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KIMBERLY PHILLIPS

WRITING
THROUGH
MELANCHOLY
TO
SOMEPLACE
ELSE

In the winter we began our collaboration¹ there were 176 days of rain on the Pacific Northwest Coast. The months between October and April are always long, dreary, grey affairs in Vancouver but that year, working back to back in cubicles (we were both art-workers in a large institution at the time), things felt particularly leaden. We asked our colleague in the graphics department to make us a sign for the times, and so one day a phrase appeared (in hot pink cursive script) on the wall above our desks: “sad sack.” So I’d say it was an enthusiastic commiseration that brought us together.

How did all this begin?

sad sack

I like the definition of a sad sack that reads: “an individual whose very presence lowers the tone in the room.”² But it was in fact another word that propelled our thinking. Melancholy.

Yes. That word, with its long, gentle roundness, hung in the air around us like a cloud. As I recall, we summoned the term melancholy not so much as a diagnosis or an explanation of a condition we were experiencing, but as a propellant, as the means to give shape to a query.

To find our way through that term, though, we first had to define it.

Melancholy: undoubtedly the most lyrical of afflictions, variously described as an atmosphere of sorrow, a sense of impending loss, or an endless, inexplicable waiting. We consulted Robert Burton’s meandering, encyclopedic *Anatomy of Melancholy*, first published in 1621³ and for centuries the singular Western authority dedicated to the condition.

1. We first collaborated on the subject of melancholy in 2012, as curatorial residents at 221A artist run centre in Vancouver, Canada, when together we developed an exhibition, publication, and series of events entitled *Sad Sack*. We began by examining the historical contexts of melancholia, as it relates to our modern engagement with objects and the urban fabric. Drawing from Freud, Benjamin, Nietzsche, W.G. Sebald, and eventually the Japanese video game *Katamari Damacy*, we focused

on the remarkable sculptural work of Canadian artist Kara Uzelman. The exhibition was a central component of the project, but so too was an edition of absinthe that we commissioned from the artist collective The Everything Co., to be shared amongst audience members, a publication including a contribution by the renowned poet and essayist Lisa Robertson that linked melancholy to the library of Aby Warburg, and a public program that included a dancer, a sommelier, an antiques dealer, and a playwright. See *Unknown Objects*, eds. Vanessa Kwan and Kimberly Phillips (Vancouver: 221A, 2012).

2. See www.urbandictionary.com (accessed December 30, 2017).

He suggests that a descent into melancholy could be brought about by almost anything, from a bad love affair to a meal of beef. In this tome, melancholy assumes the role of an open aperture

through which all of human life and thought may be examined.

I remember our conversations with the poet and essayist Lisa Robertson about Burton’s text, which she had encountered within the stacks of Aby Warburg’s library in London.⁴ She described handling Warburg’s personal copy of the book. Damaged at some point in its life, the volume had lost its end pages, so that the Index now ended, almost prophetically, at the letter “I”. In

3. Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy. What it is: With all the Kinds, Causes, Symptomes, Prognostickes, and Several Cures of it. In Three Maine Partitions with their several Sections, Members, and Subsections. Philosophically, Medicinally, Historically. Opened and Cut Up* (London: B Blake, 1836 [16th edition]).

4. See Lisa Robertson, “The Table,” *Unknown Objects*, 29, note 11.

5. *Ibid.*, 29.

Robertson’s written meditation on the subject, she reminds her reader that “only black bile, the fluid of melancholy, whose source is the spleen, has no observable correlative among the various human fluids. It is not like chyle or wax or tears; black bile is purely imagined.”⁵

That imagined potential of melancholy—its fundamental ambiguity—was important in our early thinking on the subject.

In another sense, an ending at ‘I’ can be a conversational stoppage: the kind of statement that halts the dinner party with an affective thud (“did she have to take it there?”). Some part of it is a reluctance to talk about emotions in public or to air out the reasons for your despair to a room full of revellers; the sad sack of yore is lonely, at odds with the pursuit of happiness. To be melancholic is to be afflicted, to be burdened, to be incapacitated with sadness, to be an island of inactivity in a fast moving current.

The historical melancholic is deeply narcissistic.

“I’m too sad to tell you,” said Bas Jan Ader, and got in his boat.

By the time Sigmund Freud pathologized the condition in 1917, melancholy had detached itself from Burton's scholastic method. Its precise parameters, however, remained ambiguous.⁶ Freud argues that while healthy mourning is undertaken in order to come to terms with the loss of a knowable object, "in melancholia the relation to the object is no simple one,"⁷ and in fact, the exact nature of loss for the melancholic may not be clear at all. "The patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia," he explains, "but only in the sense that he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him."⁸ A defining feature of melancholy, as Freud understands it, then, appears to be the despondency that arises from an inability to define or consciously access that loss. Perhaps it erupts even from the anticipation and dread of loss, rather than from the experience of loss itself. (And in fact, it is not so difficult to imagine Freud thus afflicted, drafting "Mourning and Melancholia" as Europe descended into the war he feared would claim both his sons.)

In any case, five years later, we were invited to revisit this term, in a new context.⁹

And with that invitation, we wondered: was it possible to reconsider melancholy through the lens of our contemporary condition? To recast our understanding of it in terms of something other than a passive affliction? Our fascination with the subject remains, but we find our relationship to sadness—and its affective cousins depression, despair, and mourning—occupies different places in our lives. It's only been five years since that rainy winter, but our emotional selves have evolved and the world has too. A decisive clarification of power has occurred in North America and elsewhere, and we find over and over that the ethics and values of our governing institutions are themselves an alienation. We find that our bodies and our realities feel increasingly in peril from (at best) state-sanctioned indifference or (at worst) active discrimination.

6. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 237–258.

7. *Ibid.*, 256.

8. *Ibid.*, 245.

9. We are indebted to Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery Associate Director Matthew Seamus Callinan and Professor Richard Freedman for inviting us to respond to Haverford College's Faculty Seminar, whose subject of exploration for 2017–2018 is melancholy, through a curatorial project, publication, and exhibition.

We are reminded of Sara Ahmed's work to unpack the meaning of "happiness" as a "history of associations," and a network of relationships and systems that together build our understanding of positive value, the basis of which

persistently validates some subjectivities more than others.¹⁰ Ahmed frames the exclusionary principles of happiness as an incitement not just to a political engagement, but as inspiration for an alternative nexus of world-building. The "Melancholic Migrant," the "Feminist Killjoy," the "Unhappy Queer": all of these positions and others represent sites of cultural redefinition.¹¹ "To kill joy," Ahmed attests, "is to open a life, to make room for life, to make room for possibility, for chance."¹²

10. Sara Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

11. Ahmed, *Ibid.*

12. Ahmed, *Ibid.*, 20.

It is this sense of potentiality that we desired to explore through our exhibition project at Haverford College. Unwilling: Exercises in Melancholy thus proposes a re-consideration of melancholy defined by our current socio-political and cultural moment. Resisting historical definitions of the term that circumscribe it as an affliction creating disorder or inactivity, Unwilling reimagines passive sadness as powerful refusal, a conscious (or unconscious) "standing aside," a willful production of generative failures and resistant potencies.

Each of the five contributing artists whose works together comprise Unwilling—Billy-Ray Belcourt, Mike Bourscheid, Ginger Brooks Takahashi, Justine A. Chambers, and Noa Giniger—begins from the position that outside the boundaries of "contentment" and "happiness" resides a potent flourishing. The work of each very differently operates to counter the "cruel optimism" of our current political and cultural trajectory.¹³ As feminist and queer theorist Lauren Berlant suggests, the basis for envisioning a more just world lies in the realization that objects of desire (be they "the good life," systems of value, romantic relationships, or political ideals) do not include or serve us all, and in fact impede some subjects' success, even as they invite their participation.¹⁴

14. Berlant, *Ibid.*

There is something to be said for standing aside from this optimism, and consciously so.

13. We owe much to Lauren Berlant: "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relations are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially." Berlant, Cruel Optimism (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 1. And: "[T]he archive of this project, straddling the United States and contemporary Europe, looks at precarious bodies, subjectivity and fantasy in terms of citizenship, race, labor, class (dis)location, sexuality and health. These cases are linked in relation to the retraction, during the last three decades, of the social democratic promise of the post-Second World War period in the United States and Europe." Berlant, *Ibid.*, 3.

Now, to the facets of this willful melancholy.
(1. failure)

Noa Giniger's artistic work extends across a variety of media—installation, film, video, sculpture, text, web, and paper. The Amsterdam-based Israeli artist has developed a practice of quiet observances and interventions in the physical world, often so small as to be undetectable. Chance factors largely in Giniger's works: for the artist, the ephemeral is rooted in the unbending structures of the universe: gravity and time. Rather than a perpetual looping of time and space, there is a pull towards things with

15. Absolute Countdown was the title of a solo exhibition of Giniger's work at The Western Front (named after Giniger's web work, www.absolutecountdown.com), curated by Jesse Birch in 2014, which included The Sorrow the Joy Brings, and to which we are indebted for our first encounter with the artist's practice.

16. Giniger's choice of medium itself might be argued to be melancholic, as the number of facilities capable of developing the 35mm film dwindled even as the project unfolded. See Giniger's blog, <http://the-sorrow-the-joy-brings.tumblr.com/>.

Giniger's desire to quite literally “lift the spirits” of a weeping willow. The appearance of this distinctive tree is unmistakable for its majestic, pendulous boughs. It is not native to North America, and so its appearance here is always the result of conscientious planting and cultivation, and it is conspicuous for this, as much as for its “mournful disposition,”¹⁸ the heavy affect with which it is so consistently endowed.¹⁹ The artist's journey towards her eventual filming (shot on location in Vancouver, Canada) is archived on her blog And Gravity Will Always Bring Us Down,²⁰ which chronicles the entirety of the project, from its beginnings as a simple sketch exploring the possibility of lifting a willow tree's

a limited lifespan, which occur amidst the relentless entropic procession—a condition within which we all exist, and which Giniger terms “absolute countdowns.”¹⁵

Unwilling features Giniger's The Sorrow the Joy Brings (2013): a six-minute 35mm film transferred to single channel video¹⁶ and a series of diminutive collages (eight of which appear in this publication, and one in the exhibition space itself). Each aspect of the work was envisioned as equal to the other,¹⁷ but its visually commanding focus is the film, which records the end point of a multi-year project realizing

17. A note about the installation itself: within the gallery, the spatial location of the collage (which might be understood as the “ideal,” with the willow's heavy boughs ecstatically inverted) and the film (the reality) was highly calculated. Positioned on opposite walls, but facing one another, the two works are impossible to experience simultaneously.

18. Mandy Kirby, A Victorian Flower Dictionary: The Language of Flowers Companion (London: Ballantine Books, 2011), 159.

19. The *salix babylonica* is a species of willow tree whose popular name is described as “weeping” in many languages: “weeping” in many languages: ערבה בוכייה in Hebrew, saule pleureur in French, Trauerweide in German, sauce llorón in Spanish, плакуч in Russian.

20. See <http://the-sorrow-the-joy-brings.tumblr.com/>.

boughs with the force of air. The blog follows Giniger's research, including conversations with experts in the fields of neurology, vision, and psychology, and is punctuated by collage works inverting the willow's “natural” disposition by a simple act of cutting and flipping so that the trees' foliage points upwards with a manic energy.

The most elaborate of Giniger's interventions to date, The Sorrow the Joy Brings saw a seventeen-person production crew traipse pilgrimage-like to a suburban farm where the chosen willow was located, armed with nine very powerful wind machines sourced through Vancouver's film industry.²¹ The gesture was a profoundly human one, perhaps most poignantly because the film records an act that is, in the end, a meditation on our propensity to control both nature and our own emotions. After several minutes of roaring

sound, with the crew visible scuttling beneath the wind-blown boughs, pointing the air at different angles in the attempt to raise as many branches at once, the willow returns to her resting state. “Some boughs are waving,” recalls the artist, “but the result is a dance of resistance on her part.”²² One by one the fans are shut down, leaving the tree to settle in resolute silence. The camera continues recording and, after a time, an airplane—designed by humans to defy gravity—hilariously and cruelly

crosses overhead, oblivious to the scene below, the agents of which have just come to terms with the constraints imposed by reality. The effort is, in its most simplistic sense, a failure: the weeping willow will not be cheered. Of course, as Giniger notes, the point was never to triumph.²³ This might well have been achieved with digital manipulation. The colossal discrepancy between the energy brought to this act (along with the expectations produced) and its tragi-comic results defines the work's subtle poetics. It prompts a consideration of our society's desire to “correct” or “repair” unhappiness, questions our definitions of “success,” and encourages examination of artistic work that refuses a productivity and use-value.

21. The artist noted that these fans were designed to blow air horizontally across film sets to simulate highly windy conditions. They had never before been tested to point vertically upwards into trees.

22. Noa Giniger in conversation with the authors, January 17, 2018.

23. Email correspondence with the artist, April 7, 2014.

(2. absurdity)

Mike Bourscheid's sculpture- and performance-based practice, which often involves his fabrication of ungainly appendages and prosthetics, channels alternate, often gender-fluid personae and abject humor as devices for exploring aspects of his own Luxembourgian heritage, as well as the absurdities of normative masculine expression and patriarchal power. In Bourscheid's performances, these "costume-objects" often become actors in their own right, functioning simultaneously as "ritualistic semaphores and as theatrical props."²⁴ Much of Bourscheid's work reveals the actions and accoutrements of these characters to be uncomfortably out of step with their environment. The artist's process of learning the eccentric suite of skills necessary to produce his work—from patternmaking to baking to copper soldering—is a fundamental part of his practice, and an important means for him to query and confound stereotypes of masculine and feminine labor (which he observed early on in his own parents' separation of skills—his mother was a seamstress and his father, a welder).

In The wellbeing of things: A 5km race, a single-channel video and sculpture work reconfigured especially for Unwilling,²⁵ an enigmatic narrative unfolds in a modest motel room, where the camera is trained on a treadmill. Bourscheid appears as a disconsolate pirate-turned-cowboy. He is outfitted in a meticulously composed ensemble that includes a pastel blue ruffled ascot and matching knee socks, heeled ostrich leather ankle boots, a western hat (with two leather eye patches attached like rear-view mirrors), and a wooden shoulder yoke/parrot roost. As the pirate/cowboy plods upon the treadmill (perhaps to re-acustom his sea legs to life on land?) he converses telepathically with his parrot about

24. Jesse Birch, quoted in Leah Sandals, "Mike Bourscheid, Vancouver's Other Venice Biennale Artist," Canadian Art (online, August 3, 2016, <https://canadianart.ca/news/mike-bourscheid-vancouvers-other-venice-biennale-artist/>).

25. The wellbeing of things: A 5km race was first created as one element of Bourscheid's multi-part performance-installation Thank you so much for the flowers at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017), where the artist represented his native Luxembourg.

his anxieties (we view the dialogue in subtitles). Little is resolved through the conversation. In the gallery, we are invited to view the video from a high-backed wooden rocking bench (also hand-built by Bourscheid), to which the projector itself is attached. The rocking motion causes the projected image to track endlessly up and down the gallery wall, creating viewing conditions that are at once absurd and frustrating (and perhaps a bit seasick-making, too). One might argue that Bourscheid's strategies (aesthetic, narrative, and spatial, both within the video and outside it) recall Lauren Berlant's "counterpolitics of the silly object," a research approach she describes as seeking out materials that "frequently use the silliest, most banal and erratic logic imaginable to describe important things..."²⁶ The artist's pirate/cowboy is in many ways ridiculous and incongruous with the world around him; he fails to uphold the highly gendered roles either of his characters conventionally carries and, as he walks in place in a stereotypically threadbare hotel, his identity and life-role appear unclear, if not pointless. But his absurdist existence, in its very persistence,

26. Lauren Berlant, The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 12.

(3. resistance)

Ginger Brooks Takahashi takes a deeply embedded approach to feminist practices of citation and relationship-building. Brooks Takahashi's early projects included the travelling MOBILIVRE/BOOKMOBILE and LTR (Lesbians to the Rescue), the former a mobile collection of artists' editions and publications, open and available to the public, and the latter a group of artists whose published works and curated events modelled queer ways of culture-building that were themselves a radical departure from heteronormative systems of order. Her project, we begin with water, a recipe for Wyrth Blod Gruyt, a collaboratively-created (and consumed) melancholy beer, extends from a long-term series of actions, editions and activities that anchor a community-engaged art practice and a consciously revised approach to food production, distribution, and

opens a playful space of transition, and a possibility for new social codes and ways of being, which we are momentarily invited to inhabit too.

consumption. Together with Dana Bishop-Root, Brooks Takahashi is the founder of General Sisters, General Store, a community-engaged project and soon-to-be grocery store located in North Braddock, Pennsylvania. The store and the practice stem from a long-standing commitment to collaboration, and the “sisters” part of General Sisters includes a wide network of activists, lovers, artists, and writers whose work has influenced the founders’ actions and thinking. General Sisters, General Store includes a garden and food production arm that intentionally reconfigures our relationships to the natural world and one another. In an interview with curator and critic Liz Park, Brooks Takahashi states:

One of the things I learned ... is to not assume a consumer relationship to plant life. The plant world is there for itself. It’s a very human-centric perspective to ask ‘can I eat it’? At the same time, ‘how can I use it’ is an important question.²⁷

27. <https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/general-sisters-27-3>

Brooks Takahashi’s approach to our invitation to consider

the theme of melancholy was characteristically thoughtful, and her work operates much the same way as her practice—through an engagement with both the collective (human and non-human) and the individual body. we begin with water, a recipe for Wyr̥t Blod Gruyt is both an infusion and an engine; it is “inside” us, by way of our digestive system, at the same time as it is among us, engendering social networks by way of its conscious distribution. The fluid way that her work circulates invites a consideration not only of how an application of herbs might counteract depression, but of what other remedy might be contained in our shared experience of this work.

Brooks Takahashi takes a very particular approach to “standing aside.” Her brew project is an extension of a practice and philosophy that are, in some ways, indistinguishable from her focus on building General Sisters as an architecture and an (alternative) institution. Reorienting the hierarchy of human-plant relationships proposes a new way of working in relation, and this has implications for building ideas and structures of varying scale. On the restoration of the building that will eventually house General Sisters, General Store:

... that’s how we started—building a roof together. We learned of a technique of strengthening old beams called *sistering*. Take new beams and sandwich an old beam, or put a new beam next to an old one, and bolt them together. When we were strengthening these beams, we wrote the names of different sisters on the inside and built them into the architecture.²⁸

And from this, an unwillingness to engage in existing ways of thinking forms the basis of new structures and spaces of belonging.

(4. surrender — or not)

The anchors of Justine A. Chambers’ movement-based practice are found in collaborative creation, close observation, and the idea of choreography as living archive. She is concerned with a choreography of the everyday: with the unintentional dances, as she describes them, “that are already there.”²⁹ Significantly, Chambers is drawn to the movement of all bodies, “not just the heroic and virtuosic acts of dancers.” Her repertoire is the quotidian itself, and its relation to the specifics of space, place, and social context.

28. Ibid.

29. Justine A. Chambers, see artist statement on <https://justineeachambers.com>.

30. See <https://justineachambers.com/family-dinner-the-lexicon/>

Alongside many other projects—including Family Dinner, an immersive dining experience and cumulative catalogue of convivial dining rituals³⁰—Chambers has collaborated for the past two years with Berlin-based choreographer Laurie Young to develop a choreography describing

gestures of resistance. The project is urgently informed by our current socio-political climate, both at home and abroad, which has produced an ever-greater groundswell of bodies resisting, moving in collective anger, revolt, and counter-resistance, captured and replayed in an endless torrent of images. The objective of this collaboration, which draws from the dancers'/choreographers' subjectively held memory bank of protest images (both iconic and incidental), is to investigate and haptically "learn" all the possible incremental micro-movements leading up to (but stopping just short of) a recognizable expression of surrender. Chambers' and Young's study³¹ is grounded in research on the

31. Chambers' and Young's approach to study follows that of Fred Moten: "When I think about the way we use the term 'study,' I think we are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal—being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory—there are these various modes of activity. The point of calling it 'study' is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present. [...] To do these things is to be involved in a kind of common intellectual practice. What's important is to recognize that that has been the case—because that recognition allows you to access a whole, varied, alternative history of thought." Fred Moten in Moten and Stefano Harney, *Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 110.

32. See Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

33. Manning, *Ibid.*, 7.

34. Conversation with the artist, Vancouver, Canada, January 6, 2018.

politics of movement, particularly the theory of the minor gesture put forth by cultural theorist and political philosopher Erin Manning.³² Though it may pass almost entirely unperceived, Manning claims, the minor gesture transforms the field of relations. Studying the minor gesture, she asserts, offers us the opportunity to rethink assumptions about human agency and political action:

The minor is a gesture insofar as it punctuates the in-act, leading the event elsewhere rather than toward the governant fixity of the major, be it the major in the name of normative political structures, of institutional life, of able-bodiedness, of gender conformity, of racial segregation.³³

Drawing from this ongoing collaborative project, Chambers will perform ten thousand times and one hundred more at Haverford College for *Unwilling*: 101 successive three-minute performances (one inside and between each of the campus's 46 buildings and 5 fields, and a final performance within the space of the gallery, which attempts to recall all the previous performances). As in much of Chambers' work, ten thousand times and one hundred more pushes against the edges of legibility: she performs, as she describes, "on either side of the gesture but not the gesture itself."³⁴ She notes that in our culture of systemic and instrumentalized racism, black bodies, regardless of gender expression, cannot afford to be unreadable—the consequences

35. Conversation with the artist, January 6, 2018.

can be humiliating, hurtful, even deadly. Every gesture, no matter how banal, has the potential, in our current time, of being misconstrued, corrupted, condemned: only complete immovability is safe. (Chambers recounts a remark offered by her African-American grandmother long ago: "black women have to turn to stone."³⁵) ten thousand times and one hundred more recalls art historian Alexandra Kokoli's assertion at the close of *The Feminist Uncanny*:

[Ours] is not a pathological melancholia that mires its subjects in self-destructive inertia but a different, energizing kind, an emergent feminist and decolonial angry melancholia, which draws attention to and refuses to let go of its hurt, and which transforms mourning into protest.³⁶

36. Alexandra Kokoli, *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice* (London and Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2016), 184.

ten thousand times and one hundred more reinserts the minor gesture of resistance into the habitus of student life, a reminder of the privilege of mobility and nuance, and the urgency of political expression.

(5. mourning)

Both Bourscheid's and Brooks Takahashi's approaches revisit Ahmed's call to "open a space for possibility," giving us fantastical (in the former) and literal (in the latter) frameworks to imagine new possibilities. For many Indigenous writers, artists, and theorists this question of removal and resurgence has a direct relationship to survival itself. The erasures and effects of settler colonial history in North America are described by Eve Tuck and C. Ree:

Colonization is as horrific as humanity gets: genocide, desecrations, poxed-blankets, rape, humiliation.

Settler colonialism, then, because it is a structure

and not just the nefarious way nations are born ... is an ongoing horror made invisible by its persistence—the snake in the flooded basement ... [It] is the management of those who have been made killable, once and future ghosts—those that had been destroyed, but also those that are generated in every generation.³⁷

37. Eve Tuck and C. Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting," *Handbook of Autoethnography*, eds. Stacey Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (California: Left Coast Press, 2013), 642.

Tuck and Ree characterize this ghostliness as enforced by the weight of history, a spectre-subject whose continued erasure is a prerequisite to nationhood as we know it. This haunted position is where poet and critical theorist Billy-Ray Belcourt begins his exploration.

For Belcourt, mourning is more than an emotional state; it is a position from which an entire world might arise. Moving through psychoanalysis, feminist and queer theory, poetry, criticism, and prose, Belcourt's work conjures a subjectivity that wholly inhabits the wound of melancholy, and builds from it a proposition for an as-yet-unimagined future. The queer Indigenous body recuperates itself from banishment from the colonial project, insisting on a presence for itself in sadness, not in spite of it: "if i have a body, let it be a book of sad poems. i mean it. indigeneity troubles the idea of "having" a body, so if i am somehow, miraculously, bodied then my skin is a collage of meditations on love and shattered selves."³⁸ Belcourt inhabits the theme of *Unwilling* profoundly, creating subsistence where once there was lack, reorienting the dead-end of despair to a back alley that can't help but take us elsewhere.

When Belcourt asks us to join him in that "back alley of the world," it is a place defined as much by desire as it is by sadness. Hinting at feral economies and furtive desires, it is dark and tender and decidedly queer. Queerness

here as elsewhere represents a looking to the future—a desire whose full expression can only be realized in the then-and-there.³⁹ Belcourt circles this temporal projection, simultaneously rejecting the end-game of settler colonialism while touching down speculatively in another place. As he writes in his contribution to this volume, *Melancholy's Forms*, "The future is already over, but that doesn't

39. José Esteban Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), references public sex, queer performance, camp, cruising, and ecstasy to reveal a thesis that relates strongly to Belcourt's work: "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on the potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."

mean we don't have anywhere else to go."⁴⁰ With this, the artist affirms the connection between melancholic refusals and the possibilities of worldbuilding.

40. Billy-Ray Belcourt, *Melancholy's Forms*, see pages 69–72 of this publication.

Melancholy's Forms is the one work whose presence in *Unwilling* does not take a physical form; rather, its ideas run through and underscore the entirety of the exhibition. Inhabiting the spectre of the queer poltergeist, Belcourt has an audacious proposition: that the future, if it is to hold us at all, must contend with and make space for this once-distanced melancholia. For Belcourt, Bourscheid, Giniger, Chambers, Brooks Takahashi, and us, the feltness of melancholy bridges our affective selves with a profound hope for a representative commons—for a future that, conscious of the histories of exclusion, the absurdity of our hierarchies of cultural value, and the failure of happiness, gives shape to new possibilities.