robert Lowell presses his face against the black iron of the Boston Common gate, exiled from experiencing the freedom of relationality that any common holds out to a public, a respite against the world of property values and enclosure.²⁷

During his childhood, he writes, there was an aquarium in Boston, now in the same looted and abandoned shape as the Detroit Public Schools’ book depository: “Its broken windows are boarded. / The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales. / The airy tanks are dry.” It used to be that young Lowell melded “like a snail” with the glass tank that separated him from the fish there, as if being in spatial sync enabled him to breathe in the air of the

and living concepts, and not just to get through the ongoing moment but to generate forms of life in resistance to an Oz horizon that doesn’t hold up close up. The aesthetics of kinesthetic performance beginning with the body can provide tactics that might grow new proprioceptors. I close with two examples focusing on the sensuality of learning in the middle of the dehiscence of unlearning.

Liza Johnson’s film *In the Air* (2009) is about her hometown of Portsmouth, Ohio, although she doesn’t name it: it could be many postindustrial US landscapes, except it’s predominantly white. The two dominant affects “in the air” are distraction and boredom: the film’s central question, posed in different forms every day, is whether the burned-out and “wasted” parents, who spend time drunk and antagonistic in cars and bars, will leave for their children what Patricia Williams describes as the inheritance of a disinheritance.⁷⁴ The disinheritance isn’t just familial or financial. It’s about the exhaustion of language: the heavy silence of what goes without saying sustains this world.

The town in this film has been abandoned not only by its elders but by capital. It seems to have one industry, a junkyard (figure 2.5). The junkyard’s aspiration seems to be to avoid events: a sign announces the string of days without accident. But the feel is as though the world of this town is one punctured membrane away from becoming the scrap it now organizes. The buildings and streets are empty: it seems to be being maintained as a ghost town.

The film is from the perspective of the kids of the town, its current crop of dreamers: they are protagonists in training. The training comes from the only live collective space we see in the town, a circus school that is called, in real life, but not in the film, *Cirque d’Art*.⁷⁵ We see the circus teacher dead serious at the front of the room, getting the group in sync to do tricks. The kids



2.5 *In the Air*, directed by Liza Johnson, 2009. Printed with permission of Liza Johnson.

Spahr's work slides consciousness of all of this into suspending its judgment without evacuating judgment, absorbing the noise of the world, and breaking the world into noise. This training in unlearning the world through reading it across many profoundly malfunctioning genealogical machineries produces an infrastructure of patience and appetite, an unusual pair. But if there is a flatness to what's evoked in her broken figuration of what also continues, and if the poetry refunctions the violent voice of indistinction as a way to reconfigure democracy, it is also haunted by the universalist desire to mechanize change rather than to stop for or be stopped by what's inconvenient about it. The machine absorbs the friction while playing with its destructiveness. A regressive poetic, in the best sense. Of course, this state was the liberal world-wish, too, imagining the extension of the common through inclusion, without loss. In the end, every moment of unlearning the world and reference has to bear the transition of fantasy, desire, and material exchange no longer governed by possession. We write out of where we write from.

Unlearning the Common

There can be no change without revisceralization. Throughout this chapter, this summary statement has been indicated in terms of the incitement to break open habits and naturalized norms of association, for example through the use of the commons concept to dispossess the normative analogy of its force. Such change involves all kinds of loss and transitional suspension of our confidence about how things work. It also releases creative energy for worldbuilding.

But it's not simple to move from fight and release to a generative freedom. The transition requires reconditioning what pass as instincts, triggers, gut feelings, true feelings, presumptive ties, the whole default world of emotional and affective expectation. In the affective common, that reconditioning is often what gets in the way of staying with who you're with while also nursing many small and large scars. I flagged this part of the process earlier in the term *unlearning*, which is another way to lose your object. Infrastructuralist perspectives experiment with what can generate ongoing life. So far in this chapter they have used the common to generate tactics for change that are fundamentally conceptual, experimental in the way they're lived. Such a focus on the transformational infrastructure is central to the anarchist tradition that begins with building from what bodies can do together on the ground, in the weather, through ideas manifest in material practice



2.3 Boston Common. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Other, “the bubbles, / drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish.” It was as though there was a common air despite the separation of species being and knowledge from tactile transmission. This low-bar national naturalism appears throughout commons talk, insisting that one has had to move through nature to return to a sense of a “we” that is bound together politically. The nostalgic “I” of Lowell’s poem still sighs for the image of nature persisting and decaying in the same time and space as he was emerging, compared especially to the “yellow dinosaur steam shovels” of modernity “grunting.”²⁸ He’s intent on revealing the thinness not only of this so-called collectively held public surface, but of the ones scattered throughout the area, too, in “a thousand small-town New England greens” that celebrate the Revolutionary War. The “green” is an idea of the common without the utopian promise.

Meanwhile, in Boston proper, the city is building near the park a parking structure for passing occupants that embodies more of what white national capitalism offers: the rental of temporary space. This model is that of modern property, defining the fungible status as always fluctuating value. This is the model of US citizenship. Boston politics seeds the temporary and calls it “public” if that’s where the funds come from. Looking around, the poem thus sees the whole system of belonging in shambles, the statehouse held together by scaffolding, monuments propped up by planks, the nearby grass providing no cushion.

In other words, it is not a fantasy of the affectionate body politic at leisure that keeps Lowell returning to the park space. Instead, he focuses on how belonging is given an aesthetic density in the space where the green provides a distraction or alibi for the ongoing, violent nationalist history also monumentalized there. “For the Union Dead” focuses on the Saint-Gaudens monument to General Robert Shaw’s Massachusetts 54th Regiment, a white-ruled regiment otherwise composed entirely of Black soldiers that was decimated during the Civil War (figure 2.4). Most scholarship on the poem focuses on its monument to white sacrifice in the heroic body of Shaw, and the irredeemable American crime of using racial genocides to prop up the ideality of its national concept.²⁹

This 1850s monument was planted there to honor that sacrifice, Lowell writes, but also to establish the very pastness of white supremacist violence. But the 1960s poem refuses the story of Northern racial blamelessness. Lowell’s version of the Union fought over what forms of limited sovereignty capitalist democracy could bear: encountering a celebration of this low-bar settler imaginary is sickening. The Boston Common houses the performance of separateness, of apartheid and death. In General Shaw’s claim that anyone

The multiplication of indices even in these stanzas lets us begin to see through Spahr’s eyes the diversity of infrastructures of belonging. Belonging intends property, sovereignty, politics, tradition, being obligated, and sharing qualities: belonging is someone else’s judgment about “fit”; belonging is a sense and an aspiration, an appetite, recycling the world. Belonging also points to something simpler than belonging that I have been calling “proximity.” More on that in the next chapter. The kinds of proximity that matter here are made by practices of attention not defined by dissensus or agonism but technically, by atmosphere-generating juxtaposition. This proximity dilutes what we called structural by shifting the force of the normative infrastructures from the state and commodity capitalism into the ordinary that also includes local plural intimacies and the associations that make life sticky and interesting.

Spahr’s tactic in *Well Then There Now* is, then, to take up a position within her colonial/racial/patriarchal/class inheritance and from there mess up the tracks of forms in movement. The function of the bot, I think, is to do more of what intention never does fully, to break likeness without protecting anything, to play with analogy randomly, with unpredictable effects. It’s a deliberately naïve use of the mechanic to mess up the image of the world one carries around.

That’s significant. For Aristotle, analogy originally pointed not to “an equality of relations” but a mere technicality about the repetition of key terms.⁷¹ But analogy has become a broader vehicle than for establishing likeness-in-relation.⁷² Spahr breaks apart this model to refuse the presumption that equality involves the distribution of the affective comfort of equivalency in any register: but this does not mean that she is not interested in equality. This poetic performs how difficult and demanding it is for a being who has taken up a position in life within imperial/capitalist infrastructures to figure equally valued social being. Attempting to decolonize and deprivatize the visceralized, invested archive of likeness creates a different form to return to, putting the flat ontology of being in the world near the materiality of raw exposure and extreme risk that Virno argues is the ordinary of the contemporary common, a dispossessedness in its awkward, convoluted, observational, comic, noisy, general, and diversely manifest vulnerability.⁷³ Nothing is archaic in a crisis politics or poetics. The settler colonial presumption is alive, as are the not-mere gestures toward making its presumptions useless. At its best, Spahr’s poetry is a technology of engagement in which all objects are granular and regenerate their relation to difference and distance. The ongoingness of this dynamic is what I mean by infrastructure.

This concept describes the way in which practices of connection, sharing, and being-in-common breed a kind of transformation in those involved in the production of a collective space/practice/mode of sociality/movement/resistance. This transformation and change is porous, messy and hard to quantify or evaluate, but it is a crucial aspect of these forms of sociality and therefore needs to be recognized.⁶⁸

What Spahr envisions as the vulnerable language commons is defined by glitch: a glitch she makes in the reproduction of colonization, migration, occupation, reproduction, nature, and capitalist circulation.⁶⁹ Spahr thinks of this enmeshing as in the tradition of ecopoetics, but in this version of it repair also looks like a will to disrepair.

what we know is like and unlike
as it is kept in different shaped containers
it is as the problems of analogy
it is as the view from the sea
it is as the introduction of plants and animals, others, exotically
yet it is also as the way of the wood borer
and the opinion of the sea
as it is as the occidental concepts of government, commerce,
money and imposing
what we know is like and unlike
one stays diverse with formed packages
that is what the problems of the analogy are
...
analogy from analogy
analogy of analogy
...
it cannot be of another way
it cannot be of another way⁷⁰

The problems the glitchfrastructure of the text performs are three: the container as a figure for the material means of distribution, which is what an infrastructure does on the ground; the institutions of structural domination; and the formally normative model of analogy, which, broken, gives way to radically different linkages. “It cannot be of another way,” repeated, does not mean that the form of things is fixed but that there are so many ways to forge strings of attachment in and to the world.



2.4 Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Robert Gould Shaw and 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment Memorial, Boston Common. Photo by Rhododendrites, November 13, 2019. Reprinted from Wikimedia Commons under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

might “choose life and die” for the nation, the monument tries to demonstrate the centrality of sacrifice to settler “democracy”; even the lost are the partial persons of the Constitution.³⁰

The Common’s monument in “For the Union Dead” triggers the poem’s processing of Hiroshima too: that act of US imperial violence that had not at Lowell’s writing, nor has yet, been monumentalized in the physical or imaginary collective common.³¹ Hiroshima hangs in the poem as an event that is apparently not yet displaceable enough into the past that mourning’s convenient screen memories obscure the racialized costs of liberal freedom. Outer “space is nearer.”³² No First Nations history is entered into the lyric record. This model of the common presents the New England lifeworld as a mass grave of many styles of complicity. It appears too much to pretend that all of US history and activity isn’t a choking destruction hidden by a green screen of episodic and limited freedom.

In that sense, in the battle of antimodernity Lowell wages, and in his disrespect for civilization and its minor mystifying sites of refuge and relief,

Lowell's turn toward and against the common draws on the precedent of Emerson's "Nature," which also takes place famously on the Boston Common. There Emerson, too, struggles to both occupy and depart from complicity with the US American appetite for dispossession. But while Lowell uses the common against its historical function of distracting public attention from the ongoing violent flesh-effects of settler and imperial practice, in "Nature" Emerson adopts a materialist strategy for ridding the Common of what's become common. You could call this an anticapitalist rather than antiracist argument, but that would point to a collective politics that doesn't attract him in the present of the writing.³³

For Emerson, choosing life in the common abandons the historical body: the sensual and politically saturated body, with its inculcated wants, is a false front, not a "natural fact." He also brackets the collective intellectual and political ballast of his own transcendentalist life in Boston, as well as anything that is an inheritance. Inheritance, in his view, blocks "an original relation to the universe": it interferes with the sovereign. Always the Spinozan, Emerson seeks the joyous increase of his powers,³⁴ and like his heirs Hardt and Negri, he looks to the inexhaustible activity of universal singularity, that part of being which cannot be generalized nor made normative, as a resource for remaking the world. But whereas in Hardt and Negri the "commonwealth" of singularities called "multitude" can organize itself in commons-like alternatives to national-capitalism, Emerson uses the singularity to generate a route out of the world entirely, toward life on an abstract plane. These two heterotopic styles are born from within conventional life but move away from it. Emerson moves through, then away from, the body; through, then away from, the natural object that offers to consciousness a revolutionized idea of spirit.³⁵ Opening up to receptivity is his sovereign act.

The aim of Emerson's method in "Nature," then, is not to reproduce or clean up the ongoing world, and it engineers a Boston Common that enables one to discover in oneself the *sensus communis* that is not tied to a representation. Breaking the environment that produces a false-positive common of national unity is not his main issue, as it was in Lowell's translation of the common into a national-political graveyard. Rather than providing a material for a social movement, Emerson sets out on a thought experiment that could provide perspectives that redeem the world. If "you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind" then beings and infrastructures in the world will be redeemed, and "disagreeable appearances, swine, spiders, snakes, pests, madhouses, prisons, enemies, vanish; they are temporary and shall be no more seen."³⁶ Prisons, enemies, the things of national grandiosity, are of the

The desired point seems to be not to use form as self-defense, nor to achieve beauty as attunement to a visceral sense of elevation and fairness. Nor is it to homogenize the world as disaster: *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* is neither Adorno on the lyric nor *The Waste Land*.⁶⁵ The desire in this text is to convert idioms of sensed impact into a scalar patterning that can become a scene of live collective being. It is sometimes graceless, absurd, or willful, but the risk of not trying for the common of awkwardness, complicity, and intimacy would be even more ridiculous and deadly. The work is about trying to stay in life gladly extended to "the brink of fear" without creating more enclosures or refuges.

Acknowledging pattern, with its constitutive interruptions, as a process of communing is extended in Spahr's *Well Then There Now* (2011), whose title is at once an admonition, a call to attention, a performance of therapeutic caring, and another cataloging of the common as a scene for the settler's destruction of her own historical structure and syntax. The ambition is to stage what she variously calls "sliding" and gliding, shifting, and "slipping the analogy of the opening of things."⁶⁶ Here the problem of analogy transformed becomes a project. In this book's version of the common, the Emersonian analogy of the "separation between" is acknowledged, but rather than shedding the world or flattening difference, as in *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*, *Well Then There Now* "approximate[s]" the "shapes of things I saw around me," loosening the attachment of figuration to its traditions.⁶⁷ The work does this by putting things next to other things in ways that emphasizes discontinuous yet ongoing experience.

Like *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*, *Well Then There Now* is located in Hawai'i, but where in the former work the land and language expose a common vulnerability in the register of the permeability of "all" to violence and desire, the latter book intensifies and denaturalizes the noise of one infrastructure using a translation program to move the languages of Hawai'i back and forth into each other. Still, standard hegemonic white English remains the setting in the end. Does this mean the unlearning of a settler screen-memory register can't or won't dismantle its ground?

Well Then There Now exposes its desire to be an archive and a counter-archive. Its mixtures of love and complicity recall the field of precarious documentation that Paige Sarlin put forth in her work on structural vulnerability, where

whatever grows, is produced, aggregated, created, or amassed within a space of sharing (outside the logic of market exchange) is vulnerable to the logic of the market & market forces, especially in relation to debt. . . .

Rhythm turns out to be key to Spahr's analogical aesthetics of the common infrastructure in resistance to punctuation's orchestration. This is not the common as a regularity but the induction of history. Rhythm is a whip-lash, a double take, a retrospect. But the discovery of a pattern also involves listening beyond the situation, speculating beyond the object, and following the disoriented body out to unsealed relations. Here flatness is not the opposite of what's dimensional but turns out to be the environment of relationality itself. "How connected we are with everyone," she writes, not just because we have ridden the same catastrophe and the same built environments but also because we have breathed in their dust particles.⁶² Dust is the effect of the contact between skin and the world, the universe and the world, and also what buildings release and the ground gives up. Pinged and hurt and inflamed by contact, we've become disoriented together, and breathed the dust out jointly, even when we're overwhelmed by what's too hard or too embodied.⁶³

This dust, that sand, that perturbing grain, and the smooth surfaces and soft air, too, affect people differently. They are in us, but the space they make is in a new alien zone of inexperience that might become something if we follow its tracks. The tone of the work varies, from a discourse of the common as the space where being connected meets being collectively doomed, to the practice of an aesthetics of interruption where any observation releases a pressure both to stay there forever and to refuse to become absorbed in the mirror of a suspension that refuses time.

This description of the variety of nonsovereign relations brought to the surface through the continuity of the life in breathing and the universality of infrastructural physicality understates the presence of internal resistance and glitch in *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*. The work can be funny in this way, maybe unintentionally: its willful mixtures create the breakdown of the machine of sense on the way to expanding it; its desire to witness complicity sometimes feels like alchemical hygiene:

In bed, when I stroke the down on your cheeks, I stroke also the carrier battle group ships, the guided missile cruisers, and the guided missile destroyers.

When I reach for your waists, I reach for bombers, cargo, helicopters, and special operations . . .

Fast combat support ships, landing crafts, air cushioned, all of us with all of that.⁶⁴

same scale as any other disagreeable things: only idealism can restore a true relation to the lifeworld.

Emerson concocts a multistage project to achieve this end. It begins with going to the Common not to be in common with others but quite the opposite, to push the noise of the world from his head. "To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars."³⁷ There is no solidarity here, no subtracted space from which he speculates a return to a populated utopia. But why would a man go to the Common to be alone? Why go to the public space of episodic democracy to subtract all that from it? The Common is a place he goes not to possess but to be possessed, to submit to being dispossessed of property in the self by the immediacy of a nature that is what it is, dissolving the attachment to sovereignty and base instrumentality. Typical men, with their gross materiality, false assurance, and confusion of capitalist wants with rationality, get in the way of the judgment of the universal common sense. Capitalist subjectivity is too clogged with "pseudo-activity" to acknowledge the vital relation among things.³⁸ The noise and flesh of other people are inconvenient. In shedding that he thinks he becomes more himself. He thinks he can show how anyone can molt being if they're willing to receive the idea of spirit rather than dominating what's in front of them.

Men in the flesh, here sensed as flesh, do not create relief from themselves or respect for the presence of the flesh, as in Lowell. As Lawrence Buell writes, Emerson never welcomes the appetites except when they are oriented away from worldly ambition.³⁹ Not surprisingly, it is said that on this very same Boston Common Emerson exhorted Walt Whitman to desexualize his poetry. Whitman, Emerson is said to have said, should write about man, not men; ideas and language, not bodies or anything bearing "mean egotism."⁴⁰ Or as "Nature" puts it, "The high and divine beauty which can be loved without effeminacy." Emerson has wrapped the Common in moral police tape. Perhaps, figuring himself on the Common as a "transparent eyeball," he wants to separate the receptive disturbances of desire from the penetrations of the spirit. In his version of unlearning the body in the world, the flesh can't become confusing.

A transparent eyeball mobilizes the senses as channels of the world's impact. Seeing subjects as fundamentally permeable to, rather than fundamentally possessive of, what they apprehend is a way of talking about affective knowledge: Marx calls this turning the senses into theorists.⁴¹ Emerson uses these intensities to experience a mode of embodied abstraction that frees

his spirit into a state neither personal nor impersonal: full of sensation, he becomes a “nothing.” From that figural position one no longer confuses sovereignty for the form of appetitive nonsovereignty that treats the world as a cupboard of things to grab at and fetishize. One no longer confuses freedom with the merely formal and forensic status of the political subject, nor wants to possess the chosen intimate: “The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance” compared to “the perpetual presence of the sublime.”⁴² This self-dispossession does not feel like loss, therefore. The presence of the sublime tells us that to break the world and open access to the universal sense, we have to shatter how we know.

At first, achieving a reoriented sensorium comes in the form of a new habit: moving through, then away from, nature. Cavell amplifies Emerson’s desire to destroy the fallen common on behalf of the *sensus communis* through a practice of reinventing natural analogy: “the analogy that marries Matter and Mind.”⁴³ Mind, or the idea, releases the body from its feedback loop errors and allows the subject of the Boston Common not to imitate himself and call it freedom, but to practice a mode of world acknowledgment that does not calcify singularity in a representation. This means, counter-intuitively, that the analogical marriage of matter and mind is not a matter of synthesis, mimesis, or the extension of likenesses. It involves seeing in analogy a chain of discontinuous continuity secured by movement at once destructive and generative.

Turning from men, Emerson would rather think about worms. The epigraph to “Nature,” a poem by Emerson, reads,

A subtle chain of countless rings
The next unto the farthest brings;
The eye reads omens where it goes,
And speaks all languages the rose;
And, striving to be man, the worm
Mounts through all the spires of form.⁴⁴

On offer here is a logic of proximity that looks like an infrastructure, but an infrastructure of association, unrepresentable except through figuration’s intensity of displacement. The eye reads prophetically but without narrative assurance; rings on a chain resonate with nearness across extensive but not saturated space; the movement from eye to rose inters human perception in a wrenching enjambment and metaphorizes “speaks” beyond the limit of the sign. Then, the worm. The worm strives to be man simply because it

space of the building that surrounds the room and the space of the neighborhoods nearby in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and the space around the hands and the space of the room and the space of the building that surrounds the room and the space of the neighborhoods nearby and the space of the cities in and out. . . .

In this everything turning and small being breathed in and out by everyone with lungs during all the moments.⁶¹

Did you skim? It is hard not to let the incantation fuzz out the demands of staying with what’s changing in a rhythmic common.

Close reading close breathing, Spahr turns everything into a holding environment that articulates the common in common but reshapes it too: other verses scale up, moving across mesosphere, stratosphere, islands, cities, rooms, hands, cells. Not identical, not joined and spaced in a regular net, but copresent, singular, general, and dynamic. A space of collectively encountered information emerges that is not necessarily collectively or coherently comprehended information, performing the speed of encounter and the reality of constant processing. Chanting is access to hearing, to assuming, and to not hearing, too, a force toward and against listening. Unlearning is not the replacement of a cartridge.

There is something romantic and humanist about this version of a process aesthetics; there may be insufficient friction in the proclamation of mixture at the political, productive, and cellular levels. Then, too, the historical fact of bodies repairing and disappearing in relation to the universe of things that include each other in sync and in counterpoint involves taking each other on and in but never collapsing the distance that allows for attention. This comfort in distance may be veiled by the “we” and the “everyone.” To take something in is to be nonsovereign in relation to it, but “we” already were that: to be exposed to one’s exposure is not equal to being destroyed by it. Intentionality minimizes loss. Facing a liberalism that can’t account for its moral comfort with national-capitalist dispossession, the poem nonetheless imagines dissolving its own floor in the histories of colonization that include the present. If we can distinguish mode from method, Spahr’s mode digests and extrudes an infrastructure of evenly distributed attention that notices discrete disturbances in the sensual and cognitive fields to squeeze out a “connection,” an infrastructure without attached directions. This is how the paradoxical relation of rhythm and flatness works.

the ocean. Such a willful poetic seems, sometimes, not to be opening up beyond its desire to be good and do good. But the formal practice installs a glitch in virtue.

There are these things:

cells, the movement of cells and the division of cells

and then the general beating of circulation

and hands, and body, and feet

and skin that surrounds hands, body, feet.

This is a shape,

a shape of blood beating and cells dividing.

But outside of this shape is space.

There is space between the hands.

There is space between the hands and space around the hands.

There is space around the hands and space in the room.

There is space in the room that surrounds the shapes of everyone's hands and body and feet and cells and the beating contained within.

There is space, an uneven space, made by this pattern of bodies.

This space goes in and out of everyone's bodies.

Everyone with lungs breathes the space in and out as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands in and out as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and the space around the hands in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and the space around the hands and the space of the room in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and the space around the hands and the space of the room and the space of the building that surrounds the room in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and the space around the hands and the space of the room and the

is generating form, not because it shares anything like tradition or organs: only nonsubjective intention. This association is presumably a reciprocal one. To be free on this Common also requires gliding through the mud: an expression of materiality in continuous movement that's uninterrupted by possessive ego performance.

Branka Arsić claims that such a streaming movement is what Emerson means by "thinking": interrupting the ego distortions of "reflection" with dynamic projection "carve[s] out . . . paths on the earth-brain so that its vegetation starts growing."⁴⁵ This new configuration is linguistic in "Nature," structured by the rhizome of analogy that pushes out the conventional to make room for an original thought, figured in enjambment, lyric leaps, and evocative speaking.

To become worm, then, and so to renew becoming man, Emerson's man must take up a position as a formalist following out movements that become forms defined by direction, not their idealizing tableau. In this version form is not a thing to be rested in. The worm creates a space of movement that becomes form. If it is form it becomes social, that is, of the world; at this stage it is movement and singular. In the wormhole the worm creates an infrastructure to hold itself in the world: the hole fits the worm, but only as it moves. It reveals an ontological flatness of all matter, but more vitally such recognition induces movement into new proximities. This transduction of the natural symbol into a revelation of ontological resonance in movement through analogy makes Emerson "glad to the brink of fear."⁴⁶ For the form of the analogy is not a brace or foundation but a sign of scene-making action and exposure to risk, what Juliana Spahr calls a zone defined by the sliding that happens in it.⁴⁷

Toward a Poetics of Infrastructure

Alone, then, the Emersonian man looks at the stars to embody the *sensus communis* that can grasp the world in its immediacy. But the stars do not return the world to Emerson in the shape of a distilled something that is held in common. Instead they provide for him a spatial opportunity to experience an impersonal affective immediacy from a distance that is also ever to be traversed. For the possibility of accessing the common that subtends all being requires him not to inhabit or possess it but to desire it—to have, one might say, a crush on it.

We will remember that he says to look at the stars in order to achieve the common sense. He continues: "The rays that come from those heavenly

worlds, will separate between him and what he touches.” That sensual “separation between” suggests an important foundation for Emerson’s sense of what analogy can induce for a social theory of an infrastructure that would afford the inconvenience of other people: a new apprehension of the proximity of things to each other. It does not work by way of metaphor’s conceptual figuration; nor by anaclisis, the propping of x onto y that reveals the chain links of investment in a psychic economy; nor by parataxis, a catalog; nor by what the flesh feels immediately as touch and impact. Analogy’s special gift to him is the separation within the nonsovereign relation that makes linking possible.⁴⁸

In other words, the separateness between, the dynamic of difference within relation, has to exist in order for Emersonian common sense even to be conceived of. We would not, after all, need a concept of the common if alterity weren’t moving through the wormholes that structure intimacy, itself a sensed but unrepresentable figural space graspable only in the reflexive movement of bodies, moods, and atmospheres. The commons concept foregrounds the ellipsis of difference in which a common historical being and separateness-in-relation resonate with and push each other formally, transmuting inconvenience into practices called intimacy and democracy that the overcloseness of othered beings requires. The space between and the spaces among involve distances created by the disturbance of being close without being joined, and without mistaking the other’s flesh for one’s own or any object in the world or object world as identical to oneself. Non-sovereignty is not, here, the dissolution of an expected boundary. It’s the original experience of an affect, of being receptive, of being.

The word Emerson uses for the experience of the natural immediacy among things is not *belonging* but *detection*: “Not only resemblances exist in things whose analogy is obvious,” he writes, “as when we detect the type of the human hand in the flipper of the fossil-saurus, but also in objects wherein there is great superficial unlikeness. Thus architecture is called ‘frozen music’ . . . and [a] ‘Gothic church’ . . . ‘petrified religion.’”⁴⁹ He thinks of metaphor as a subset of analogy, a kind of disturbance within a figurative relation. Even if the Emersonian natural symbol integrates processes to produce models of a world unbound by mortal distortions, the work is to detect and therefore to create spaces within the image that can assume an unpredicted rhythm, one recognizable but sensed, not of a “likeness.”

In the common of the “separation between,” then, a sense of worlding is unimpeded by an economy of loss or a worry about the destruction of what is finally an indestructible singularity. Paradoxically, by putting things into an-

parts, and a launching pad in relation to which beings can find each other to figure out how to live. It is as though their kinetic movement takes energy from the term *movement’s* political resonance. Or maybe it’s both/and. Movement changes how space works too.

As a poetry of infrastructure, *The Transformation* stages enclosures that are located outside, and when inside there are always open windows and screens, such as on the computer. It connects mediations and spells out what’s going on there. In short, if the infrastructure of the social emerges within predictable life, Spahr releases it into an open plan. But it is not a flat plane, because the language through which the book generates a narrative image of their life is a bumpy surface, like life is: a neglected side road for bodies and the histories taking shape. One has to make language do what it cannot yet do. How the lovers use it matters because they want to be like what they are not yet like.

Through an aesthetic that collects streaming observations, then, Spahr’s work aims to circulate a new common sense from analogy that does not redeem the world, as in Emerson, or condemn it, as in Lowell: Spahr sees the analog as a material infrastructure starting with the body that can anatomize, dismantle, disturb, and make possible living in the world that is always, for good and ill, intimately touching from near and far and therefore changing what proximity does. The “they” begins in contact. The common of contact produces plans for structural transformation from where the bodies and lifeworlds are. To say, then, that Spahr is a poet of infrastructure, a queer infrastructure, is to point to an aesthetic zone of perverse undefensive expansion in multiple dimensions that risks speculating about everything, placing a flattened voice near what’s threatening, aversive, and inconstant in attachment’s vibrating action.

This practice does not become a formalist fetish in her later work. This *Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2005) is a different kind of queer reboot of the common, testing out what’s converging in the plural, using a practice of hypernaming and indistinction to shake out of hiding and necessity a whole range of things from the lifeworld of US empire, privacy, and whiteness.

You can’t shed history performatively or by decree. In italicized passages preceding each section, she describes having to take in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan while living far away in a never-postcolonial Hawai’i where US military operations are also ordinary, intruding as the white noise of the day. All of this is in proximity to aural and visual mediations of world destruction, beauty, celebrity scandal, birdsong, human friction, many racisms, love, and

are in a dynamic to which they must pay attention that is critical, loving, and persistent.⁵⁶ That's one thing it means to hack normativity.

The affective scene focuses on receiving and metabolizing the world while unraveling its presumptive solidity. The lovers personify themselves as a collective, which ruffles and proliferates analogies:

They just wanted to talk to each other the way that humans talk to each other when they go on long car trips in the country and they have nothing really to say after the first hour in the car but sometimes in the hours that follow they might point something out or talk some about what thoughts came to them as they drove along, mesmerized by the blur of space passing by them. They wanted to be they the way that humans might be they with a dog and a dog they with humans, intimately together yet with a limited vocabulary. They wanted to be they like blood cells are compelled to be a they. What they meant was that they were other than completely autonomous but they were not one thing with no edges, with no boundary lines.⁵⁷

Whereas some critics disparage Spahr's association with experiment as lyric vanguardism and bourgeois play without risk, I take the Spahrian project of describing the textured dynamic of an ongoing nonsovereignty to offer the affective idea of worldmaking as infrastructural improv, churning out a space as the worm does, through situational generative movement that requires an ethics and a politics.⁵⁸ To read Spahr executing this aim is to enter the production site of a *sensus communis* that must remain disoriented: the eyes are receptive and aleatory, but not unfocused. Its task is to take in, feel out, be historical, be speculative: to keep moving while assessing. The bodies autonomously signify things that must be acknowledged and folded in.

Meanwhile, the glue that binds the floor of the world that privilege enjoys dissolves in her version of flat-toned affect. Intimates, peoples, and structures crash into each other, at once overclose and distant. To break analogy is to break bad habits of responding and relating, freeing the inconvenience drive to try out alternative linkages. Avant-gardes attack, and Spahr is a good polemicist and historian of literary activism when she aspires to it.⁵⁹ The commons-work puzzles things more intricately though, worries them from the inside where existence is more felt than verified. "And when they thought rationally they felt that being they in this awkward time should have made them feel more safe."⁶⁰ Of course it doesn't, because, as we saw in chapter 1 in relation to *Last Tango in Paris*, plural form is not only a wish for a refuge or cushion; it is also social, an exposure, a mediation, a conjuncture of moving

alogical relation, Emerson interferes with the mode of likeness that embraces the narcissism of sovereign-style subjectivity. He enables nonsovereignty to feel like a relief from the reproduction of heavy selves. This nonsovereignty does not bind relationality to any specific shape. To the contrary, this positive version of dispossession makes the world bearable by projecting and receiving a collective, but not mutual, movement in practice.

We have learned all this by following the becoming-man of the worm. As its track is an infrastructure of continuity across the surface of things, the concept helps us to see analogical figurality as a conduit for social infrastructures as well. Susan Leigh Star, the great ethnographer of infrastructure, describes it as a relational and ecological process of sustaining worlds that is mostly visible in its failure. Star, more a formalist, argues that when systems of social reproduction stop working, you can see the machinery of the separation that has induced relations among things and the dynamics that kept them generating the energy for worldmaking: when infrastructural things stop converging, she writes, they become a topic and a problem rather than the automata of procedure. So, we can see the glitch of the present as a revelation of what had been the infrastructure of the lived ordinary. When things stop converging in the reliable patterns of social and material reproduction, they also threaten the conditions and the sense of belonging, but more than that, of assembling.⁵⁰

This way of thinking infrastructure-making gathers up many processes: the convergence scene of various value abstractions, material protocols for metabolizing resources, and the socially distributed experience of making and sustaining life, to start. It resonates with David Harvey's view of the local disturbances that capital makes to protect infrastructures of interest to the dominant class.⁵¹ It suggests that disturbance is what allows for collective work to be done in order to build out zones of return for alternative life-worlds. But this is not the same as building new institutions. The liveliness of world-making activity distinguishes infrastructures from institutions, although the relation between these concepts and materialities is often a matter of perspective. Institutions enclose and congeal power, resources, and interest, and they represent their legitimacy as something solid and enduring, a predictability on which the social relies. Institutions normalize reciprocity. What constitutes infrastructure, in contrast, are the patterns, habits, norms, and scenes of assemblage and use. Collective affect gets attached to it, too, to the sense of its inventiveness and the horizon of dynamic reciprocity it entails. This is what it means to invent alter-life from within life, what I called in the introduction the heterotopian impulse.

In contemporary left commons talk, social institutions that deliver mass resources are deemed worthy only if they provide an infrastructure for the common rather than privatizing it, along with delivering something like what the state does, an exterior-looking focalizing point of material and imaginary survival for its often desperately at-risk members.⁵² These proximate modes of counter-organization include the practices of mass social movements, local cells, alternative supply chains, phone trees, petitions that disturb beyond opinion-strutting, and pooled ideas, for example. Whatever is sustaining grows from exchange.

Institutions generate the positivity of attachment and protocol even while destroying the lifeworld of the lands and lives attached to them for survival. The notion of structure as calcified, as a thing, also negates ordinary continuous adaptation and adjustment by casting them as epiphenomenal. The very figure of infrastructure, too, can block seeing its contingency and creativity, establishing tableaux that bear witness to the formal regularity of movement. But it's worth the risk. We live in a time of massive institutional failure that has led to infrastructural collapse: of bridges, economies, health systems, practices and fantasies of intimacy, ideas of what equality can look like, and what the state has to do with it. The old logics or analogies that make collective life collective seem to be loosening and collapsing.⁵³ Protestors push the analogical breakdown, which is a version of destroying confidence in causality, in what leads to what. See, for example, the centrality of broken analogy to contemporary abolitionist movements. X is not like y in relation to security: see the ordinary violence of policing, prisons, universities, and, though not in this exact terminology, antiracist, feminist, queer, and trans antiharassment and pro-rights movements. Then sometimes x is like y, but you need to read the revised caption. The disturbance of material and conceptual infrastructures is a radical opportunity.

Emerson modeled a common without movements, on which other people could not jostle his idealization of a universal spirit made possible by "the separation between." He achieves his ambition to represent by taking up strings of figuration that, like the wormhole, are not residences. He floats an affective trail and trial more powerfully than a map for method. Yet if seeing worldbuilding as immanence and infrastructure-making starts where the universalist fantasy provides a primary location for flourishing, it is here that the Spinozan tradition finds its limit. As the Spinozan transcendentalists and their heirs in Deleuze, Hardt and Negri, and, from a queer project perspective, Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani demonstrate, it is very hard to

move through symbolization without becoming overattached to a primary analogy or figure.⁵⁴ It is hard not to read signs as though they are slogans.

Writing the common from the Emersonian tradition has been central to Juliana Spahr's practice of the past few decades. Her work's discipline is processual, labile, and mobile, like Emerson's, and politically lyrical, like Whitman's after him. The intensity of her habits of figuration also expresses the sensuality of being in a common movement without attaching it to a particular shape to serve as a foundation for a better likeness. Like the worm, she converts feeling things into feeling things out. She receives the world and metabolizes it so that its troubles look moveable.

But Spahr's work does not begin with the serial perfectionism of singularities or other lyric modes that proclaim singular "I's" and "we's" in the wishful performative. After Lowell's use of the historical faux-Common against the idea of the common and Emerson's protection of it by using analogy to deontologize, Spahr's work adds a third approach, using it to enact and unravel settler imaginaries of the common by beginning with the ubiquitous manifestations of the nonsovereign. There's no travel to that common and no escape from it: it's where people live. Spahr's work performs instead an aspirational mutuality among the inconvenient, who are always a bit uncoordinated in time and space, falling into and out of each other's way.

Here are some examples of how the making of a common through analogical destruction has worked for Spahr. The effects are not merely rhetorical or subjective. Her autobiography, *The Transformation* (2007), takes place in the intimately and politically collective timespaces of structural violence that cross the Hawai'i of 1997 and New York City in the penumbra of 9/11. The text spans these timespaces by charting the erotic and intellectual love of three people for each other. But Spahr writes of an ambition not to see "relationship" writ large as "a feedback loop" of desire or something clarifying like a triangle.⁵⁵ You cannot make a stencil of this transformation. You cannot copy the form or carve your life into a likeness of it. The question is of the scalability of attachment and what can be done with how you use it.

The lovers seek what she calls "a Sapphic point" of impersonality that would allow them to think of themselves as a "they," avoiding the way a two-person couple conventionally thinks of itself as an "it." This formation cannot be skimmed or lived as a shortcut. The "they" is the first beat of a transformation, as the title predicts. Spahr looks not to the common of singularity to keep herself safe from engulfment in the "we," nor to an abstract solidarity that allows for self-heroic inflation, but begins where the bodies