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Chad Shomura

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Vital Impasse: Animacy Hierarchies, Irredeemability, and a Life Otherwise

Chad Shomura

By the early twenty-first century, it has become increasingly apparent that the United States has not lived up to its promises of the good life except for an increasingly wealthy, increasingly powerful few. For those down and nearly out, the good life nonetheless maintains a powerful lure. Take Sasha, the main character of Jennifer Egan's short story "Found Objects," who is "hanging by a thread."¹ The good life has long been unattainable for the thirty-five-year-old in post-9/11 New York City: her job as an assistant to a record label executive has dragged on for twelve years; her string of dates goes nowhere; she no longer cares to keep in touch with friends; and she lacks the will to pursue her old goals like following the news and managing a band. Sasha attempts to turn her life around by seeing a therapist, Coz, but the regular trips are bankrupting her. Her efforts to attain the good life backfire.

"Found Objects" raises political and theoretical questions about the good life at what Lauren Berlant might call an "impasse." Rather than a deadlock between values, beliefs, or ideologies, an impasse involves a crisis in the good life. People hit a block because the good life is out of reach despite their best efforts. At the same time, alternative paths are unavailable or actively thwarted. The unparalleled premium placed on the good life generates a double-bind: take on the psychic, bodily, and material costs of pursuing an unreachable end or risk the consequences of deviating from what has been enforced as the prime social good. Whatever course is taken, change is slow to happen though it is desperately needed. Impasses are nonetheless politically important, Berlant insists, because people might detach from the good life and develop alternative modes of living.

While scholars like Berlant have depersonalized impasse by attributing it to social, political, and economic failures, "Found Objects" focuses on relationships between humans and material things. The heart of Sasha's troubles appears to be what critics have called "kleptomania," or the pathological impulse to steal things that are not for personal use or monetary value.² Sasha is stuck because the exhilaration of taking things overpowers any desire for upward mobility,

romance, social life, or personal improvement. Instead of referring to Sasha as a kleptomaniac, however, Egan highlights an aesthetic sensibility. As an art form, found objects are composed of eclectic materials gathered from random places: storage, streets, landfills. The textures, colors, and shape of each material reflect a flurry of nonhuman influences such as wind, rain, and dirt. Found objects are a testament not to the human manipulation of inert objects but to a liveliness distributed across all kinds of matter. Seen in this light, Sasha is not an ill thief but remarkably sensitive to the allure of lively things. Because such a sensitivity relaxes the hold of the good life, might it offer a different way to understand and engage impasse?

This essay reads “Found Objects” alongside feminist, queer, and new materialist work on affect to describe how impasse troubles the good life in two ways. First, impasse unsettles the imperium of the good life. This essay joins widespread criticism of the US good life as a social fantasy defined by property ownership, job security, upward mobility, wellness, citizenship, and straight, monogamous, reproductive intimacy. It is supported by disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms that cultivate self-possessive individuality, masterful agency, and human dominance. These hallmarks of liberal modern subjectivity are shaped by race, gender, sexuality, coloniality, and ability. The good life differentiates people based on their current stage, progress made, and ability to move onward and upward. They are oriented to the same destination even though it is made inaccessible for many. The good life extends distributions of power and precarity by delineating between lives worth living and those that are not. The pain, exhaustion, and desperation that arise in impasse reflect the steep costs of the good life.

Second, this essay engages impasse to take on the unusual task of questioning the notion of life in the good life. Too often in the West, only certain humans are deemed eligible for the good life. It is difficult to imagine how the good life may be achieved by racialized humans, animals, plants, and rocks. This difficulty is partly due to modernist distinctions between humans (rendered the epitome of life ostensibly due to reason, purpose, and freedom) and matter (reduced to inert objects, chained to mechanical laws, and used for any and all human desires). Racism, sexism, homophobia, colonialism, and ableism have aligned certain humans with degraded matter. These ontological distinctions become acutely visible when contrasted with the good life beyond the West. Latin and South American notions of *buen vivir* (Spanish for “good living”) center on social and ecological harmony rather than resource extraction and economic growth.³ Macarena Gómez-Barris writes that *buen vivir* “offers a different

paradigm from the materialist impulse of the neoliberal discourse of ‘the good life’ that imagines endless personal expansion.”⁴ *Buen vivir* not only challenges the global dominance of the US good life by centering on collectivist, sustainable values. Since it recognizes the autonomy of the natural world, *buen vivir* challenges the US good life by signaling a nonanthropocentric notion of life.

Elevating non-Western figurations of the good life like *buen vivir* would surely open pathways through impasses that do not reproduce US-centrism. While acknowledging the importance of that task to flag the provincialism of the US good life and its imperial reach, this essay argues that the US good life, in addition to establishing how life ought to be lived, tacitly circumscribes what life is. The good life is predicated on what Mel Chen calls “animacy hierarchies,” which differentiate beings according to grades of liveliness, agency, ability, and mobility.⁵ Might the good life enforce the deanimation of matter except for certain forms, such as irresistible commodities? Does it afford life to humans only within certain confines? Are impassive states such as nonproductivity, incapacity, and unwellness made to designate not only a life not worth living but also an absence of life? If the good life implicates nonhumans as well as humans, then engagements with its normativity—its “goodness”—alone may inadvertently reinforce a notion of human life that affects all beings, whether human or not. Alternative figurations of life depend on addressing the animacy hierarchies of the good life.

I wish to show that impasse is vital for a life otherwise. As “Found Objects” shows, humans can be stopped in their tracks, while matter might be more lively and free. So while impasse most immediately evokes blockage, it actually teems with vitality; nothing is merely stuck. I am drawn to Berlant’s description of impasse as a “state of animated and animating suspension,” and I find those animations to extend well beyond the human.⁶ Impasse evokes what Gilles Deleuze calls “a life,” which is not a property of certain beings. A life is “sheer power,” an unruly force that courses through all kinds of bodies: animal, vegetable, mineral, . . . A life is impersonal, because it is not contained within any body; yet it is singular, because it is tied to specific bodies in a particular way. A life is *this* modulation of *these* bodies. No one body calls all the shots.⁷ The good life is a particular arrangement of a life, but it is far from the only one. “A life otherwise” designates protean assemblies of bodies that unsettle the animacy hierarchies of the good life. Impasses are critical junctures between the good life and a life otherwise. Rather than understanding impasse only negatively—as an obstruction to the good life—it can be reread as an unfolding of a life otherwise. What the good life depicts as going nowhere may in fact be vital movement even, or especially, when it feels all wrong.

This essay illustrates how impasse provokes new political control and possibilities for a life. It first navigates Berlant's cruel optimism, Chen's animacy hierarchies, and Jane Bennett's vibrant materialism in order to develop impasse as a state in which a life otherwise is disturbing the good life. It then turns to "Found Objects" to illustrate three points: lively matter can open and sustain an impasse; disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms try to restore the good life by reinstating its animacy hierarchies; and impasse enables irredeemable modes of being.

To be irredeemable is to refuse the good life by sticking with impasse. Critiques of the good life as a neoliberal, racialized, gendered, heteronormative, colonialist, ableist fantasy provide helpful signposts. Yet the disciplinary and biopolitical enforcement of the good life indirectly confirms that a life otherwise is already if elusively here and now, not in a solid form but as capacious potentiality. It is important to cultivate sensitivity to a life otherwise, for such may embolden resistance to the lure of the good life. The political potential of impasse, then, is not only in reimagining how life might be lived but also opening up what a life could be and, in some ways, already is.

The Lively Matter of Cruel Optimism

As the US good life in the early twenty-first century has been strained by economic crises, social unrest, ecological upheaval, and global war, the affective dimensions of social life and political action have received greater attention. Under the rubric of "Public Feelings," feminist and queer scholars explore affect, feeling, and emotion as important analytics of the political, key sites where power plays out, and resources for political engagement. Affect does not designate a psychic or bodily state alone; it circulates through publics, binding the personal to the political.⁸ Meanwhile, so-called new materialists also treat affect as an impersonal force while focusing on its not-quite-human dimensions.⁹ They explore affect through media, art, technology, and nonhuman entities, disputing the organization of matter into stark categories of life and nonlife.¹⁰ Together, and with modifications, Public Feelings and new materialism help register impasse as a tension between the good life and a life otherwise.

In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant attends to the affective binds left in the wake of collapsing social infrastructure. "Why do people stay attached to conventional good life fantasies," she asks, "when evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?"¹¹ The particulars of the good life (e.g., job security, a stable income) matter less than a sense of promise: the good life anchors continuity with the world as the source of living and living on. Life would be unbear-

able without the possibility of it, but because significant alternatives seem to be unavailable, people cling to the possibility of the good life through costly coping mechanisms such as hoarding, unhealthy eating, hustling, and drifting. “Cruel optimism” designates how promises of the good life can actually lead to a bad life, and even death.

Cruel optimism indirectly shows that the good life depends on the containment of unruly matter and the assertion of human agency. Berlant uses a mix of lively terms to describe *impasse*: “Where cruel optimism operates the very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment.”¹² Objects of desire are formed by misrecognition, a sort of psychic trick that “projects qualities onto something so that we can love, hate, and manipulate it for having those qualities—which it might or might not have.”¹³ Although Berlant does not say so, misrecognition confirms that matter is unwieldy and that human dominance is at the heart of the good life. While Berlant focuses on the incompatibility between fantasies of the good life and socioeconomic realities under neoliberal capital, the psychic and affective response of cruel optimism confirms that the good life is deeply anthropocentric. It expects humans to dominate all matter. *Impasse*, then, is an uncontrollable shift in liveliness across humans and matter.

Cruel optimism seeks to restore an animacy hierarchy in disarray. According to Chen, Western animacy hierarchies are anthropocentric; they use humanness as the chief measure by which beings are categorized and ranked. Animacy hierarchies hold the human to be a superior form of life based on markers such as reason, language, consciousness, and purposiveness. While these markers of animacy have assigned nonhuman animals, vegetables, and minerals to lower ranks, they have ejected countless humans from humanity as well. Anthropocentrism is inextricably linked to systems of race, coloniality, sexuality, and ability that regard some humans as animals and objects. Because cruel optimism serves to reinforce anthropocentrism, it reflects a deep affective attachment to stark ontological divisions as indispensable components of the good life.

While displacing life with animacy enables Chen to explore a broader, more intricate terrain of biopower, *impasse* affords a glimpse into how the good life extends animacy hierarchies that reinforce an image of life for the benefit of certain humans alone. The good life is predicated on the deadening of matter—that is, allowing humans and nonhumans to exhibit life only in accordance with an animacy hierarchy. If the good life presumes that humans can be endlessly resilient if not masterful, cruel optimism indicates how the

enervation of matter can actually threaten human and nonhuman life.¹⁴ Cruel optimism is diehard commitment to an animacy hierarchy that stratifies the good life in toxic, deadly ways even if all humans are ostensibly eligible and nonhumans are implicitly disqualified. The cruel optimist can't imagine life in the US without a deeply exclusionary figure of the human.

Because the good life depends on human centrality and dominance, its hold may be diminished by acknowledgment of a degree of autonomy in matter. Jane Bennett elaborates a "vibrant materialism," in which matter is not inherently passive and its activeness is not propelled by external forces alone. It is self-organizing, exhibiting a capacity "to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."¹⁵ Simply put, "Everything is, in a sense, alive."¹⁶ By challenging Western modernist divisions between humanity and nature that underpin the good life, vibrant materialism offers an image of a life otherwise: all matter is unruly in different ways and at different times; humans are not masterful.

Yet new materialist efforts to disassemble anthropocentrism may unwittingly reproduce animacy hierarchies of the good life. By minimizing the differences between humans and nonhumans, new materialism does generate a glitch in systems of power that rely on objectification. Transvaluations of matter, however, may not dislodge tight historical intimacies between different tiers of animacy hierarchies. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson and Tavia Nyong'o have warned that responses to Enlightenment humanism that turn toward the posthuman, animals, and matter further elide Black imaginations of each and thus reproduce anti-Black conditions of thought, being, and politics.¹⁷ Although there are exceptions, new materialisms often tiptoe around feminist, antiracist, and anticolonial engagements with life and matter and extant ontologies that never unrolled such distinctions.¹⁸ Many Indigenous cosmologies, for example, do not delineate life based on the anthropocentric predicates of Western modernity.¹⁹ Setting aside the status of matter as racialized substance to navigate impasse may reinforce the amalgamation of humanness and whiteness that underpins the good life.

Still, if unruly matter does unsettle the good life, its impact reverberates throughout animacy hierarchies in unpredictable ways that are worth tuning into. "Once one stops doing the incommensurate work of attempting to touch inhumanity," José Esteban Muñoz offers, "one loses traction and falls back onto the predictable coordinates of a relationality that announces itself as universal but is, in fact, only a substrata of the various potential interlays of life within which one is always inculcated."²⁰ Inhumanity connotes a life

otherwise—that is, a life not captured by the anthropocentrism of the good life. The labor of touching inhumanity is an effort to strain for a life otherwise. It is not banal activity, like picking up an object in a confirmation of the subject. It is not action with an equal but opposite reaction but contact that is mutually estranging. It reveals something not quite human about the human, and it refigures inhumanity for those cast as such. To touch inhumanity and to be more sensitive to inhuman touch are important efforts to reach for a life otherwise beyond the animacy hierarchies of the good life.

One important way to undertake this labor is to discern how impasse is full of life. If assemblages of matter “have uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others,” impasse might initially appear to be a kind of traffic jam.²¹ Bodies slow down and stick together, approximating inactivity.²² Yet things only appear frozen because the good life is a “distribution of the sensible” by which life is sensed through motion, sentience, purposiveness, growth, reproduction, productivity, wellness.²³ A life is better understood as, in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s formulation, a plane “upon which everything stirs, slows down or accelerates.”²⁴ A life is not always fluid or constantly becoming. Yet stuckness is not stasis. It is a state of subtle movements that fall below the threshold of life defined by the good life. What feels like an impasse may be the stirrings of a life otherwise.

Seeking a life otherwise calls for more than human-centered accounts of affect, positive ontologies of matter, and critiques of racialized genealogies of theory. It requires sensitivity to the twists and turns of a life, which is neither thoroughly captured nor entirely free. A life simultaneously reinforces and unsettles animacy hierarchies. “Animacy is a craft of the senses,” writes Chen; “it endows our surroundings with life, death, and things in between.”²⁵ A key political task within impasse is to cultivate sensitivity to a life otherwise by reworking the sensorium of the good life.

Found and Lost: Things in a Raw and Warped State

“Found Objects” takes up this task by dramatizing impasse through, to borrow Bennett’s words, “the power that things have to draw us near and provoke our deep attachments to them.”²⁶ The story was first published by the *New Yorker* and later included as the first chapter of the 2011 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. The novel follows a host of characters in different periods of their lives, which are entangled sometimes loosely, sometimes intimately. Each chapter depicts a struggle with the realization that life

whizzed by during pursuits of the good life. While many stories in *Visit* focus on human-centered genres of impasse such as the midlife crisis, “Found Objects” is an outlier because it affords a starring role to matter. The story turns impasse from a state of personal failure into a complex juncture of public feelings and material forces. If Public Feelings has largely focused on human sociality, and if new materialism has largely focused on more-than-human forces, then “Found Objects” draws attention to a life that circulates through humans and nonhumans alike. It homes in on what Jasbir Puar calls “ecologies of sensation and switchpoints of bodily capacities.”²⁷ Sasha is conjoined to found objects, sometimes with agony, sometimes with joy. Excitement, pleasure, shame, anxiety, frustration, anticipation, and desperation (“ecologies of sensation”) animate and are animated by matter. The interplay of bodies lubricates them for wild movement or glues them in place (“switchpoints of bodily capacities”). Let us follow Sasha into an impasse in which matter electrifies a stream of unruly feelings and happenings.

Over several years, Sasha has accumulated an eclectic mass of things, including “five sets of keys, fourteen pairs of sunglasses, a child’s striped scarf, binoculars, a cheese grater, a pocketknife, twenty-eight bars of soap, and eighty-five pens.”²⁸ She no longer takes things from stores, since “their cold, inert goods didn’t tempt her.”²⁹ Perhaps Karl Marx would applaud her, for he found belief in the liveliness of commodities to be a dangerous feature of capitalism. Commodities are fetishized because they appear to have autonomous qualities that stand in for, and thus conceal, human social relations.³⁰ As Elizabeth Chin puts it, “People are so completely and so powerfully alienated that they are reduced to things; in the meantime, the things they produce and the things they purchase have acquired all the livingness that people have lost.”³¹ This real shift in liveliness stems from a dangerous illusion: commodities are not really alive, but people treat them as such.

So Marx’s applause would be brief, for while Sasha is insensate to commodities, she is attuned to the liveliness of matter. Although the early Marx was open to such liveliness, the later Marx, in his dismissive—and indeed racist—characterization of this dynamic as a fetish, was committed to a modernist divide between scientific reason and primitive animism that cast humans as agents and matter as mute.³² Politics based on critiques of commodity fetishism may reproduce this animacy hierarchy of the good life. Found objects offer an alternative, since, to Sasha, they bear the allure of food: a wallet is “tender and overripe as a peach”; a screwdriver has the sheen of a lollipop.³³ This is a deliciousness that cannot be commodified, as in Henry David Thoreau’s insistence

that huckleberries become “mere provender” when they are turned into goods: “The ambrosial and essential part of the fruit is lost with the bloom which is rubbed off in the market cart.”³⁴ Thoreau and Sasha discern a material vibrancy in excess of the commodity-form that, if explored, may undercut the good life.

Attunement to a life may furnish alternatives to the good life based on the animacy hierarchies of commodification and private property. Chen writes, “Animacy hierarchies are precisely about which things can or cannot affect—or be affected by—which other things within a specific scheme of possible action.”³⁵ In a restroom, Sasha comes across an unattended, open bag and spies a “fat, tender wallet, offering itself to her hand.” Finding it “so life-as-usual to just leave it there,” Sasha takes the wallet.³⁶ Life as usual is defined by private property: humans are to exercise restraint before the possessions of others. Finding objects explores a different range of affectivity. Inanimate things become lively actants, humans are animated without volition, and the field of possible action expands beyond consumption and respect for property.

This strange sensitivity, voracious yet nonconsumptive, might be akin to that of a hoarder. For Berlant and Bennett, the hoarder is a figure of consumer capitalism. Berlant describes hoarding as an aspiration for sovereignty by removing things from capitalist exchange to convert them into pure potential, a kind of nonuse-value in a rejection of perpetual consumer dissatisfaction.³⁷ Bennett attends to hoarders as “differently-abled bodies that might have special sensory access to the call of things.”³⁸ Neither description sticks to Sasha. She piles up found objects back home to keep “their power from leaking away” because she wants less agency, not more.³⁹ And, as I show, she is less attached to the hoard than to variations in its force depending on what is involved and when. Rather than having a set sensibility—a desire for sovereignty or an irresistible attraction to matter—Sasha displays a shifting sensitivity to a life.

Perhaps Sasha feels a thrill from transgressing law, but Egan focuses on material powers of various bodies rather than disembodied humanist markers of legal personhood; as Sasha says about finding objects, “I don’t think about *the people*.”⁴⁰ One incident occurs when Sasha pities an old plumber as he crawls around her bathtub “like an animal fumbling its way into a familiar hole,” with fingers “grimed to cigar stubs” and an exposed “soft white back.”⁴¹ Her feelings change when she spies a screwdriver in his tool belt, “the orange translucent handle gleaming like a lollipop in its worn leather loop, the silver shaft sculpted, sparkling.”⁴² Consonance registers a life clicking into place. Sasha “plucks” the screwdriver and feels “instant relief” followed by a “blessed indifference.”⁴³ After the plumber leaves, however, the screwdriver oddly looks “normal . . . like any screwdriver.”⁴⁴ What has changed?

The allure of the screwdriver depended on the particular cluster of matter to which it once belonged. The plumber was a vital component of the screwdriver's appeal due to the grimy, animal-like materiality of his body. Things changed when Sasha plucked the screwdriver in an act akin to Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's notion of alienation, which untangles an ecosystem to form a "stand-alone as-set."⁴⁵ Indeed, found objects cannot stand alone; their power depends on the timely convergence of various bits of vibrant matter.

Sasha is remarkably sensitive to shifts in the composition of a life. This sensitivity is not an inherent bodily capacity, a power inherent to objects, or a structural effect of consumer capitalism alone. It is about a life that emerges through various bodies: gleaming plastic, sparkling metal, worn leather, grimy fingers, a patch of exposed skin, and animal-like crawling. Plucking objects from a life might seem to turn a morsel of matter from enticing to plain, powerful to powerless, lively thing to lifeless object.⁴⁶ Yet shifts in a life are not a zero-sum game. Nor are they leaps up or down an animacy hierarchy. A life can unsettle animacy hierarchies and point beyond them by gathering human and nonhuman bodies in novel ways.

Sasha is also sensitive to shifts in a life over time. Recall that she keeps found objects in a pile in her apartment in an effort to jump-start their potency. Unfortunately, things just don't add up. Instead, they make Sasha's home heavy and alters its affective tone. Though her apartment had once "seemed like a way station to some better place," it "had ended up solidifying around Sasha, gathering mass and weight, until she felt both mired in it and lucky to have it—as if she not only couldn't move on but didn't want to."⁴⁷ Impasse is a predicament of *having* something and of *being had* by it—that is, being captive to something while cheated of its promises. A life shifts as its composition changes or as time goes on. It alters bodies, desires, and affects. Its transitory nature can effect a powerful hold.

Impasse is a taut state between the good life and a life otherwise. Sasha recounts to her therapist Coz a first date (which turns out to be a last date) with Alex, a young newcomer to New York City. The date is a drag, but on a strategic restroom break, Sasha finds the wallet described above. Now sensing the date to "tingle with mirthful possibility," she brings Alex home.⁴⁸ "The place smelled of scented candles, and there was a velvet throw cloth on her sofa bed and lots of pillows, and an old color TV with a very good picture, and an array of souvenirs from her travels lining the windowsills: a white seashell, a pair of red dice, a small canister of Tiger Balm from China, now dried to the texture of rubber, a tiny bonsai tree that she watered faithfully."⁴⁹ Alex is spellbound:

“It feels like old New York,” he says; “you know this stuff is around, *but how do you find it?*”⁵⁰ Although Frank Sinatra once celebrated “old New York” as a glamorous place for “making a brand new start of it”—a shot at the good life—Sasha’s New York is defined by impasse.⁵¹ For Alex, found objects are hidden gems that sparkle with nostalgia and possibility for the good life; for Sasha, they are now dull, set in stone, and yet maintain a faint promise of life.

Sasha is filled with pride and shame over the objects, the “raw, warped core of her life.”⁵² The feeling motivates her to initiate sex, and though Alex tries to lead her to the bedroom, she pulls him onto the floor next to the found objects; rather than diving into the chambers of heteronormative reproduction, she sticks close to the queer stuff of impasse. Sasha is turned on by a life otherwise, composed of queer erotics, mixed feelings, and a multitude of enlivened bodies, most of which are nonhuman. Yet the lack of infrastructure to support this life immediately directs her desire to heteronormative intimacy: away from things, toward a man. The result is deeper than disappointment: “All her excitement had seeped away, leaving behind a terrible sadness, an emptiness that felt violent, as if she’d been gouged.”⁵³ Devalitized, wounded, and left with a hole that no found object can fill, Sasha returns to Coz’s couch to seek the good life by overcoming her sensitivity to a life otherwise. Cruel optimism indeed.

The penultimate chapter of *Visit* reveals that Sasha channeled her sensitivity to a life into the artistic practice of found objects, turning detritus into sculptures, after entering a straight marriage and having two kids. A life otherwise proves to be elusive and requires deliberate effort to keep in view. Although Sasha does not break up with the good life, her fuzzy sense of potential in a more open relationship with things could lead to the “incommensurate work of attempting to touch inhumanity” described by Muñoz. A life otherwise is matter in a raw and warped state, or what Michel Foucault might call an “incorporeal materiality.”⁵⁴ This is matter deactualized, unresponsive to the demands of animacy hierarchies. An impasse opens when renegade matter drags humans for a whimsical ride. Caught in waves of affect, with crests of emotion and undercurrents of impersonal forces, humans struggle to stay on course to the good life. Indifferent to human wishes and well-being, a life heads where it will. Sometimes, it wanders into places strange and exhilarating. But just when one might have found something, when one might have been found by being lost, the good life could suddenly snap back in place.

Securing the Good Life

Impasse is a tension between the good life and a life otherwise, yet the pull of each is not even. The good life exerts a powerful lure because it is supposed to be *the* end. Sasha and Coz are “writing a story whose end had already been determined: she would get well.”⁵⁵ The good life casts impasse as a tiny setback rather than a serious breach that opens alternatives. Wayward formations of a life must be straightened out; as Chen observes, an animacy hierarchy must “continually interanimate in spite of its apparent fixedness.”⁵⁶ Disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms secure the good life by restoring its animacy hierarchies.

At a disciplinary level, the good life champions wellness as an aspiration, a social norm, and a mode of embodiment. In Sasha’s world, as in ours, kleptomaniacs are rehabilitated or punished because they do not relate to things properly—that is, as property. If, as David Harvey observes, sickness under capitalism is an inability to work, then it also manifests as an inability to consume.⁵⁷ Illness and disability are held to be impediments to the good life. Medical and therapeutic intervention is deemed necessary to shuttle bodies onto a curative track.⁵⁸ Otherwise, the good life, and life itself, are jeopardized. As Sasha recognizes, getting caught taking things would “unleash a cascade of horrors: arrest, shame, poverty, death.”⁵⁹

The good life uses bodily capacity as a measure of being alive, being well, and living well. Disciplinary practices cultivate specific kinds of bodies at the expense of others by enhancing capacities and tweaking sensoria. Coz describes episodes of finding objects as “personal challenges,” or opportunities for “Sasha to assert her toughness, her individuality” by leaving things rather than taking them.⁶⁰ The notion of kleptomania centers on impulsion, an irresistible movement to reach outward. Efforts to foster self-control seek to dampen, which is to say redirect, an inhuman vital force. The good life requires a mind-over-matter mentality. It is supported by disciplinary practices that cultivate individualism; gendered and racialized subordinations of the sensory to the rational in the realm of decision-making; heightened sensory openness and sensual indulgence in the realm of consumption; heteronormalization of pleasure; robust human agency; and denials of thing-power outside the commodity-form.

The good life also summons biopolitical regulation and sovereign violence in order to push through impasses. Egan situates “Found Objects” in post-9/11 New York—a detail added to the story when it served as the first chapter of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. While in its initial form as a stand-alone short

story, Sasha and Alex catch a cab from the restaurant to her apartment, in the novel they walk through Tribeca: “[Sasha] hated the neighborhood at night without the World Trade Center, whose blazing freeways of light had always filled her with hope.”⁶¹ The “old New York” of possibilities has been destroyed. The hole in the iconic city skyline overlaps the hole in Sasha after sex with Alex, “an emptiness that felt violent.” Sasha is a citizen-subject traumatized by the destruction of the World Trade Center and its cluster of American dreams. Although Sasha is never identified as white (an omission that could be interpreted as evidence that she is), she is invested in whiteness as a framework of the good life that is predicated on the exploitation, immiseration, and violation of Black and Brown bodies worldwide. The Ground Zero of shattered optimism connects a personal impasse to a national one, wherein US global dominance as an anchor of the good life has been threatened and must be restored through military might.

Egan invites consideration of the damage from securitizing the US good life in the “war on terror.” The refrain “Why do they hate us?” that puzzled US public culture after 9/11 presumes the US good life to be irresistible. Rather than let go of its attachments to American exceptionalism, the US reasserted (to borrow Coz’s words) its “toughness,” its “individuality.” It restricted civil liberties, intensified surveillance, advanced invader colonial mappings of the world through tropes of the “homeland” and the “frontier,” and extended its imperial reach through an intricate machinery of detention, torture, and slaughter.⁶² Two decades of upturned lives and landscapes register the havoc of an empire desperately holding on to a dream. The path to the good life is paved with mass death.

What makes “Found Objects” distinctive is its allusion to the “war on terror” as a campaign to impose a particular animacy hierarchy around the world. Readings of *Visit* have focused on post-9/11 surveillance technologies while bracketing Sasha’s story as though it were a merely personal drama.⁶³ “Found Objects” reminds us that central to rebuilding the United States was the jump-starting of a commodity economy, as heard in George W. Bush’s call shortly after 9/11 for a return to consumer life. The directive to shop (for commodities, or “cold, inert goods”) sought to restore the good life defined by human mastery when the United States was increasingly overwhelmed by material forces, such as toxic debris from the collapse of the Twin Towers, threats of anthrax and smallpox, and improvised explosive devices on military fronts. The containment of dangerously lively matter has been continuous with the racialization of terrorist others as unruly matter or irrational force (recall

former US secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld's insistence that only indefinite detention would restrain so-called enemy combatants from committing violence).⁶⁴ The "war on terror" has sought to restore the animacy hierarchies of the US good life, shaping nonhuman matter and racialized humans worldwide. Biopolitics and sovereignty are not just about who lives and who dies but the advancement of a particular animacy hierarchy. They advance a notion of life that is anthropocentric because it is racist.

Disciplinary power and biopower normalize bodies and regulate populations by calibrating a life to the animacy hierarchies of the good life. Securitizing the good life involves draining matter of nonprofitable liveliness and eliminating vital forces supposedly unrestrainable by cool reason. Some bodies are contained, incapacitated, and stripped of life or eliminated. Others are propelled in upward progress. Some are disqualified from the good life and selectively incorporated only as means to the ends of others. The good life is sustained through social abandonment and killing but also through a figuration of life that privileges certain humans at the expense of all other beings.

In the face of disciplinary and biopolitical apparatuses that secure the good life, are those who desire a life otherwise merely abandoned to cruel optimism? Judith Butler suggests otherwise by developing mourning into a powerful alternative to militarist violence. Mourning shifts the basis of personal and political life from sovereignty to vulnerability. It reconstructs the public architecture of grievability to bring negated entities into the domain of valuable life. Had the US mourned, it would have relinquished age-old desires for global sovereignty.⁶⁵ Butler's influential and compelling framework of mourning is, however, limited. Mourning posits life as a corporeal property of certain bodies rather than as an impersonal force. Perhaps mourning remains too close to the animacy hierarchies of the good life insofar as it prioritizes embodied, organic life as the measure of political grievance. Impasse points to the side of mourning, toward protean beings caught together in energetic limbo: a life otherwise. What might be the politics that arises therefrom?

Irredeemable, or Touching Fleeing

The good life is founded on animacy hierarchies defined by possessive individuality, sovereign agency, private property, heteronormativity, whiteness, and human centrality. A life otherwise designates assemblies of human and nonhuman bodies that do not accord with those animacy hierarchies and hence are framed to be threats to the good life. Although discipline, regulation, and sovereign violence are depicted by social orders as the just deserts

of deviants and evildoers, they can be reread as anxious responses to, and thus tacit acknowledgments of, a life otherwise. Rereading surely provides little comfort, but when one is at odds with the good life it can be vitalizing praxis. It takes a page out of *Touching Feeling*, where Eve Sedgwick describes “reparative reading” as a practice of “extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture” whose explicit aim is to disallow countless forms of life.⁶⁶ I have been rereading “Found Objects” to elevate a life otherwise that persists within and against animacy hierarchies of the good life. My aim has been to foster greater sensitivity to a life otherwise that is not on full display in the story but can be spied in moments and moods of impasse.

This essay advocates the political value of sensitivity to a life otherwise that becomes vaguely though acutely discernible within impasses. A life otherwise is hard to pin down because the good life’s distribution of the sensible indexes life to movement, action, capacity, reason, purposiveness, wellness, growth, productivity, and reproductivity. It is also difficult because a life may swerve as time goes on and as bodies drop in, drop out, or change. What a life will have become is unpredictable. It may be redirected to animacy hierarchies of the good life. Or, because it is composed of bodies waywardly assembled (to borrow Saidiya Hartman’s formulation), it may initiate alternatives to the good life that are real but fragile, ephemeral, and under threat.⁶⁷ Although the US good life is clearly linked to capitalism, racism, heteronormativity, and human dominance, a life otherwise may not readily appear as communal, decolonial, queer, or ecological. It is too slippery, too subtle, too unfinished to be unequivocally placed in extant categories. Sensitivity to the eccentric propensities of a life is thus vital for countering the reassertion of animacy hierarchies and for activating minor modes of being, social relations, and political infrastructure.

Tsing has called such sensitivity an “arts of noticing,” which strives to discern the emergence of a commons out of the precarity dispersed across humans and nonhumans within ecological and economic ruination.⁶⁸ Indeed, the politics pursued here overlaps with US and European responses to twenty-first-century impasses in the neoliberal good life under the banner of precarity, especially those like Tsing’s, which have mobilized affect and suspended anthropocentrism. Although broad in meaning, “precarity” typically designates a state of deep uncertainty and trepidation due to heightened job and wage insecurity under the expansion of neoliberal capitalism. As life becomes unlivable for more people, intense anxiety becomes the dominant public mood.⁶⁹ Precarious politics call for interdependency, mutual aid, and revisions to the good life. Usually restricted to humans, precarious politics sometimes draws on the notion of the commons to undo the hold of private property, address the

environmental impact of human activities, and relinquish human dominance over life.⁷⁰

The politics developed here differs from some forms of precarious politics by affirming the extant persistence of a life otherwise. The notion of precarity constrains political possibilities when it proceeds from a measure of security that has been denied to many, whether it is the poor in the global North or vast swaths of the global South.⁷¹ Here, the point is not only that precarity may obscure long-standing neocolonial distributions of unlivable life. Precarious politics may not attune enough to a life otherwise that is already, though not clearly, prefiguring alternatives to the good life. If precarious politics respond to the loss of access to the good life, then the politics of a life otherwise begins from the losses generated by the good life, which are not really losses but a sociopolitical and aesthetic condition of being out of touch with wayward formations of being.

A life otherwise is difficult to detect and harder still to affirm. Near the end of “Found Objects,” Sasha thinks to herself, “Redemption, transformation—God how she wanted these things. Every day, every minute. *Didn’t everyone?*”⁷² Melissa Strong reads these kinds of pauses in the story as “opportunities for wholeness and healing.”⁷³ The lure of redemption is strong, but I reread Sasha’s hesitation as unshakable doubt. That Sasha questions whether everyone wants redemption and transformation may reflect a desire to persist as she is, a longing for kindred spirits rather than fitting in. She cannot say exactly what a life otherwise would be. Yet, precisely when the good life appears to be irresistible, Sasha remains stubbornly attached to a life otherwise. While the elusiveness of a life otherwise may understandably draw skepticism over its value and viability, sticking with it may be a crucial step in activating alternatives to the good life. What if impasses were not overcome by the elimination of barriers to the good life? What political consequences follow from rejecting a story with a predetermined end, from refusals of wholeness and healing, from opting to dwell in unwellness? What if a life otherwise were teased out, followed, and nourished?

Let “irredeemable” name a mode of political being that is enabled by impasse and fostered through affirmation of a life otherwise. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *redemption* means salvation from evil or sin but also the act of regaining possession of something in exchange for payment, as in the clearing of debt. “For a life to count as a good life,” Sara Ahmed writes, “then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good.”⁷⁴ If the good life aligns bodily orientation and feeling, then

to be irredeemable is to reject that social good, that direction, those animacy hierarchies, and, in doing so, to heed a life otherwise. It is to act like Sasha does when finding objects: to “seize the moment, accept the challenge, take the leap, fly the coop, throw caution to the wind, live dangerously.”⁷⁵ Irredeemability is one part listless wandering, one part deliberate tending to what is made to appear unpromising. It is not an individual attribute or personal choice. It is acceding to and then fostering an unruly mode of collective being that spans humans and nonhumans. Thoroughly recalcitrant to the hold of the good life, the irredeemable circle about an impasse until they are dizzy and the world is a blur.⁷⁶

Irredeemability is typically indexed by the good life to a host of negative states such as unwellness and nonproductivity. However, these states can be reread as markers of a life otherwise. Johanna Hedva articulates the promise of irredeemability under the banner of “Sick Woman Theory.” Writing with chronic illness, Hedva observes that the capitalist, racist, cis-heteropatriarchal US maintains the sickness of some for the well-being of others. “Sick Woman” names all those who struggle to live when access to the good life and survival has been barred. Hedva refuses the impossible demand to fit in: “It’s the world that needs fixing.”⁷⁷ Rather than seeking redemption by becoming well and productive, the Sick Woman is irredeemable. She presses for a new society based on vulnerability, interdependency, and exquisite mindfulness of different bodily needs.

In other words, irredeemability betokens minor desires for something other than the good life. A different assembly of bodies, affects, and sensoria could serve as the bases of alternative social relations and political infrastructure. Sasha intuits this. As a Sick Woman, she longs to be in touch with things that breach the sensorium of the good life. When she lifts things, she is lifted by them: “Not a bangle jangled; her bony hands were spastic at most things, but she was good for this—made for it, she often thought, in the first drifty moments after lifting something.”⁷⁸ Caught in a rush of sensual pleasure that is not heteronormative, Sasha violates the regime of private property in a nonvolitional performance of what Jack Halberstam calls a “queer art of failure.”⁷⁹ Sasha heeds minor desires and callings that make her momentarily irredeemable to a heteronormative, capitalist society. Before the alarm of the good life is sounded, Sasha is in touch with something vital: a life otherwise in which she feels all right.

How often do the minoritarian get to feel this way? Here, the politics of a life otherwise comes into view. When things feel utterly, unbearably stuck,

when the good life seems inescapable, to be irredeemable is to stubbornly push for and be pushed by a life otherwise. Irredeemability stems from preconscious yearnings, nonvolitional strivings, and wayward propensities of a life that course through nonhuman channels without regard for animacy hierarchies. It appears to be passive, depoliticized waiting only from within animacy hierarchies that restrict politics to robust forms of agency. It enables modes of being that are not defined by humanist attributes and relations that are not dominated by humans. Above all, irredeemability provides an important check on the good life whose powerful hold derives from the active erasure of all alternatives. It is attuned to nothing less than the feeling of futures made possible when the unbearable narrowness of the good life promises only despair.

Although a life otherwise is difficult to clearly imagine, it is strangely already here. It persists as potentiality, “mirthful possibility”: not vivid images but smeared lights and faint hums, matter in a raw and warped state. It sparks up when things feel locked down. What may be felt today as a dead end may be viewed tomorrow as a lifeline. A touch of matter in flight might deliver a sense that hitting an impasse means part of one has already fled the good life. It splits a body in time. The political task, then, is to feel out unformed futures and imagine backward into the present, partaking of a life otherwise that makes of impasse, in all its stuckness, remarkably vital.

Notes

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1. Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011), 11.
 2. “Kleptomania,” in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), doi-org.aurarialibrary.idm.oclc.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596.dsm15. On the rise of kleptomania as a gendered and classed discourse in late nineteenth-century United States and Europe, see Elaine S. Abelson, “The Invention of Kleptomania,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15.1 (1989): 123–43.
 3. Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 284–85.
 4. Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 24.
 5. Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

6. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 5.
7. Gilles Deleuze, "Immanence: A Life . . .," trans. Nick Millett, *Theory, Culture & Society* 14.2 (1997): 4.
8. Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
9. New materialism has been widely criticized for its putative newness, especially when it is pitched as a response to the so-called linguistic turn. See, e.g., Sara Ahmed's "Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the 'New Materialism,'" *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15.1 (2008): 23–39.
10. William E. Connolly, "The 'New Materialism' and the Fragility of Things," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41.3 (2013): 399–412; Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, eds., *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012); Samantha Frost and Diana Coole, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
11. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.
12. Berlant, 25.
13. Berlant, 122.
14. Take, e.g., the Anthropocene. While it is typically narrated as a geological epoch in which humanity has thoroughly overwhelmed nature, Clive Hamilton argues that destabilization of the earth system actually unleashes powerful natural forces. Efforts to dominate nature backfire, and the good life built on human dominance may in fact play a starring role in ending human life. See Hamilton, *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017).
15. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.
16. Bennett, 117.
17. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020); Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).
18. See "Queer Inhumanisms," edited by Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21.2–3 (2015); and "A Questionnaire on Materialisms," edited by David Joselit, Carrie Lambert-Beatty, and Hal Foster, *October* 155 (Winter 2016): 3–110.
19. See, e.g., Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller and Noenoe Silva, "Sharks and Pigs: Animating Hawaiian Sovereignty against the Anthropological Machine," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110.2 (2011): 429–46.
20. José Esteban Muñoz, "The Sense of Brownness," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21.2–3 (2015): 209.
21. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 23–24.
22. Impasse recalls Sara Ahmed's elaboration of the "stickiness" of affect that is "an effect of histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs" and Arun Saldanha's notion of "viscosity" that captures how stability emerges from dynamism (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* [New York: Routledge, 2004], 90; Saldanha, "Reontologising Race: The Machinic Geography of Phenotype," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 [2006]: 16).
23. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004), 12.
24. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 255.
25. Chen, *Animacies*, 55.
26. Jane Bennett, "Powers of the Hoard: Further Notes on Material Agency," in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Brooklyn: punctum books, 2012), 243.
27. Jasbir K. Puar, "Coda: The Cost of Getting Better (Suicide, Sensation, Switchpoints)," *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18.1 (2012): 157.
28. Egan, *Visit from the Goon Squad*, 4.
29. Egan, 4.
30. Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 164–65.
31. Elizabeth Chin, *My Life with Things: The Consumer Diaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 24.
32. Notably, the early Marx entertained the liveliness of matter in his dissertation, "The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature" (in *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Volume 1: Karl Marx 1835–1843* [London: Lawrence & Wishcart, 1975], 25–105).

33. Egan, *Visit from the Goon Squad*, 5, 7.
34. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and "Civil Disobedience"* (New York: Signet Classics, 1999), 142.
35. Chen, *Animacies*, 30.
36. Egan, *Visit from the Goon Squad*, 2.
37. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 43.
38. Berlant, 244.
39. Egan, *Visit from the Goon Squad*, 17.
40. Egan, 7; emphasis mine.
41. Egan, 7.
42. Egan, 7.
43. Egan, 8.
44. Egan, 8.
45. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 5.
46. According to Bill Brown, objects are socially coded figures while things evoke a fuzzy relationship between subjects and objects that are "baldly encountered" yet "not quite apprehended" ("Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 [2001]: 5).
47. Egan, *Visit from the Goon Squad*, 14.
48. Egan, 5.
49. Egan, 13.
50. Egan, 14; emphasis mine.
51. Frank Sinatra, "Theme from *New York, New York*," *Trilogy: Past Present Future*, Reprise, 1980.
52. Egan, *Visit from the Goon Squad*, 15.
53. Egan, 16.
54. Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 231.
55. Egan, 6.
56. Chen, *Animacies*, 30.
57. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 95.
58. Eunjung Kim, *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
59. Egan, *Visit from the Goon Squad*, 10.
60. Egan, 4.
61. Egan, 12.
62. I thank Glenn Morris for the term *invader colonialism*.
63. Louise Amoore, *The Politics of Possibility: Risk and Security beyond Probability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 155–76.
64. On liveliness as a tool of racialization, see "Animatedness" in Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 89–125.
65. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 21.
66. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 150–51.
67. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).
68. Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 17–25.
69. Institute for Precarious Consciousness, "Anxiety, Affective Struggle, and Precarity Consciousness-Raising," *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements* 6.2 (2014): 271–300.
70. Jasbir Puar, ed., "Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović," *TDR: The Drama Review* 56.4 (2012): 163–177.
71. Katherine M. Millar, "Toward a Critical Politics of Precarity," *Sociology Compass* 11.6 (2017), doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12483.
72. Egan, *Visit from the Goon Squad*, 18; emphasis mine.
73. Melissa J. Strong, "Found Time: Kairos in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 59.4 (2018): 472.
74. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 21.

75. Egan, *Visit from the Goon Squad*, 3–4.
76. In thinking about the good life as an orientation, I am informed by Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* and *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
77. Johanna Hedva, "Sick Woman Theory," *Mask Magazine* 24 (January 2016), www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory.
78. Egan, *Visit from the Goon Squad*, 8.
79. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).