The Renewed Desire for the Critique of Libidinal Economy: Pain, Stress, Flesh

Ben Gook

For US$160, an Australian company called LBDO will send you its Essensual De-Stress Bundle. It includes a vibrator ("colour of your choice"), 250g bath salts ("for solo or partnered baths"), a 120g massage candle ("melts down into a warming and sensual pool"), and a stylish LBDO tote bag to tout your essensuality. For an extra $37, you can upgrade to include their Vitality Vitamins – a 60-tablet course to create "a strong foundation to optimise your physical, mental and sexual wellbeing."[1] The LBDO bundle promises its buyers access to today's optimised, sexually competent body: a couple of hundred dollars lighter and ready for tranquil pleasure. Whatever the rise and fall of Freud's cultural currency over the past century, here he still haunts the contemporary economy with his notion of libido: the post-Freudian subject is sexually aware and unafraid to go to market to find what it needs. Distressed by interconnected social crises and their daily rhythms, they know just where to shop to de-stress.

LBDO, through its threefold pitch for wellbeing ("physical, mental and sexual"), sells the sexual stimulation of the individual body as an intervention against globalised stress. Nevertheless, from its vowelless name to its brand identity – warm, sensual images on social media with sex-positive phrases ("feel good about feeling good"), body-positive models and pro-pleasure self-care blog posts alongside its online shop – the Australian company aspires to connect its socially-conscious and sexually-awakened demographic to the capitalist market for what LBDO and its competitors now cannily sell as "sexual wellness." The company's direct-to-consumer deals encapsulate the commodity aesthetics and psychosocial status quo among at least one well-connected and culturally hypervisible corner of the west in these crisis times: stressed, horny, anxious; tired, wired, always online; sunk in the body and its failings but looking to connect; polymorphously perverse, polyamorously curious, enthusiastically consensual; self-diagnosing, self-administering, self-sooth-

1 https://web.archive.org/web/20231001190757/https://www.lbdo.com/blogs/the-talk/introducing-lbdo-vitality. They also note: "what makes LBDO Vitality different, is that we will not now, or ever claim to 'fix' your libido."

ing.[2] Yet even with its vowels plucked like unsightly body hair, can the libidinal be so frictionlessly joined with *pleasure* and *feeling good*? Equally, what is the gain of this term, libido, if it is merely interchangeable with Eros or the sexual?

In what follows, I want to keep an eye on how the circuits of the libidinal are imagined to be circuits of illness and cure, distress and wellbeing. LBDO is not alone in its pitch for ailing the distressed body via sexual pleasure. A whole suite of differently branded devices, increasingly marketed on street posters in cities and sold in mainstream department stores, are now on hand as sources of libidinal relief. Like LBDO, they also purport to provide self-care and optimised life: some new "sex tech" devices use sensors and AI, offering their users feedback via a dashboard of real-time and historic data, all with the promise of reaching untold heights of enjoyment. In this chapter, then, I return to the place of the sexual in the libidinal economy, as it is often passed over with some embarrassment. At the same time, I also note how libidinised enjoyment is conjured – and captured – in proximity to crisis situations. In the opening to this volume, I outlined Freud's understanding of libido before discussing its overlaps with, and distinctions from, related terms, such as desire. I also addressed the two other key terms in this collection: economy and crisis. Here, I resume the discussion of these terms in the context of contemporary debates and crises, while drawing on several authors who do not typically feature in the critique of libidinal economy, including Elaine Scarry and Paul B. Preciado. "The flesh" – as the jointure of the symbolic and real that comes to the fore in crisis – plays a prominent role in this chapter, as will a set of further examples drawn from libidinal investments in recent interconnected crises.

Tracking libidinal economic activity

In reaching the concluding pages of the book, we might now say that libidinal economy concerns the way that human beings manage and distribute their erotic attachments – desires, sources of enjoyment and suffering – in the world. As the preceding chapters have made clear, in our crisis-prone era, questions continually arise around how desires are shaped, modulated and guided by the leading institutions of capitalist economies. If the libidinal is de-natured, then this is another way of saying it comes to us – enters us, circulates within us – via the world or the social field. For most of the world today, this social field, this *socius*, this reigning form of life, is capitalist.[3] As it is in the broader economy, so it is with the libido: our desires

2 On sexuality and commodity aesthetics: Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1986).

3 On libidinal economies outside or adjacent to capitalist forms: Marinus Ossewaarde, "Socialism's Struggles with Eros: Politics of the Body in Cuba and China," *International Sociology* 31,

move within, and sometimes against, the capitalist economy's range of pleasures. A range of pleasures, it is worth underlining, that ideologists of capitalism hold up as distinctive and to be celebrated in their delivery – precisely as variety and choice – by this social and economic form; something that it, capitalism, does better than rival systems, which are less responsive to needs, wants and desires. The name attached to this superiority is "the market." This virtual entity – nowhere visible but always operative, always materialised in practices – offers all that one, that every subject of the market, could desire. This is a "site" earlier embodied in local economies by a space so designated, a *Marktplatz*, and still sometimes quaintly spatialised as a "marketplace," as if in a bazaar or medieval town square, yet, again, never truly seen or present in its entirety.[4] Leaving aside the fact that markets themselves are not inherently capitalist, one longstanding view propounded by capitalism's advocates is that the market is where coordination, distribution, value and production are given their ideal economic ordering. In this view, the market is the site to organise and enact desires and, thus, where an economy gets and takes its orders (buy this, sell that).[5] Ultimately, the market is an institution of economic administration – established and maintained by a state form – that attempts to order and price desire.

Yet the *capitalist* market is besieged, disordered, by crisis after crisis – as if the tumult of desire were the actual guiding principle. "While economic institutions and discourses try to administer and domesticate enjoyment," Ceren Özselçuk and Yahya Madra write, "they always fail since it is impossible to balance out, apportion or stitch together enjoyment."[6] Indeed, the libidinal marks out a field of enjoyment and pleasure with its unconscious operations; it denotes how enjoyment can be intrusive and involuntary for the subject, and how the pleasurable excesses of *jouissance* – Jacques Lacan's name for libidinal enjoyment, encompassing sexuality, suffering

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no. 5 (2016): 525–32; Keti Chukhrov, *Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism* (Minneapolis: e-flux, 2020); Charlie Yi Zhang, *Dreadful Desires: The Uses of Love in Neoliberal China* (Duke UP, 2022); Perry Johansson, *The Libidinal Economy of China: Gender, Nationalism, and Consumer Culture* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015); Bogdan G. Popa, *De-Centering Queer Theory: Communist Sexuality in the Flow during and after the Cold War* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2021).

4 Even in the bazaar or marketplace, we would often find another marketplace – that of raw goods and so on – effectively hidden behind the site where the market sits; so "the market" has never been anything but another iteration of the economy's part-whole relation, as I explored in the opening chapter.

5 Keith Tribe, *Strategies of Economic Order: German Economic Discourse, 1750–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995). Roffe points out that "not every social form includes [a market]. The strange, ahistorical, cultish view of societies past promulgated by economics, in which the market has always existed in immature, kernel forms (circumscribed by the famous barter illusion), precisely excludes this recognition" (*Abstract Market Theory* (NY: Palgrave, 2015), 50).

6 Ceren Özselçuk and Yahya M Madra, "Enjoyment as an Economic Factor: Reading Marx with Lacan," *Subjectivity* 3, no. 3 (2010): 335.

and satisfaction beyond the rational ego, identities, and normative institutions – emerge and recede, sometimes chased by pain or in admixtures of both.[7] If those critiquing libidinal economy focus on *jouissance* as excessive, sacrificial, destructive of self and others and ultimately unstable, this is because it negates economic functionalism or reproductionism – namely, countering those images of the economy "in which the practices of consumption, production and distribution are glued snugly together in a systemic cycle of social equilibrium and crisis."[8] Human subjectivity in the libidinal political economy of capitalism can be "understood as the fluctuating outcome of an individual's attempts to negotiate self-coherency while immersed in the instituted practices of the market."[9] At the same time, the subjective grammar of libidinal economy and the structural grammar of capitalist political economy are mutually supportive. The economic actor seen as a subject of libidinal economy will act less on the basis of conscious rationality than unconscious anxiety and enjoyment, including pleasure in the suffering, subordination and failure of others.[10]

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7 Derek Hook, "Jouissance as Tool of Psychosocial Analysis," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Psychosocial Studies*, ed. Stephen Frosh, Marita Vyrgioti, and Julie Walsh (Cham: Springer, 2020), 1–27. As Hook points out, commenting on Frank Wilderson III's claim about enjoyment in anti-Black violence: *Jouissance* "is not a free-floating or merely individual moment of intensity (an isolated instance, for example of the pleasure of hating). It is, by contrast, a sanctioned excess which ensures the maintenance of a sociopolitical structure, a formation of power, (or, in Wilderson's terms, a 'regime of violence') and that anchors a broader *weltanschauung* and its associated libidinal community." In essence, the claim is: "any system of domination necessarily entails a particular libidinal economy, that is, a particular distribution of *jouissance*" (12). If we follow Hook's proposed method for understanding libidinal identifications – that is, the process of understanding such distributions – the following questions can help the analysis: "What are the shared instances of transgressive-enjoyment that enable the formation of communities of entitlement? What accumulative 'micro-enjoyments' make subjects into stakeholders of a particular libidinal economy? Consider how instances of enjoyment contradict – or exist in tension with – professed ideals, symbolic values, or imaginary identifications. Lastly: How are particular identifications consolidated by means of a hatred of an other's jouissance?" (25).

8 Özselçuk and Madra, "Enjoyment as an Economic Factor," 335. Darian Leader suggests we could "divide up" a list of jouissances "between those of the real body, those linked to how we perceive the Other's subjectivity and its claims on us, how we act on ourselves and on the Other to negate these claims, and those linked to the virtual, to points of inaccessibility, generated retroactively by symbolic structures" (*Jouissance: Sexuality, Suffering and Satisfaction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021), 133). The jouissance concept is notoriously – sometimes productively, sometimes unproductively – amorphous, and Leader speculates about what Lacanians like himself would do if, from time to time, they left "jouissance" aside in favour of "thinking more carefully about how we inhabit and are inhabited by the body and by language" (132).

9 Earl Gammon, "Narcissism, Rage, Avocado Toast," in *Clickbait Capitalism: Economies of Desire in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Amin Samman and Earl Gammon (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2023), 22.

10 Kapoor et al., *Global Libidinal Economy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2023), 10.

It is, of course, psychoanalysis's *modus operandi* to focus on what is excluded from discourses and practices – the repressed, disavowed, foreclosed – and how what is excluded returns and is efficacious despite its ostensible elimination. Even in everyday terms, the ideological associations of capitalist market activity with equilibrium, fairness, and measure are met with their equally well-known underside of exploitation, crisis and chaos. A libidinal political economy sees economic beliefs and behaviours as shaped by the unconscious, such that "what is rational in the sphere of political economy is contextual, and ostensibly irrational behaviours commonly indicate a conflict between unconscious demands and what is socially expedient."[11] Excess, irrationality, immoderate compulsions – all this "libidinal stuckness," in the words of the authors of *Global Libidinal Economy*, "helps explain both the intensity and extensity of contemporary global capitalism – why it is able to reach everywhere, mesmerize everyone, and continuously reproduce itself, even (and perhaps especially) in the face of obstacle or crisis."[12]

Again, the heights of the economy disavow this enjoyment and stuckness, often depicting economic management as tendentially dry, calculating, boring; as so many graphs, trading terminals and spreadsheets that lead to rational decision-making. Yet every discourse, even this economic one of apparently bloodless analysis and allocation, is a discourse of enjoyment: "enjoyment is articulated like a discourse," Samo Tomšič writes, "it is an inevitable product of linguistic, economic, religious, epistemic and other types of symbolic bonds, which affect the human body."[13] Popular culture offers us a countervision of this in its libidinally-charged depictions of financial traders, avatars from capitalism's ideological apex – for example, in the films *Wall Street* (1987) to *American Psycho* (2000) to *Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) to *The Big Short* (2015) to the TV series *Billions* (2016–23) and on, all of them circulating from the heart of the global economic hegemon in the neoliberal era.[14] Notably, these also depict financial elites in various modalities of manic enjoyment and breakdown,

11 Gammon, 24.

12 Ilan Kapoor et al., *Global*, 158.

13 Samo Tomšič, *The Labour of Enjoyment: Towards a Critique of Libidinal Economy* (Cologne: August Verlag, 2019), 10.

14 Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014); Clint Burnham, *Fredric Jameson and The Wolf of Wall Street* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2016); Calum Watt, *Derivative Images: Financial Derivatives in French Film, Literature and Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2022); Alasdair King, *The Financial Image: Finance, Philosophy and Contemporary Film* (Cham: Springer, 2024); J. D. Connor, *Hollywood Math and Aftermath: The Economic Image and the Digital Recession* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). The German production *Bad Banks* (2018–20) depicts this scene from a different angle: the commanding heights of the European economic regime – Frankfurt am Main, London and Luxembourg plus a fintech and start-up interlude in Berlin.

brought undone either by an exploitative social field, typically euphemised as "inequality," or the pleasure traduced by the castrating governmental bogeyman of "regulation."

With its eyes trained on what falls out of the standard accounts of economic life, the critique of libidinal economy is one wing of politico-existential or psychosocial inquiry that has tried to make sense of the contemporary conjuncture. "In virtually all this work," as Emily Apter and Martin Crowley write, summarising what they call the *economies of existence*, "the emphasis on financial outcomes, predictive processing, and quant-think typically found in professional economics is displaced by the investigation of their psychic and phenomenological fallout, often diffuse and hard to measure."[15] So one appeal of "libidinal economy" is this sense that by discussing it rather than "quant-think," we immediately challenge a picture of people as the rational, utility-maximising and pleasure-seeking individuals of dominant economic theories. That is to say, in the relation of an expansive financialisation in everyday life, the libidinal – like the "affective" – is taken to be the antithesis of measured value: "that which is incalculable (by means of rational choice), unaccountable, non-capitalized, non-optimized, non-transcendent, non-equivalent or untranslatable as a measure of economic, political and existential value."[16]

This claim for an antithetical relation to quantity is ironic, given that Freud had hoped that the libido would *someday* be measurable. It is also slightly caricaturing, as utilitarianism and its adherents in economics pay attention to pleasure, pain, happiness and so on – although they suggest we answer difficulties in measuring these experiences through a *calculus*, bringing it back to the rational. Nevertheless, the turn to the libidinal is more complicated than a quasi-vitalist strategy of resistance, siding with the pulsations of "life" against reigning "systems." After all, what

15 Emily Apter and Martin Crowley, "Economies of Existence," *Diacritics* 47, no. 1 (2019): 6. To crib their list of responses: "Georges Friedmann (machinism), Pierre Bourdieu (symbolic capital, the wages of social suffering), Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (post-Fordist, network-based capitalism), Bernard Stiegler (the symbolic misery of the hyper-industrial epoch), Jonathan Crary (time measurement in the attention economy), David Harvey (accumulation by dispossession), Thomas Piketty (r > g), Achille Mbembe (the racial subsidy), Antoinette Rouvroy (algorithmic governmentality), Maurizio Lazzarato (debt as the basis of social life), Roberto Finelli (the ontology of real abstraction), Arlie Hochschild (affect management), Frédéric Lordon (willing slaves of capital), Randy Martin (the social logic of derivatives), Mark Fisher (capitalist realism), Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (accelerationist economics), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (immaterial labor), Karen Gregory (subjectivity and digital labor), Yann Moulier Boutang (cognitive capitalism), Antonio A. Casilli (the microlabor of machinic taskers like Amazon Mechanical Turk or Clickworker), Keller Easterling (infrastructure as a space of extrastatecraft), Ivan Ascher (the portfolio society), Tiziana Terranova (free labor), Harmut Rosa (social resonance as anti-alienation)" (5). See also John Roberts, *Capitalism and the Limits of Desire* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2022).

16 Apter and Crowley, "Economies of Existence," 3.

complicates this position of libidinal resistance are the complex ways that capitalist societies have, in some realms, invoked rational maximisers while, in others, they have not been shy about provoking libidinal attachments to institutions, people and commodities – or, indeed, joining the two by establishing an affective attachment to rationality, good measure, markets and so on. For Bernard Stiegler, this investment by capital in the libidinal drains our sexual reserves.[17] Stiegler describes contemporary social conditions as exhibiting a *libidinal dis-economy* with devastating psychopathological and sociopathological consequences. This threatens community disintegration, economic ruination and destruction of a well-lubricated capitalist libidinal economy. Stiegler will call this our contemporary "symbolic misery," his response to compounding contemporary crises, as capital raids our subjective and collective reserves, cannibalising these resources just as it has with others.[18]

An era of polymorphous crises

In what looks and feels like an era of everlasting crisis – that is to say, crises that are multiple, diverse and not clearly time-bound – the question of how capitalist economies survive, die or stumble on seems to be posed in radically different ways. Equally, the populist political moment of recent years has thrown into broadsheet columns and social media feeds a thousand wild discussions of the ids, egos and superegos – the unchecked desires and passions – of voters and leaders. And the pervasiveness of climate anxiety and doom, alongside apathy and inaction, have had many reaching for explanations in the unconscious. While Stiegler proposes a dis-economy, economists themselves struggle to describe what is occurring in the contemporary political-economic field. Prediction, equilibrium and measure all seem ineffective, delivering a crisis of and for the discipline. Economists seem hard-pressed or unable – epistemologically – to answer what is going on and going wrong in

17 See also Dominic Pettman, *Peak Libido: Sex, Ecology, and the Collapse of Desire* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

18 "Symbolic misery is the way that the exploitation of libidinal energy tends to exhaust it, with the result that, when this process approaches its conclusion, libidinal energy is replaced by the unleashing of drive-based tendencies. Only when it reaches this point is it expressed as spiritual misery. The binding force that was libidinal energy, as the premier energy of capitalism, then becomes an unbound force, decomposing the drives that were bound by libidinal energy, the latter no longer being able to contain them because it has been destroyed" (Bernard Stiegler, *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 7). Stiegler is partly aiming at the idea of a "new spirit" of capitalism: Bernard Stiegler, *The Re-Enchantment of the World: The Value of Spirit against Industrial Populism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Bernard Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010); Daniel Ross, "Translator's Introduction to Bernard Stiegler's 'Pharmacology of Desire: Drive-Based Capitalism and Libidinal Dis-Economy,'" *New Formations* 72 (2011): 146–49

these crisis times. After all, the modern financialised and globalised economy "is attempting to come to grips with the world it has created in its image." The difficulty economists face is both real and hermeneutic: "the science of economics has spent the last three hundred years creating the very economic facts it is now struggling to decipher."[19]

If this rings true for recent financial crises, it is also true of crises in other areas of social life. The prevailing understanding and representation of the world today is one of cascading crises: polycrisis and omnicrisis are currently two popular terms. This understanding is efficacious. Once a society is said to be in crisis by prominent voices, it has been altered by its self-perception of crisis conditions: the crisis is operative within it.[20] Crisis talk is immanent, performative and nonneutral. As Sara Ahmed notes:

> to declare a crisis is not "to make something out of nothing": such declarations often work with real events, facts or figures (as we can see, for example, in how the rise in divorce rates is used to announce a crisis in marriage and the family). But the declaration of crisis *reads* that fact/figure/event and transforms it into a fetish object that then acquires a life of its own, in other words, that can become the grounds for declarations of war against that which is read as the source of the threat.[21]

By noticing this fetishisation, by making this analytic move to a reflexive level, we are prompted to consider precisely what "crisis" is, and how crisis talk often gets deployed *strategically* rather than baldly describing the state of, among other things, the global market, the household, earth systems, sex and libido, asylum seeking, the "white race," and so on.[22] That is, we can remind ourselves to halt at the point of

19 Joseph Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, trans. Joachim Redner and Robert Savage (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2015), x. Writing almost a century earlier, Georg Lukács made a similar point: "the very success with which the economy is totally rationalised and transformed into an abstract and mathematically orientated system of formal 'laws' … creates the methodological barrier to understanding the phenomenon of crisis. In moments of crisis the qualitative existence of the 'things' that lead their lives beyond the purview of economics as misunderstood and neglected things in-themselves, as use-values, suddenly becomes the decisive factor. (Suddenly, that is, for reified, rational thought.) Or, rather: these 'laws' fail to function and the reified mind is unable to perceive a pattern in this 'chaos'" (*History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976, 105).

20 Andrew Simon Gilbert, *The Crisis Paradigm: Description and Prescription in Social and Political Theory* (Cham: Palgrave, 2019), 9.

21 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2014), 77.

22 Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave, 2013); Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis," *Public Culture* 7, no. 2 (1995): 323–52; Janet Roitman, "The Stakes of Crisis," in *Critical Theories of Crisis in Europe: From Weimar to the Euro*, ed. Poul F. Kjaer and Niklas Olsen (London: Rowman

glibly invoking crisis, and notice, instead, in whose social, political and economic interests such a crisis may be declared. This crisis terminology has been routinised in recent years, in discussions of all political stripes – giving us even more reason to be mindful of its use. This caution can be advised, even as we might wish to affirm the account, partially or wholly, that it offers of the facts – of the state of global heating or the misery of certain "surplus" populations and so on.

Crisis was imported into social inquiry from predominantly medical and military uses, which privilege technical expertise, licensing those who diagnose and act. It offers the chance for description and proscription. Janet Roitman writes that crisis is "an observation that produces meaning," responding to a given (bad) condition.[23] As Ahmed and others make plain, crises are simultaneously *objects*, referring to states in the world, and *demands*, asking for a decision or resolution. They seek to establish empirical validity in their *descriptions*, and normative, existential, or political force in their *proscriptions*. Crisis theory draws its authority from its claim to bring chaotic events under conceptual control and ordering.[24] In this sense, crisis is bound up in processes of power and hegemony, even as it offers countervailing forces the prospect of providing a new frame and intervention. It is, as Reinhart Koselleck puts it, a *Kampfbegriff*, "a concept designed for combat … used by both sides against each other."[25] In recent decades, we have seen how, once a crisis has been declared and broadly recognised, no shortage of jockeying begins for control of futures – be they economic, planetary or sexual. This jockeying is visibly true of status quo elites in high offices, as well as a reactionary right and an emancipatory left. The left, in particular, has found crisis to be "an invaluable historical hermeneutic, compelling us to anticipate limits, to imagine alternatives, to welcome collapse, and thus to resist the 'end of history' triumphalism characteristic of late capitalist ideology in boom times."[26] For Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the term had a positive political valence, even if born from economic misery. "This crisis," Engels wrote to Marx in 1857, "will make me feel as good as a swim in the ocean."[27]

& Littlefield International, 2016), 17–34; Joseph Vogl, Sven Fabre, and Arne Vanraes, "The History of the Notion of Crisis," in *Critical Theory at a Crossroads: Conversations on Resistance in Times of Crisis*, ed. Stijn de Cauwer (NY: Columbia UP, 2018), 61–74.

23 Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham: Duke UP, 2014), 82.

24 Gilbert, *Crisis Paradigm*, 9, 217.

25 Reinhart Koselleck, "Crisis," trans. Michaela W. Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 2 (2006): 376.

26 Annie McClanahan, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis and the Twenty-First-Century Culture* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2017), 15.

27 Quoted in Koselleck, "Crisis," 394.

In our era, swimming in the sea of crisis talk feels less energising. "Whoever speaks of 'crisis' today," Nancy Fraser warns, "risks being dismissed as a bloviator."[28] Consequently, some have suggested the term is now demobilising or outright reactionary: fascism, too, is a politics of crisis. Koselleck, in his conceptual-historical work over several decades, already issued this diagnosis and warning:

> The concept of crisis, which once had the power to pose unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives, has been transformed to fit the uncertainties of whatever might be favored at a given moment. Such a tendency towards imprecision and vagueness, however, may itself be viewed as the symptom of a historical crisis that cannot as yet be fully gauged. This makes it all the more important for scholars to weigh the concept carefully before adopting it in their own terminology.[29]

As Annie McClanahan suggests, part of the current efficacy of "crisis" consists in how it is both "ambient context and the manifest content of much cultural production, social experience and economic life." This has "transformed our sense of personhood … and our experience of social belonging."[30] Or, as Lauren Berlant puts it, "the way we live now" is a "survival in the present of an ordinary collective life suffused with a historic and historical crisis to which we are always catching up."[31] Berlant describes a "crisis ordinariness," a paradox marking the banality of the apparently exceptional. They note that "crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming."[32] These mark the "intensities of a situation that spreads into modes, habits, or genres of being."[33] Indeed, it is often these ordinary and everyday conditions – the fallout of stuttering economies and societies – that clinical psychoanalysts find themselves addressing today: climate anxieties and loss, for example, or ramifying inequality and its attendant anxieties, as these turn up in the day-to-day suffering of subjects forced to navigate them.[34]

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28 Nancy Fraser, *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond* (London: Verso, 2019), 7.

29 Koselleck, "Crisis," 399–400.

30 McClanahan, *Dead Pledges*, 15.

31 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011), 59. See also Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan* (Durham: Duke, 2013).

32 Berlant, *Cruel*, 10.

33 Berlant, 81.

34 Sally Weintrobe, ed., *Engaging with Climate Change: Psychoanalytic and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2012); Sally Weintrobe, *Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis: Neoliberal Exceptionalism and the Culture of Uncare* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021); Elissa Marder, "The Shadow of the Eco: Denial and Climate Change," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 49, no. 2 (2023): 139–50; Tad DeLay, *Future of Denial: The Ideologies of Climate Change* (London: Verso,

Pounds of flesh

Bodily experiences of suffering become a ground in moments of crisis and its discourses.[35] Elaine Scarry makes this point in her study of the body in pain. "When there is within society a crisis of belief," she writes, "when some central idea or ideology or cultural construct has ceased to elicit a population's belief either because it is manifestly fictitious or because it has for some reason been divested of ordinary forms of substantiation," then, she continues, "the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of 'realness' and 'certainty.'"[36] Scarry is writing about torture and war, and how human pain – the liveness of tissue – is "borrowed" to verify and substantiate the symbolic authority of institutions. Many other feelings can be faked, but pain always seems to be true: even phantom pain is *pain*.

Pain for Freud was what allowed the body to attain "its special position among other objects in the world of perception."[37] Psychoanalysis will, of course, want to introduce questions of pleasure amid pain – the common-enough experiences of sadomasochism, self-harm, addictions and so on. In other words, all the ways the apparent biological program of avoiding pain and suffering comes up against enjoyment, relief and pleasure. In "Psychoanalysis and Medicine," a speech given in 1966, Lacan suggests the body is made to *jouir*. But in this context, he goes on to define *jouissance* in particular terms: "in the register of tension, of forcing, of expenditure [*dépense*], indeed of the exploit." He adds that "there is incontestably *jouissance* at the level where pain begins to emerge, and we know that it is only at this level of pain that a whole dimension of the organism can be felt which would otherwise remain veiled."[38] Pain reveals something in us – the organism – while also pointing to something vital outside ourselves. Those who specialise in the study of pain agree: it is

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2024). From the opposite angle, this has also seen climate crisis thinkers and activists come to see the relevance of psychoanalytic theory: Andreas Malm, "The Future Is the Termination Shock: On the Antinomies and Psychopathologies of Geoengineering. Part One," *Historical Materialism* 30, no. 4 (2022): 3–53; Andreas Malm, "The Future Is the Termination Shock: On the Antinomies and Psychopathologies of Geoengineering. Part Two," *Historical Materialism* 31, no. 1 (2023): 3–61

35 This is true in the following examples but also in another sense explored in Marina Vishmidt, "Bodies in Space: On the Ends of Vulnerability," *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 8 (2020): 33–46.

36 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985), 14. Scarry limited her understanding of pain to the physical, even as she acknowledged the accuracy of also talking about pain in mental suffering, such as grief or depression.

37 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), XIX: 25. Freud describes the bodily ego as a surface that is also a projection of a surface, ruptured by wounds, palpitating with organ pain.

38 Translated from the French in Leader, *Jouissance*, 54–55.

never private but socially and publicly formed.[39] Psychoanalysis always intervenes here, positioning itself between body and language.

The mediation of bodily pain by language can be among the causes of distress. Alongside feelings of certainty, pain can instil in the sufferer a striking feeling of dependency and loneliness – no one else can directly feel the sensations and thoughts. This often leads to a retreat to the body as the here-and-now becomes the locus of attention. But the difficulty of communicating the experience can also breed pressurised speech. Pain can dominate the sufferer's conversation, just as the site of pain pushes other sensations below awareness, and the painful present marginalises past and future. This over-presence of pain can set in motion a concurrent alienation from other people.[40] As Scarry writes, for the person in pain, the perception is "so incontestably and unnegotiably present … that 'having pain' may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to 'have certainty,' while for the other person it is so elusive that 'hearing about pain' may exist as the primary model of what it is 'to have doubt.'" She concludes, "thus pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed."[41] Part of the sufferer's sense of abandonment amid the uncertainty of others derives from the fact that pain also comes to resist language. Expressions of pain regularly slip back "before" language to infantile cries, sobs and howls. While these express the suffering, as objectifications – as extensions into the world – they also attest to pain's factualness, little cries from the real that short-circuit the linguistic alienations of the symbolic, underwriting a realness that can be borrowed by ideologies. In other words, for those going through it, pain is incontestably real and this quality of realness can be conferred on whatever brought it into being.[42]

There is, thus, apparent certainty in pain and injury. The injured body is a piece of the real that provides the ultimate support or backing of a symbolic order – the national sacrifice of "our fallen and wounded," for example, will prop up, via the bodies of the injured, a national ideology's senses of valued belonging and worthy collective endeavour. Such injuries make the social facts constituted within the space of representation feel real – vital – rather than virtual. Scarry discusses the "intricacies of the process of transfer that make it possible for the incontestable reality of

39 Joanna Bourke, *The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014)

40 Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 55.

41 Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 4. Later (54–55) she writes, "pain begins by being 'not oneself' and ends by having eliminated all that is 'not itself.' . . . It eventually occupies the entire body and spills out into the realm beyond the body, takes over all that is inside and outside, makes the two obscenely indistinguishable, and systematically destroys anything like language or world extension that is alien to itself and threatening to its claims. Terrifying for its narrowness, it nevertheless exhausts and displaces all else until it seems to become the single broad and omnipresent fact of existence."

42 Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 27.

the physical body to now become an attribute of an issue that at that moment has no independent reality of its own."[43] The dead and injured are evidence that the nation and its cause ever existed. This is, then, an account of the body as ground and source of verification and substantiation of institutional, symbolic authority – and thus an account of how this becomes a crucial site for the working through and out of crisis. This can include authoritarian paths out, using the lure of "resurrecting a more visceral, less careful form of power, that could settle matters of life and death in public, and give vent to anger," as William Davies has described. Authoritarianism, for instance, offers an imaginary of simple solutions with recourse to the body and feeling states: "Guilt should mean pain, innocence should mean comfort, and then justice is finally done."[44]

Bodily pain is a source of verification – and of information and power in the modern world. Feeling, sentiment and experience have moved to the centre of data capture, communication and, hence, to value creation. Many of these techniques come from the "real-time intelligence" technologies of the military-industrial complex. An emphasis on real-time knowledge has bled from military operations to digital platforms to market algorithms to smart-home sensors to public CCTV systems to smartwatches and even, as I noted earlier, to sex toys. In this context, Davies has accounted for a generalised war footing: from this spread of onetime military technology in everyday life (real-time intel on imminent cardiovascular attacks) to geopolitical cyberwarfare to the quasi-militaristic frames of contemporary politics (culture wars, wars on terror, and wokeness) and social problems (wars on drugs, obesity, addiction).[45] During the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders deployed slogans such as "we are at war" to galvanise the population to stay at home, telecommute and maintain total vigilance over their bodies and those nearby. Attending to the past decade's political economy and crisis tendencies, Davies accounts for how the

43 Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 124–25. Santner (*The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xvi) leaps off this mention of "transfer" to discuss "transference" in psychoanalytic terms, which is not precisely what Scarry meant in her phrase. Nevertheless, Santner considers transference a social phenomenon, a source of verification and a mode of perception. In psychoanalysis, transference is the process by which the subject transfers or projects their libidinal attachments, fantasies, and expectations onto another person, usually the analyst, who comes to represent a figure of authority or influence in the subject's life. Santner suggests that transference can also be understood as a way of transferring the reality and certainty of the physical body onto a cultural construct or a symbolic order that lacks independent reality or legitimacy. Hence, in the current discussion, transference figures one way of coping with the crisis of belief or the lack of fit between the human subject and the social field.

44 William Davies, *Nervous States: Democracy and the Decline of Reason* (NY: Norton, 2020), 93.

45 Davies, *Nervous States*. The war on terror was the first war waged on an emotion: Lauren Berlant, "The Epistemology of State Emotion," in *Dissent in Dangerous Times*, ed. Austin Sarat (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 46–78.

time of combative, pervasive wars on multiple fronts manifest the characteristics of the current conjuncture: deepening inequalities, environmental degradation, and political polarisation. War is, like crisis, a pronouncement with effects. But war is also a symptom of crisis that only deepens its causes and effects – splitting the population, instilling aggression, foreclosing debate, and so on. This describes a breakdown of a fundamental modern distinction – ideal as it always was – between wartime and peacetime. This breakdown has produced individuals and governments existing in a state of near-constant heightened alertness, combativeness and a feeling of being "under siege," which leads to twitchy nervous states in subjects, leaders and bodies politic.

Beyond their role in value creation – outside the military, chiefly in the *ressentiment* machines of the social industry[46] – the libidinal circuit here concerns the pleasures, pains and suffering instilled by warlike relations with others. We might recall here a passage from Lacan's seminar on Edgar Allan Poe's *Purloined Letter*:

> Every human drama … is founded on the existence of established bonds, ties, pacts. Human beings already have commitments which tie them together, commitments which have determined their places, names, their essences. Then along comes another discourse, other commitments, other speech. It is quite certain that there'll be some places where they'll have to come to blows. All treaties aren't signed simultaneously. Some are contradictory. If you go to war, it is so as to know which treaty will be binding.[47]

Lacan here outlines the inevitable conflicts around commitments, names, places, and bonds.[48] If we live in a period characterised by generalised war, as Davies characterises it, then, if we follow Lacan, this means that the regular "going to war" in cultural and political life indicates we are in a crisis of contradictory or unsettled symbolic pacts, bonds, and ties; or, put differently, crises and their discourses indicate the battle over the settlement of what bonds, ties, and titles come to reign for the next phase of some putative crisis-free political and libidinal economy. Such

46 Joseph Vogl, *Capital and Ressentiment: A Short Theory of the Present*, trans. Neil Solomon (London: Polity, 2023); Richard Seymour, *The Twittering Machine* (London: Indigo, 2019).

47 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 197.

48 In the circuit of the economic, we can even consider the conjunction of *war* and *bonds* in those debt securities issued under that very name. The "war bond" emerged in the twentieth century partly to channel consumer spending into patriotic duty. In WWI, these were called "liberty bonds" in the US; elsewhere, they were sometimes called "victory bonds." These bonds are paradigmatic for understanding national belonging as a macroeconomic and identificatory endeavour, tying individual (financial) fates to national fates. If all goes well, then the surplus of victory is apportioned and enjoyed. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (NY: Knopf, 2003), chap. 2.

are the promises of homeostasis and anxiety-free futures offered by combatants in these dramas – dramas that stage battles for hegemony. These battles are, among other things, about the tying together – the binding – of subjects to projects, places, names, and essences, when subjects otherwise feel themselves adrift.

We have seen throughout this volume that, for the human to come into their social being and be distinguished from the nonhuman, libidinal implication in the space of the cultural (i.e., the representational, the world of symbolic roles, mandates, titles, exchanges) is necessary. Our enjoyment is tied to these signifiers, titles, and entitlements; our erotic attachments in the world are born from our existence within a matrix of signifying representations. Scarry's work suggests that in crises of representation (such as those of democracy and politics) and the world (such as those of climate, precarity and health), the body becomes an unrivalled veridical instrument, valorised and prized for its apparent immediacy and vulnerability. The body will shift individuals and social orders away from crisis and back to senses of normality. In other words, in crises of the spaces of representations and accompanying social being (subjectivity), the flesh becomes vitally enlisted in attempts to renew the underwriting, or rewriting, of social facts and orders. The flesh – "the bit of the real," Eric Santner proposes, "that underwrites the circulation of signs and values"[49] – represents the site where the personal and the political intersect, always already entangled with the social and symbolic orders that structure our world.

The flesh, in its somatic-discursive entanglements, captures the material and affective dimensions of the capitalist libidinal economy – a different sort of body language. *Flesh* is something in the body that is more than the body, the symbolic order's subject-matter – which is to say, the subject's matter, the stuff, that they offer up and work on in the name of the social. Flesh is not only a biological substance, then, but also a medium of the historical and political forces that shape the libidinal economy. It is a substance that "forms at and as the unstable jointure of the somatic and the normative dimensions of human life."[50] It is also one that, across history, forms at an oscillation between the transcendent (holy) and sinful (profane), or the physical (material) and scriptural (biblical), or the particular (enfleshed races and genders) and universal (humanity per se). Santner explores how flesh becomes a site of suffering, resistance, and transformation in crisis: as a social medium, the flesh and its functions can be most apparent when it starts registering breakdowns.

The contemporary doxa that you ought to "listen to your body" has a certain value here. Psychologists and medical professionals, after Freud's initial interest in the psychosomatic, have been sceptical about "conversion disorder." Conversion is associated with concerns at the border of the bodily and psychic: classically, conversion

49 Santner, *Royal*, xv.

50 Eric L. Santner, *The Weight of All Flesh: On the Subject-Matter of Political Economy*, ed. Kevis Goodman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 238.

disorder names the symptomatic traffic of psychic and somatic distress.[51] Jamieson Webster comments in her recent book on the topic that, after a decade in private practice and the intimacy it offers ("after hours and hours of listening to patients – mostly women"), not a single patient escapes "touching the realm of so-called conversion disorder."[52] She writes:

> if I survey my practice, everyone is troubled by what it means to have a body, having a series of bodily symptoms that define their life…. They take pressures and pains and protests in the body personally, meaning that they assume a kind of guilt in relation to their existence…. From within *this stagnant economy of culpability* (one that easily reverses into blame at other moments) you can find the deep longing for a way out, for another way of life, including a way to find the conviction to pursue something other than what has been offered – this I also want to name conversion.[53]

In a striking passage, Webster records what she hears in these recent analytic encounters with forms of conversion disorder:

> The threat of symptomatic pains that write themselves on [the patient's] flesh: strange autoimmune diseases; obscure aches; a litany of possible diseases; with medications on offer, some taken; and the infinite number of people at your disposal that you can pay to treat weary flesh. A body between the cracks. Please touch me. Tell me where it hurts. With these healers of various sorts, she is given a place to know herself in some other way, to have herself again, as a body in pain but attended to by others. We are still living in the nineteenth century. Hydrotherapy and sanatoriums have other names, including the recourse to seaside vacation or energy work or massage. On the less privileged end, it is somewhat the same as it was; the barbaric institutions of psychiatric facilities or prison are tempting, a solution to an inequitable and counterproductive fight for protection and stability.[54]

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51 Jamieson Webster, in the introduction to her *Conversion Disorder: Listening to the Body in Psychoanalysis* (NY: Columbia UP, 2019), draws out a definition from the APA's 2013 *DSM-V* diagnostic manual: "'conversion disorder' is a diagnosis that is part of the subgroup 'somatic symptoms and related disorders,' which includes hypochondria, pain disorder, and somatic symptom disorder (APA 2013). Conversion requires a neurological evaluation of symptoms that can range from dizziness to loss of consciousness to changes in motor or sensory functions, from difficulty seeing, smelling, and touching to paralysis, weakness or numbness in the body, and even difficulty speaking or swallowing. The diagnosis gives a nod to psychoanalytic history, the link between the first conception of psychoanalysis and the vicissitudes of neurology" (12–13).

52 Webster, 54.

53 Webster, 14, emphasis added.

54 Webster, 47.

The massage room and the psychiatric cell are places, among others, "where one can hide for a time from the demands of efficiency and productivity leveled at one's body." Later, Webster writes that "the body rebels first" against the dictates of assimilating to regimes of work, lifestyle, authentic experience and so on.[55] The appeal of the bodily retreat or the masseur's thumbs pressing into knotted shoulders suggests how and why the flesh is also the focus of attempts to right the social order. A fix in the body will right the crisis, bring it to an end, and ease the suffering – or so the fantasy goes. As Santner puts it, in moments of symbolic crisis, a "bottoming out of symbolic function on … the flesh becomes urgent."[56] The body – whether in pleasure or pain or both – is essential to these symbolic, ideological operations, a material substrate of our desires and fantasies, and a source of both vitality and vulnerability.

Amid the abstractions of contemporary capitalism, the flesh returns us to creaturely life – something firm if not meaty – only to inscribe this in yet another set of valuations and symbolisations. In moments of crisis, this attempt to recapture the fugitive desires for something valuable can appear absurd, incongruous, and incommensurate. As Benjamin Noys points out, the key texts in the critique of libidinal economy represent a "striking attempt to come to terms with capitalism's capacity to subsume the most seemingly outré elements of human behaviour to the value-form."[57] That these practices keep returning to the body and its libidinal circuits leads us to what I consider in the remainder of the chapter: a set of explicitly sexualised responses to crisis. This time they concern the climate crisis and the pandemic, where forms of relief and bodily pleasure are central to value and reinscribing enjoyment – or types of (libidinal) economic stimulus.

Here, coincidentally, as with LBDO, we find another Australian sex toy company taking the lead. In late 2019 and early 2020, shortly before COVID-19 rushed through the boarding gates of the world's airports, Australia endured devastating bushfires across thousands of kilometres. These fires killed an unfathomable number of animals, including the beloved and distinctive koalas, kangaroos, and wallabies. Amid this disaster, Geeky Sex Toys raised funds for wildlife with its Down-Under Donation Dildo – a silicone toy in the green-and-gold colours of native wattle trees and Australia's sporting teams, set on a base in the shape of the continental landmass. It also featured an image of a koala, a resonant victim of the fires. In recent years, the koala has become a singular and potent object in mourning Australia's accelerating

55 Webster, 47.

56 Here Santner is extending Scarry in his *Royal*, xvi.

57 Benjamin Noys, "'We Are All Prostitutes': Crisis and Libidinal Economy," in *Credo Credit Crisis*, ed. Aidan Tynan, Laurent Milesi, and Christopher John Muller (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 170.

climate disasters. The koala is, after all, a form of commodified kitsch in the Australian and international imagination of the country. Such cute figures, for Sianne Ngai, aestheticise powerlessness, which comes to the fore when they are perceived as injured, disabled or attacked.[58] Ngai argues that "the cute," which the koala globally embodies, is strongly associated with commodity-oriented aesthetics. "Cuteness" is also linked with the infantile, feminine and unthreatening, and, partly through anthropomorphising, often demands an emotional and caring response; ultimately, the koala looks like a sleepy, slightly grumpy human baby.

"I just care so much about the motherfucking koalas," singer Lizzo famously exclaimed when visiting Australia around the time of the fires.[59] Her statement encapsulates a generalised libidinal attachment in the expansive sense indicated by Freud's understanding of the libido, its economy and the way it can "stick" to particular objects in circulation. The commodification of koalas concerns their role in a lucrative tourist economy, where this libidinal attachment enters the capitalist economy: not only is their likeness exploited on key rings, hats and media imagery, but also by visitors "buying" the privilege of holding them and posing for sanctuary selfies. Cuteness unveils the spectrum of feelings – or the complex libidinal relationship – individuals have toward objects within capitalism, including not only tenderness but also aggression towards these ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening creature-commodities. Yet, despite deceptively cuddly appearances, they might also threaten us: as Evie Kendal points out, given the koala population's "struggle with high rates of chlamydial infections, it may not have been the best choice for a sex toy."[60]

Sexually transmitted diseases aside, a symptomatic response is legible in mobilising the cute koala amid the catastrophe. As Elissa Marder has argued, in the context of "ecocide" (a "primordial crime scene" that augurs "egocide"), climate change presents a unique challenge to the human psyche. The inexorable unfolding of eco-crises threatens the establishment of a rational relation to reality. Given the monumental scale of climate change, individuals often resort to personal actions to manage feelings of guilt and helplessness. After all, climate change challenges conventional perceptions of time, forcing a re-evaluation of the subject's relation to this horizon: "the traumatic temporality of climate change," Marder points out, "unfolds as an unprogrammable future that bears within it the belated, unknowable and incalculable effects of past actions and inactions that are beyond repair."[61] Recognis-

58 Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, 1st edition (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2015)

59 Emily McAvan, "'I Just Care so Much About the Koalas,'" *Angelaki* 28, no. 5 (2023): 21–38.

60 Evie Kendal, "Horny for COVID: The Growth of Coronavirus Erotica," *Extrapolation* 63, no. 1 (2022): 64.

61 Marder, "The Shadow of the Eco," 144.

ing irreparable damage to the planet prompts existential questions about human responsibility and the limitations of individual agency – and ultimately, forms of mourning and pre-mourning.

Just after WWI, in an essay titled "On Transience," Freud gives a short rendition of his work on melancholia and mourning, written around the same time. The libido ("our capacity for love") attaches to objects "which are thus in a sense taken into our ego." When these are "destroyed or … lost to us," the libido "is once more liberated," and it can then "take other objects instead," he concludes.[62] This passage suggests the interchangeability of objects and, in this context, how mourning concerns the difficulty of renouncing libidinised objects of care, investment and longing. It also intimates the turn to fantasy and imagination in response to death. Closing the short essay – which is a stylised recollection of dialogue with Rainer Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé on natural beauty and, fittingly enough, extinction – Freud commented that although the conversation "took place in the summer before the war," the landscape they contemplated had been subsequently ruined. Freud could be describing the great ravages of human-induced wildfire, and climate catastrophe more generally, when he writes:

> [war] destroyed … the beauty of the countrysides through which it passed and … also shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization…. It tarnished the lofty impartiality of our science; it revealed our instincts in all their nakedness and let loose the evil spirits within us, which we thought had been tamed forever by centuries of continuous education by the noblest minds…. It robbed us of very much that we had loved, and showed us how ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless. We cannot be surprised that our libido, thus bereft of so many of its objects, has clung with all the greater intensity to what is left to us, that our love of our country, our affection for those nearest us and our pride in what is common to us have suddenly grown stronger.[63]

The ambivalence here about human civilisation and science – equally the bringer of social advances and extinction – is not unfamiliar in our time. Given the nationalistic overtones in Freud too, we might observe how the Geeky Sex Toy proffers a new libidinal object for subjects in distress: clinging, like a koala in a eucalypt, to the figure of national pride, even as habitat loss from fossil capital drives it to an alarming level of threat. In Australia's case, this is a sort of manic mourning stitched into a national libidinal economy amid a mining-rich national political economy. Freud writes that, however painful mourning may be, it ultimately "comes to a spontaneous end. When it has renounced everything that has been lost, then it has consumed itself, and our libido is once more free … to replace the lost objects by fresh ones, equally or still

62 Freud, *SE*, XIV: 306.

63 Freud, 307.

more precious."[64] In the context of wildfire and its affectively overwhelming devastation – its total consumption of whole regions – the Geeky Sex Toy was a way to, all at once, honour the dead, enjoy the charitable ecological crisis response and briefly dissipate the stress of 21st century doom through benevolence, humour and sexual pleasure.

Around the same time as the charity sex toy was offered for sale, PornHub, the world's biggest video porn site, launched its "Sexstainable" series of videos. Under the slogan, "let's f*ck the planet right," they asked, "is there anything sexier in today's world than a person who cares about the future of our planet?" Sounding uncertain, they replied, "probably not." They then announced their new initiative: "to educate and inspire more people to start acting sustainably, PornHub, in partnership with 2030 or Bust, has created an entirely new genre of porn: Sexstainable Jerk Off Instructions." Their other slogan promoted this as "the most pleasurable way of caring for the environment." Indeed, they ultimately defined their neologism – "sexstainable" – as "the act of deriving pleasure from taking action towards a better environment."[65] These are the realms that Dominic Pettman, in his book *Peak Libido*, covered under the subtitle of "sex, ecology, and the collapse of desire."[66] What Pettman and others have observed are debates about how the climate emergency has depressed libido, either through psychic symptoms, such as anxiety and depression, or physical effects, such as microplastic pollution or radiation and other potential causes of impotence and declining Western birthrates. With "sexstainability," the leading brand name in internet pornography and one of the most prolific producers of CO_2 on the planet, looked to ruefully counteract the flagging libido amid crisis, just as the LBDO package gives you a little "me time" in an unendingly stressful era, and the sex toy stages a vigil for the coming and current mass extinction events.[67]

These examples may perhaps be overly explicit in conjoining the sexual and the social. Yet, in their nakedness, in their subsumption of the once outré to commodification, they underline just how commonly and openly libido and money are linked

64 Freud, 307. Several authors have turned to this essay to consider climate change, including Jonathan Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2022).

65 https://web.archive.org/web/20210127123905/https://www.pornhub.com/sexstainability. Asterisk in the original. Their "tips" included innuendo-laden suggestions for helping the planet: go easy on the meat; get turned on by dark fantasies; go "au naturel"; always go for a full load; screw the mile-high club; use a second hand; spread your seed; swallow all of it; use me over and over again.

66 Pettman, *Peak Libido*.

67 In 2019, *New Scientist* reported that watching online "pornographic videos generates as much CO2 per year as is emitted by countries such as Belgium, Bangladesh and Nigeria." PornHub, as the largest platform by some margin, takes an outsized share of these emissions. https://web.archive.org/web/20190701000000*/https://www.newscientist.com/article/2209569-streaming-online-pornography-produces-as-much-co2-as-belgium/

today. This plainness differs from Freud's time: he pointed out in his guide for analysts beginning an analysis that setting a fee needed to be done plainly, as "money matters are treated by civilized people in the same way as sexual matters – with the same inconsistency, prudishness and hypocrisy." The analyst, by speaking matter-of-factly, demonstrates "that he himself has cast off false shame on these topics," and the analyst understands that, with money, "powerful sexual factors are involved in the value set upon it."[68] (In many ways, it may be easier in our time to speak plainly about one's private sexual arrangements than it is to speak without shame about one's financial investments and inheritances.) Nevertheless, the examples here also suggest how powerful money matters are involved in the value set upon libido. Or, put differently, these examples suggest how easily libido and crisis are linked today – and how openly a price can be put upon them.

In the cases I have outlined, it is almost as if the manifold corporeal immiserations could be removed – or at least forgotten about – by direct, pleasurable, fleshly interventions. This contrasts with what Scarry noted as the role of the body, pain and mental life in crisis. But it also ostensibly inverts the mortification of the flesh in the Christian tradition. Namely, those forms of ritual and practice to deaden sinful nature – the human's concupiscence – via a humbling self-denial or inflicting pain on the body: self-flagellation, abstinence and wearing of irritating hairshirts; all are reminders of the need to repent.[69] Perhaps what we see in the contemporary recourse to fleshly pleasure is how the proximity of what is happening in acute crisis phases – billions of dead animals, flooded cities, overwhelmed emergency services

68 Freud, *SE*, XII: 131. Elsewhere, Freud (XVIII: 91) remarked on the offence taken by "educated people" to his focus on sex: "In psychoanalysis … love drives (a *potiori* and because of their origin) are referred to as sexual drives. Most 'educated people,' finding this nomenclature offensive, have taken their revenge by saddling psychoanalysis with the charge of 'pan-sexualism'. Anyone who considers sexuality as something shameful and degrading to human nature is at liberty to use the more genteel expressions 'Eros' and 'eroticism.' I might have done so myself from the outset and spared myself much opposition. However, I chose not to, being keen to avoid concessions to faintheartedness. There is no knowing where such an avenue will lead; one gives way first in words, and then little by little in substance too. I cannot see that anything is gained by being ashamed of sexuality; after all, the Greek word 'Eros,' which apparently softens the offence, is quite simply the translation of our German word *Liebe* [love], and ultimately, the man who can wait need make no concessions."

69 The Bible paragraphs that undergird this theology include: "for if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:13); "put to death … whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5); "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24); "blows and wounds scrub away evil, and beatings purge the inmost being" (Proverbs 20:30). Anthropologists have noted versions of some similar painful bodily practices occur in indigenous communities, which have a clear symbolic function during rites of passage.

– draws the subject to coping mechanisms of disinhibited self-soothing alongside visions and experiences of pain and torture. These are ways of temporarily putting to death the deeds of a crisis ridden world. For this soothing, we find the market provides no shortage of services and objects to smooth the path away from pain – and some of these, where they raise funds for charitable causes, even offer the chance of buying indulgences and a little repentance.

The libidinal exploit

In 2020, amid pandemic-induced fear and anxiety, public health measures shaped intensive libidinal investments in mask wearing, crowds, social distancing, mandated shutdowns, and, ultimately, conspiracies and scapegoats. These were all challenges to the notion of control over the external world and the human body, or the porous edges of the body and self.[70] Porn producers, ever the avant-garde in the culture industry and always tuned into fluctuations in the libidinal economy, began uploading content tagged as "COVID" or "quarantine" to porn sites in the pandemic's first month. Widely circulating elements of political and medical discourse – personal protective equipment, nurses, doctors, homes in lockdown – took on a fascination as users, morbidly curious about the risks, engaged in fantasies of proximity to what threatened them and the world.

PornHub saw itself as a first responder on the scene of the crisis, or perhaps even as a partisan of the mutual aid networks that flourished in the first phrase of the pandemic. It offered free "premium content" to people in self-isolation and quarantine. In this role, it presumably hoped to help stymie a zombie-like urge for the infected to roam the streets looking for means to discharge libidinal energy. Erotica also emerged during the early pandemic, notably in the four-part ebook series, *Kissing the Coronavirus* by M. J. Edwards. As the title suggests, this entails dalliances with the sentient virus itself ("I want to be inside as many people as possible. I must spread my seed"); the virus is the character-subject of desire in the series.[71] Other contributions to the genre featured global leaders of 2020 – such as British Prime

70 Preciado ("Learning from the Virus," *Artforum*, June 2020) writes: "the management of epidemics stages an idea of community, reveals a society's immunitary fantasies, and exposes sovereignty's dreams of omnipotence – and its impotence." Many conspiracy theories alternate between wild fantasies of sovereigns who are either omnipotent or impotent. This exposure of the sovereign seems to be precisely what conspiracy thinking cannot bear, hence the intensity of such thinking in periods of crisis.

71 For a close reading of the series, see Kendal, "Horny for COVID." Other self-published works, largely appearing online at fandom site Archive of Our Own, include *Courting the Coronavirus: A Positively Viral Love Story* (2020) and *Scissoring the Coronavirus: A Sickeningly Erotic Lesbian Sex Story* (2020).

Minister Boris Johnson and US President Donald Trump – in stories of man-virus love. Across the mutating variants of COVID-erotica, we find "speculative fiction, body horror, fantasy, fan, and slash fiction," mixing "stories of sexual adventure during isolation and quarantine, cybersex, medical fetishism, handwashing and other cleanliness kinks, and their abject counterparts."[72] This is a long way from the imagined normative ideal of sex. But it reflects the rapidity with which desire can introduce new elements from the world and thereby take new shapes – up to and including the virulent, hot green beasts of this erotica, presumably unknown to fantasy life before January 2020.

In the global COVID-19 crisis, the libidinal, in all its plasticity, charted the fixations of populations enduring a rising mix of anxiety, boredom and isolation.[73] Overall, porn traffic spiked upwards during the lockdowns, as the PornHub response suggested. This increase prompted the "porn wars" of earlier decades to be rapidly re-enacted in media and scholarly outlets, now articulated with some prepandemic discourse about sexual ethics, harassment and abuse (e.g., #MeToo).[74] Debates about broader internet addiction and "over-consumption" appeared in psychiatric and public health journals, suggesting a disturbance in the libidinal economy that needed swift medical redress. However, the moral panic around a "porndemic" was misplaced as website usage dropped after the initial explosion in the freighted first half of 2020. What seems to have occurred is a porn-Prozac effect: self-dosing with erotics to quell or alleviate the intense uncertainty of the early pandemic period. As many white-collar workers settled into working-from-home habits, pornography returned to being a mundane feature of their day, either for heightened reminders

72 Kendal, "Horny for COVID," 56.

73 For many women, this isolation equalled violence. On femicide and the threat of the feminine for masculinised subjects during the pandemic, see Jacqueline Rose, *The Plague*, Ebook (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2023). Rose writes that women "are being punished – paying with their lives – for a death that has become too keenly felt. As defences start to crumble, the phobic core of being human explodes. Even as the pandemic seems to diminish in its force, this violence against women has continued, as if the felt fragility of life had released into the atmosphere a new, ugly – and seemingly unstoppable – permission to engage in violence. The numbers of sexual offences are soaring…. Domestic violence has become more visible, but the renewed attention has not reduced the prevalence of sexual crime – if anything the opposite" (n.p.). A poster she sees around London encapsulated the pandemic experience for women locked down in violent situations: "abusers always work from home."

74 For recent accounts of the porn wars: Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022); Nancy Bauer, *How to Do Things with Pornography* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2015); Lorna N. Bracewell, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars: Sexual Freedom in the #MeToo Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021). Meanwhile, some research showed that COVID-19 infection caused "sexual dysfunction" and what one paper calls "prolonged libido problems": Issam Nessaibia et al., "The Way COVID-19 Transforms Our Sexual Lives," *International Journal of Impotence Research* 34, no. 2 (2022): 117–19.

of selfhood or the desired loss of it. Porn content was now "essential for work" rather than "not safe for work." From the other side of the screen, during the COVID-19 pandemic, porn labourers were doing "essential work," to use the terminology of the time. After all, "every porn scene is a record of people at work."[75] Sex workers collectively laboured throughout the pandemic to produce an indispensable component of capitalism – enjoyment.

Paul B. Preciado has described the contemporary capitalist era as "pharmacopornographic."[76] Following Preciado's theorisation, we can say that online pornography has a firm place in the global libidinal economy and – at least during the pandemic – national governance. During the pandemic's height, pornography offered not purely private, commodified pleasures but overlapped with techniques for managing the national (cum global) libidinal economy. Some governments introduced curfews to prevent nocturnal gatherings and promoted masturbation instead of casual sex, all in the name of "stopping the spread" and "flattening the curve" of infection. People's searches for pleasure, they intimated, needed to measure up to the reality of the global situation.

In *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, Freud wrote that if the pleasure principle determines the purpose of life, then it is nevertheless at odds with the whole world, which seems to oppose happiness. Faced with this reality, people temper their claim to happiness, he suggests, being content to escape unhappiness and prevent suffering. Among the ways we "regulate our constitution" is with self-administered pleasures, such as pornography and "intoxicants," about which Freud wrote that their effect "in the struggle for happiness and keeping misery at a distance is seen as so great a boon that not only individuals, but whole nations, have accorded them a firm place in the economy of the libido." Similar to the depletions figured in Stiegler's libidinal dis-economy, Freud warned that, while yielding a positive effect on pleasure and desired independence from the world's reality at certain times ("drowning our sorrows"), the desired aid of intoxicants also makes them "dangerous and harmful. In some circumstances, they are responsible for the futile loss of large amounts of energy that might have been used to improve the lot of mankind."[77] In an early let-

75 Heather Berg, *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

76 Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, trans. Bruce Benderson (NY: The Feminist Press, 2012). Despite a glancing similarity, Preciado's analysis, as we will see, differs considerably from US anti-pornography campaign groups such as Fight the New Drug. Such groups suggest pornography is analogous to a drug and public health crisis. These campaigns have been effective: by 2020, 14 US states had non-binding resolutions declaring pornography a public health hazard. See Emily F. Rothman, *Pornography and Public Health* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2021), 7.

77 Freud, *SE*, XXI: 78. Translation altered. The German is "Die Leistung der Rauschmittel im Kampf um das Glück und zur Fernhaltung des Elends wird so sehr als Wohltat geschätzt, daß Individuen wie Völker ihnen eine feste Stellung in ihrer Libidoökonomie eingeräumt

ter to Wilhelm Fliess, Freud connects addiction, masturbation and intoxicants: "the insight has dawned on me that masturbation is the one major habit, the 'primary addiction,' and it is only as a substitute and replacement for it that the other addictions – to alcohol, morphine, tobacco, and the like – come into existence."[78]

The current global model of political economy is, in a certain sense, also addicted to masturbation, particularly in the guise of pornography. Preciado's theory of "pornpower" describes the intricate relationship between sex, pornography, and desire within larger economic structures. A play on Michel Foucault's conception of "biopower," Preciado's term points to discourses of pleasure that ground contemporary power. These discourses and practices emotionally engage individuals, generating economic value by harnessing work discipline and pleasure discipline. With internet pornography, a new form of work and labour emerges for capital, "an economy of ejaculation."[79] Precisely tracked by online data gathering to identify broad trends and micro fluctuations of interest (when porn users skip, pause, re-watch, like, favourite, share), it is the "culture industry" model at its zenith: an industry of precisely targeted production and precisely dosed pleasure. Indeed, Preciado suggests that the porn industry is the model of efficient profitability, excitation and affective impact in the current market: "minimum investment, direct sales of the product in real time in a unique fashion, the production of instant satisfaction for the consumer."[80] Developments since *Testo Junkie*, such as entrepreneurial porn subscription platforms (e.g., OnlyFans), have simply increased the level of niche consumption and illustrated the imbrication with logics of capital: they have added parasocial elements from celebrity and social media culture to increase affective attachments; many "amateur" profiles are now overseen by dedicated brand management companies with teams of people, often offshore in low-

haben." The noun "Völker" can indicate either "peoples" in a generic sense or "nations" in a more bounded sense.

78 Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887–1904*, trans. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Cambridge: Belknap, 1986), 287. The depletion has its description in these letters to Fliess, too. As summarised by Jamieson Webster: "Neurasthenic melancholia – languor, malaise, boredom – Freud ties to excessive masturbation, namely, too much terminal discharge of sensation, creating an overall weakening of one's system. This is what we might think of as the vicissitudes of addiction and the problems of indulgence that eventually induce anesthesia. Here, depression follows an excess, but one that creates an inability to maintain any store of energy or pleasure that might amount to anything other than a demand for total discharge. Your system is spent. You've blown your load too many times – the result of a reified love object that you infinitely consume because it is not separate from yourself, tied into the external world" (*Conversion Disorder*, 80).

79 Preciado, 293. Berg's argument in *Porn Work* suggests how sex workers are always at the vanguard of changes in economic and labour relations, both in creating new possibilities and responding to harsh legal regimes.

80 Preciado, *Testo*, 39.

wage centres such as the Philippines, ventriloquising the models and responding to private messages 24/7, typically to extract cash from wealthy subscribers for purportedly exclusive content.[81]

Preciado's book *Testo Junkie*, a self-described "body-essay," sketches a "new cartography" of how, during the past century, sexuality and the body became subjects of meticulous governmental and industrial management – and source of economic value. He uses "pharmacopornographic" because "these management techniques function no longer through the repression and prohibition of sexuality, but through the incitement of consumption and the constant production of a regulated and quantifiable pleasure."[82] Pharmacological consumption, pornographic representation, and sexual services are the characteristic vectors of economic growth. Notions of libido – alongside psyche, consciousness, gender, sexuality – have been transformed into tangible realities by technoscience, manifest in commercial chemical substances, molecules and fungible technological goods. These entities are managed by multinationals, their goods listed on government-administered health care schedules and their value traded in shares: depression ↔ Prozac, masculinity ↔ testosterone, (non)erection ↔ Viagra, reproduction ↔ the Pill, HIV ↔ tritherapy. The bidirectional arrows indicate that once discovered, these open potentials that individuals *must* seize upon – with Viagra, you *can*, therefore, you *must*.[83] This confers a set of expectations and understandings of "the problem" (fertility, impotence, dysmorphia) that cannot but be read back into it. The opioid crisis in the US over the past decade has further evidenced the role of prescription and illicit drugs in the search for profit amid pleasure (and dependency and despair).[84] Here again, as we saw earlier, finding relief for the body in pain becomes the site of intervention

81 On the economic implications of these platforms, see Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith, "OnlyFans as Gig-Economy Work: A Nexus of Precarity and Stigma," *Porn Studies*, 2022, 1–16. On the marketing and management companies, see Ezra Marcus's report from 2022 in *NY Times*: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/16/magazine/e-pimps-onlyfans.html

82 Preciado, "Learning."

83 Slavoj Žižek, "'You May!,'" *London Review of Books*, March 18, 1999. As Žižek writes: "The superego inverts the Kantian 'You can, because you must' in a different way, turning it into 'You must, because you can.' This is the meaning of Viagra, which promises to restore the capacity of male erection in a purely biochemical way, bypassing all psychological problems. Now that Viagra can take care of the erection, there is no excuse: you should have sex whenever you can; and if you don't you should feel guilty."

84 Max Haiven, *Revenge Capitalism: The Ghosts of Empire, the Demons of Capital, and the Settling of Unpayable Debts* (London: Pluto, 2020); Jesse Proudfoot, "The Libidinal Economy of Revanchism: Illicit Drugs, Harm Reduction, and the Problem of Enjoyment," *Progress in Human Geography* 43, no. 2 (2019): 214–34; John L. Fitzgerald, *Life in Pain: Affective Economy and the Demand for Pain Relief* (Singapore: Springer, 2020). Fitzgerald points out that illicit drug strategies attempt to inflict pain and death on drug users, as in the drug death squads of Rodrigo Duterte's Philippines. These were a point of sadistic pride for the leader and his followers.

into social ills, a *pharmakon* in Derrida's sense, undecidably on the cusp of cure and poison.

Preciado's work describes this contemporary libidinal economy without placing it in that particular tradition.[85] He proposes "*potentia gaudendi*" – the inherent capacity to produce and experience pleasure, desire and affects within the human body – as the raw material exploited in current regimes. This *potentia* encompasses both physical sensations (such as desire, arousal, and orgasm) and mental experiences related to pleasure: products such as Viagra are marketed to promise enhanced and managed bodily pleasure; aids such as poppers are used to cause euphoric highs and enhance sexual pleasure; pornography is offered as a failsafe route to pleasure via managed doses of representation and fantasy; and, practically folding all of these together, online communities such as "gooners" aspire to marathon, hours-long, trance-like masturbation sessions using poppers and looping porn videos. To get a grip on this conjuncture, we might propose joining Santner's "flesh" with the psychiatric language of addiction and speak of a "substance use disorder" of a different type – the fleshy substance, the subject-matter, of global libidinal economy, the substantialisation of the object as, and in, pleasure. If the use of the substance in such regimes is ostensibly disordered, then Preciado's work suggests – in age of disorganised capitalism that cashes in on this disordered enjoyment – there might nevertheless be a certain senseless or compulsive order to this disorder.

If we follow Preciado, then at this stage of global capitalism, any baroque vision of economic disturbance via sexual excess – the fantasy of earlier libidinal liberationists, bursting through repression and economic rationality, an eruption of the libidinal in the factory or office cubicle or delivery van – does not seem to capture the smooth functioning of porn consumption (and porn production and sex work) within the workaday realities of the contemporary economy. Today, the widespread accessibility of porn is no longer taken to be the "filthy commerce with oneself" denigrated by anti-masturbation campaigners of earlier centuries, but a salve for loneliness and boredom in conditions of antisocial capitalism.[86] Pornography use has

85 Preciado has a complicated relationship with psychoanalysis, explicitly distancing himself from it but also drawing on elements despite himself. As Webster argues, his project and the critique of libidinal economy are not really at odds: "Somato-Militancy: A New Vision for Psychoanalysis in the Work of Paul B. Preciado," *Paragraph* 46, no. 1 (2023): 124–41; "Memento Mori: The Book as a Cut," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 17, no. 1 (2016): 14–18.

86 Here, we can acknowledge the contemporary "no fap" anti-masturbation movement as a marginal cultural formation, born precisely as a reaction to porn's quasi-sanctioned mainstream availability. We can note their pleasure in renouncing pleasure, a formal similarity with the religious movements associated with earlier anti-masturbation campaigners that often see the two groups compared. These cultural movements overlook the achievements of masturbatory pleasure in Darian Leader's estimation: "we learn how to use phantasy quite early on in life, as we coordinate our daydreams to manipulation of the body. It's quite a feat,

become more mundane, less exceptional. As Mari Ruti pointed out before the pandemic, the common practice of using internet porn to "take a break" from work and other demands – that is, "to recharge one's ability to tackle the next task or to endure the dullness of the day" – is maximally efficient: "you take your break, you satisfy your desire while neatly sidestepping the (potentially time-consuming) tangles of intersubjectivity, and then you go right back to 'producing.'"[87] This recalls, unexpectedly, a passage from Plato's *Symposium* in which Aristophanes speaks about the functional role of homosexual intercourse in that era: "when a man embraced a woman, he would cast his seed and they would have children; but when a male embraced a male, they would at least have the satisfaction of intercourse, after which they could *stop embracing, return to their jobs, and look after their needs in life*."[88] In these examples, the sexual release is used to prop up the Other, enabling participation in social and professional functions, living up to expectations and perhaps supporting the identifications that keep the subject up and running in its roles (e.g., a good and productive worker).

In opening a browser window to a wall of fleshy thumbnail images ready to be stirred into action with a click, the user's libido is not repressed or delayed in its sexual gratification. As Preciado sees it, the excitation-frustration chain is ultimately slackened and temporarily returned to quiescence – yet at that moment, capital derives its surplus and readies for the next round, following the rhythmic circuit "excitation-capital-frustration-excitation-capital," echoing Marx's general formula for endless capital accumulation: "money-commodity-money."[89] Preciado notes this as a model of post-Fordist consumption in general (other industries have "porn envy") and a specific mode of production, "a masturbatory temporization of life," the "ultrarapid diffusion of information, a continuous mode of desiring and resisting, of consuming and destroying, of evolution and self-destruction."[90] Frustration and loss are hallmarks of the libidinal – and porn's purpose, as Preciado sees it, is producing

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after all, to make a significant moment in a story we are picturing coincide with an orgasm. This requires a very complex set of cognitive and physical skills, and it has even been described as a milestone in sensorimotor development, like learning how to write or tie one's shoelaces. As we learn how to build and use masturbatory stories, we are also learning how to identify with characters, how to be other people, which is arguably something we need in order to read and relate to the world more generally" (*Is It Ever Just Sex?* (London: Penguin, 2023), 183).

87 Mari Ruti, *Distillations: Theory, Ethics, Affect* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2018), 105.

88 Quoted in Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One in: On Comedy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 188. Emphasis added.

89 Preciado, *Testo*, 271–72.

90 Preciado, 41, 271.

"frustrating satisfaction" or, to quote multihyphenate artist and sometime experimental porn actor Lydia Lunch: "I sell frustration, not relief."[91]

As Freud theorised, sexual drives initially find satisfaction in the subject's own body (autoeroticism). They are delayed in finding an object, which means they can lead to a closer relationship between sexual drive and fantasising – where the circulation of pornography offers itself as a medium of libidinal gratification, a smorgasbord of niche and privately enjoyed content. Studies of online porn users suggest they interrupt one video and replace it with another, shuffling fantasy worlds to find their path to climax. What might be at stake for subjects in this widespread take-up of such material? "Fantasizing about intensified feeling can be a way of imagining the thrill of sexual or political control or its loss, or," Berlant writes, "conversely, a way of overwhelming one's sexual ambivalence or insecurity with a frenzy of representation."[92] Berlant here puts pornography in dialogue with the chaste romance plot in popular culture, suggesting viewers of both have multifarious purposes connected with fantasy life and desire, navigating between reality and pleasure principles.

Freud's concern about intoxicants, particularly in situations of addiction, was that they gave free rein to the pleasure principle over the reality principle. As Freud sees it, a contradiction stems from these two principles of mental functioning. The "pleasure principle" seeks to eliminate tension by fulfilling our desires. For example, when we are hungry (a state of unpleasure), we eat to satisfy our hunger and experience pleasure. However, if we constantly fulfil all our desires (if the buffet never closes), we will be stuck in a cycle of excitement and exhaustion, making it difficult to accomplish anything. This is where the second principle, the "reality principle," comes into its own: it involves delaying gratification and conserving energy to manage the tasks of life. The more we internalise this principle – the more we sit in the state of frustration – the more control we have over ourselves and the world. Freud describes how, when libidinal energy reaches a certain level (unpleasure), this can be satisfied either autoerotically, as modelled in those early stages of life, or by finding an external object, which will entail some reality testing. Fantasising, however, is exempt from reality testing, thereby obeying the pleasure principle. Reflecting on these principles, Jamieson Webster suggests that "we try to master ourselves, self-regulate our access to pleasure, defend against pleasure that has grown too intense" but find ourselves in "a losing game."[93] Indeed, moment by moment, day in, day out, this is a lot of psychic work.

Religious myths about renouncing earthly pleasures for future rewards, such as those in the Protestant ethic, echo the apparent transition from Freud's "pleasure

91 Preciado, 304, 265.

92 Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (NY: Punctum, 2012), 96–97.

93 Webster, *Conversion Disorder*, 31.

principle" to the "reality principle."[94] Although often presented in this way, as if the pleasure principle was a primitive compulsion checked by the later development of the reality principle or – in some accounts of libidinal liberation – as if pleasure and reality are opposed, the point is that they exist in dialectical tension, in a relationship of dependency.[95] At the same time, the relation between pleasure and reality principles is not fixed and ontological but historical, which means it is social, changeable, and analysable in these terms: that is, as "an historical becoming of the relation between pleasure and desire."[96] This further implies that – in tracing a development of pleasure and desire – drives and the libido are changeable and subject to historical modification.

The contemporary porn industry's precise online data gathering, for instance, produces a welter of proprietary research about people's access to pleasure. "Year in review" stats from PornHub consistently show over recent years that the two busiest periods on the site are those of the postprandial lull (1 pm–6 pm) and after dark (9 pm–2 am); other appetites are presumably fed between 6 pm and 9 pm. If for the sake of argument we assume the site's users work ordinary business hours, then those enjoying after dark are following a traditional, morally severe Protestant ethic: the subject should focus on performing productive tasks throughout the workday rather than taking the pornographic detour, which can instead be the delayed gratification of a day's work, perhaps even following other imperatives to "de-stress" and aid insomnia or sleep anxieties.[97] The midafternoon porn browser, by contrast, is the one

94 Freud, *SE*, XII: 213–226.

95 Stiegler, *Lost Spirit*, 45.

96 Stiegler, 46. Herbert Marcuse, for example, names the "performance principle" as the reigning reality principle of the twentieth century. It includes the pay-off for the readiness to always perform the functions desired by and for capital: "under its rule society is stratified according to the competitive economic performances of its members. It is clearly not the only historical reality principle: other modes of societal organization not merely prevailed in primitive cultures but also survived into the modern period." Nevertheless, "the performance principle, which is that of an acquisitive and antagonistic society in the process of constant expansion, presupposes a long development during which domination has been increasingly rationalized: control over social labor now reproduces society on an enlarged scale and under improving conditions" (*Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (London: Routledge, 2023), 33). The sacrifice in Marcuse is not to "civilisation" as Freud put it, but rather to specific economic interests and instrumental rationality.

97 Max Weber quoted the Puritan minister Richard Baxter to encapsulate the ethos: "keep up a high esteem of time; and be every day more careful that you lose none of your time, than you are that you lose none of your gold or silver. And if vain recreation, dressings, feastings, idle talk, unprofitable company, or sleep be any of them temptations to rob you of any of your time, accordingly heighten your watchfulness" (*The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (London: Penguin, 2002), 231n14).

"drawn into the neoliberal game of keeping up with a multitude of practical, psychic, emotional, and work-related pressures."[98] Overworked by work and more besides, this is close to a capitalist consumer ethic, a type of impulse shopping: "spending not saving, self-gratification not self-denial, the pleasures of consumption rather than the dignity of labour."[99]

In the reality principle of rational asceticism and self-command central to the earlier capitalist spirit described by Max Weber and Adam Smith, emotional suppression was required for future goals to be prioritised over an urgent desire.[100] Yet those goals, in contemporary crisis times, can be difficult to glimpse or, in the case of climate change, can be outright terrifying. Goals, whether collective or individual, become more challenging to commit to and it becomes more difficult to believe in the worth of self-denial in the present; the desperate spectacles of self-denying fitness influencers and tech entrepreneurs only attest to the crisis of mass investment in the old mythos. The ascetic denial of satisfaction via consumption recedes with this missing horizon; gratification collapses into the present or near future. Objectively – which is to say, following the reality principle – accumulation and hope through the subject's denial no longer seem to be wise bets. Agentive futures feel barred. What is the subject's sacrifice, foresight, industry, application, constant effort and purpose for, if, beyond the passing esteem and recognition of a job well done, or the transient power and recognition of wealth, all are hostages to the fortune of a grim future in which even the wealthy will burn with the koalas, jobs are all gig work and the prospects of economic growth, on which so much is premised, are serially revised down?

To take the question from the other side of the ledger, what, in the end (times), is the economic utility of all this libidinal enjoyment? In recent years, human resources researchers have empirically investigated this topic. As the true libidinal economists of our time, they concluded: "employees experience a 5% increase in mood at work the next day for each time they engaged in sex the previous evening."[101] The contem-

98 Ruti, *Distillations*, 106.

99 David Bennett, *The Currency of Desire: Libidinal Economy, Psychoanalysis and Sexual Revolution* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2016), 44. "Spending" was the Victorian-era metaphor for orgasm. The colloquial "I'm spent" also carries this implication.

100 Jack Barbalet, *Weber, Passion and Profits: "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 117.

101 Keith Leavitt et al., "From the Bedroom to the Office: Workplace Spillover Effects of Sexual Activity at Home," *Journal of Management* 45, no. 3 (2019): 1185–86. Amusingly in this context, they also write that "an editorial commentary in the *Academy of Management Journal* titled 'What Makes Management Research Interesting, and Why Does It Matter?' notes that sex and stock options are topics that immediately generate interest" (1174). Of course, "sex" and masturbation with pornography are different activities. These researchers focus on married couples and "intercourse," by which they seem to mean penetrative sex as they oppose this to "oral sex or other forms of stimulation" (1177). They are largely interested in the mood and

porary awareness of libido and its impacts at work is not the upshot of our especially enlightened, liberal, sexually positive 21st century. Henry Ford, the factory boss of 20th-century American capitalism, suggested that when married working-class couples have a good sex life, workers become more productive and easier to manage.[102] Centuries earlier, political economists such as Bernard Mandeville pointed out how sexual vices and self-interest were compatible with the common good of economic development – (female) prostitution, for example, was a vice and an urban blight but was ultimately helpful to business.[103] What emerges here, in elite libidinal economic management, "is the link between exploitation and enjoyment, the reproduction of the relations of domination by means of the production of enjoyment." This is the exploitative nexus of *power-enjoyment*: "in their seemingly private enjoyment, subjects work for the system."[104]

While sexuality's imbrication with the market is not new, what has changed is its intensity and scale, as Preciado suggests. After all, our era is one in which global infrastructures – such as undersea cables and 5G technologies – have been built up in part to support porn consumption at the highest possible definitions with minimum lag and the ostensibly unwelcome frustrations of buffering. Sexual markets, commodification and consumption are now vast, involving millions of people around the globe in production and circulation – and millions more in their consumption. As capitalism faces roiling crises and capitalists go hunting for commodities to create surplus-generating inputs, markets linked to sexual products and services are a continuing zone of profit. These are multifarious, selling: *relationships* (dating apps, forced marriages, sex tourism); *expertise* (sex therapy and self-help); *objects* (drugs and sex toys); *representations* (pornography and advertising); *bodies* (sex work); *people* (sex trafficking); and *life* or *contraception* (reproductive technologies – IVF to birth control to offshore surrogacy). All this commerce is worth hundreds of billions of US dollars annually. All of it has been criticised on multiple fronts, including its elements of economic exploitation, sexual oppression, capital accumulation, organised

physiological (hormonal) responses of this interpersonal intimacy. As Leader (*Is It?*, 7) points out, in pornography, characters typically do not show loyalty to others. There's a lack of prior commitments or emotional connections, which contrasts with relationships where loyalty and emotional bonds are significant factors; even the brief hook-up at a party or organised by app (etc.) carries an extra dimension that is not present in screen-based recorded media – a dimension of bodies colliding with bodies, sometimes physically, always affectively.

102 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 296. This is from the section on "Americanism and Fordism," which includes several fascinating passages about sexuality and gender.

103 Dana Kaplan and Eva Illouz, *What Is Sexual Capital?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022), 50–51.

104 Tomšič, *Labour*, 15

crime, forced migration, and unequal development, as well as racism and gendered violence.[105]

This generalised commodification of sex and bodies – "the finest consumer object"[106] – only confirms critics' longstanding warnings about capitalism's grip on increasing areas of human intercourse. The point Lacanian critiques have offered of contemporary sexualities is that whenever we most consider ourselves to be liberated in comparison to previous generations, we are being directed to desire in line with the desire of the symbolic (or big Other), both through the direct monetisation of our desire via goods and the indirect monetisation of our desire through increased productivity.[107] Historically, some have traced "sexual liberalism" – not liberation – to the era that began in the 1960s in many Western countries. This new regime encouraged a liberal sexual subject, particularly among men. Literature and popular culture were decensored, while pornography came to be viewed as a source of sexual knowledge. These liberal subjects embraced sexual pleasure and sexual consumerism: seeking self-fulfilment and self-actualisation, they became self-educators, bettering themselves through the sexual encounter. This liberalism spread, shaping gender norms and consumer behaviour, despite challenges from feminist and LGBTI+ movements that sought to counter the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and promotion of individualistic attitudes towards sexuality.[108] The "sexual wellness" devices with which I opened this chapter offer twenty-first-century visions of this sexual liberalism: typically marketed to individual women as forms of sexual education, enlightenment and pleasure, they offer, via what the brand Lioness calls "sexperiments," biofeedback and machine learning optimisation to improve – or have "smarter" – orgasms. This image of both reification and utopia, of capital and new frontiers of pleasure, only reiterates the point that the human is the libidinal creature that subjects its sexual pleasure to cultures of (quasi-)scientific reflection but also to data capture – to a melange of wellness, science and venture capital.

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105 This paragraph draws from the expert summary and reference list in Ken Plummer, "Sexual Markets, Commodification, and Consumption," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Oxford: Wiley, 2017), 1–4. We could add here the spate of twenty-first century reality TV franchises (*Love Island*, *Too Hot to Handle*, *FBOY Island*, *Dating Naked*, *Naked and Afraid*, *Naked Attraction* and so on) organised around competitive relationships, frustration, titillation and moralism – the winning capitalist mix of prurience and puritanism.

106 Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1998), chap. 8.

107 Ruti, *Distillations*, 106.

108 See Ben Mechen's work: "'Instamatic Living Rooms of Sin': Pornography, Participation and the Erotics of Ordinariness in the 1970s," *Contemporary British History* 36, no. 2 (2022): 174–206; "Dirty Magazines, Clean Consciences: Men and Pornography in the 1970s," in *Men and Masculinities in Modern Britain*, ed. Matt Houlbrook, Katie Jones, and Ben Mechen (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2024), 253–68

In the capitalist universe, it often seems "there are only commodified pleasures."[109] For some, however, this contemporary sexual-cum-libidinal variety still marks a liberation, despite capital's role. These are tensions long explored in feminist, queer and gender studies: the difficult tangle of repression and progress, co-optation and radicality, market and deviance, pleasure and exploitation – all of this under the bigger question of sexuality as a site of politics, or the expanding and contracting of pleasures in exchange societies (aka "the capitalist paradox").[110] In the French (male) tradition of libidinal economy – Pierre Klossowski, Georges Bataille, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – this tension concerns whether it is possible to "render libidinal economy as a counter-economy."[111] For Lyotard, no counter-economy exists in global capitalism. Whoever "does not want to recognize that political economy is libidinal," Lyotard writes, "reproduces in other terms the same phantasy of an externalized region where desire would be sheltered from every treacherous transcription into production, labour and the law of value." He suggests this is the "phantasy of a non-alienated region."[112] For Lyotard, this is at once a spatial, psychic and physical truth in his polemic against Western philosophy, anthropology and sociology: there is no spot for us to retreat to, withdraw to or celebrate for its nonalienation or its shelter for free, direct libidinal expression.

Lyotard and others in the line of libidinal economy ultimately question what is generated in a capitalist matrix of exchange and, by implication, what might escape that matrix. It is a matrix in which, Noys writes, "living bodies become the material which capital posits as its ground and [which] play an unstable role as a recalci-

109 Tomšič, *Labour*, 188.

110 To indicate a few recent works that have taken up these questions again: Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*; Kaplan and Illouz, *What Is*; Nona Willis Aronowitz, *Bad Sex: Truth, Pleasure, and an Unfinished Revolution* (NY: Plume, 2022); Jayne Swift, "Toxic Positivity? Rethinking Respectability, Revaluing Pleasure," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 3 (2021): 591–608; Angela Jones, "Sex Positivity: A Black Feminist Gift," in *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies*, ed. Nancy Fischer, Laurel Westbrook, and Steven Seidman, 4th ed. (NY: Routledge, 2022); Bracewell, *Why We Lost*; Berg, *Porn Work*; Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke UP, 2014) For a classic collection covering the "capitalist paradox" of pleasure's dilation: Ann Barr Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (NY: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

111 Noys, "'We Are All Prostitutes,'" 176. Another French iteration of the libidinal economy debate is the feminist one around Irigaray and Cixous, which concerns the question of an economy of generosity rather than scarcity. For example, the scarcity thesis in Freud contributes to his understanding of abnormal narcissism as an overallocation of libido to the self, leaving less for outward investment. See Teresa Brennan, *The Interpretation of the Flesh: Freud and Femininity* (London: Routledge, 2002), 75.

112 Jean-François Lyotard, *Libdinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993), 107.

trant and problematic 'base.'" In other words, living bodies are turned into sources of value, an operation resting on the flesh and materiality of sex.[113] So the problem of the critique of the libidinal economy remains: namely, imagining "a liberation that interrupts rather than replicates a capitalist logic," the logic that everywhere transforms "the body from mere material into a mere resource for exploitation."[114]

Continued collective conceptual labour

The usual charge *against* psychoanalytic cultural and social theory is that it is not viable to generalise from the individual to the collective, the clinic to the social. But this misunderstands the task of such an approach, which is, rather, to "show how individuals get initiated, drawn into, 'seduced' by, the ways in which historical forms of life have – always precariously and provisionally – come to terms with fundamental impasses plaguing human flourishing more generally."[115] In this chapter, we have seen that late capitalism has a certain shamelessness in extracting value from the lustful, drawing from and on the libidinal impasses of its subjects in crisis times – including their pains and their attempted remedies at the level of the flesh. In the other chapters, we have also seen the regular seesaw from the *libidinal* economy to the libidinal *economy*. I have touched on some of the ways the libidinal is capitalised upon, while many other contributors to this volume have explored how capital is (always already) libidinised.

In closing, I want to recall that the impetus for this edited volume came from noticing the term "libidinal economy" – or variations on it, such as "psychic economy" – had popped up again, partly in response to the Global Financial Crisis of 2007–8 and the subsequent interest in debt and finance. This re-emergence suggested the appeal of such concepts to deal with the ever-starker crisis tendencies and their subjective implication and fallout in capitalist societies. That the idea of the libidinal economy might be doing some interesting new work was apparent in its appearance in writing of various sorts in recent times: critical political economy; re-engagements with Lyotard's infamous text, particularly in the cultural politics of the accelerationists; Lacanian psychoanalytic critique; queer theory; critical accounts of sex work; afropessimism / antiblackness; cultural criticism's fascination with affect; libidinal "ecology."[116] There has been a whole sweep of thinking, then,

113 Noys, "'We Are All Prostitutes,'" 180.

114 Noys, 180.

115 Santner, *Royal*, 73.

116 In addition to those already cited, see, for example: Amin Samman and Stefano Sgambati, "Financial Eschatology and the Libidinal Economy of Leverage," *Theory, Culture & Society* 40, no. 3 (2023): 103–21; Angus Cameron, Anastasia Nesvetailova, and Ronen Palan, "Wages of Sin?: Crisis and the Libidinal Economy," *Journal of Cultural Economy* 4, no. 2 (2011): 117–35; Earl

about bodies, the flesh and desire, or the psychic life of the economy. This has joined a renewed and reinvigorated interest in the psychosocial impacts of capitalism's current regimes, and a desire for a revenant critique of libidinal economy. The conference in Berlin aimed to weave together these threads to see what patterns would emerge. Inevitably, not all the critiques of libidinal economy could be addressed in the conference, or this book, and those included here have skewed towards the Lacanian, Deleuzian and Lyotardian versions of the term. Equally, some have explored conceptual and philosophical lineages that are precursors of this libidinal economic thought – Spinoza, Cavendish, Ibn Sina, Marx and more.

The work on these realms continues, with two other books published shortly before this one: the first, from a similarly titled conference that ran in the UK a year or so after the Berlin event; the second, a co-authored volume proposing a theory of global libidinal economy.[117] As such, the current collection can be seen as contributing to a broader, collective conceptual labour on libidinal economy that emerged after 2007 and that continues a decade and a half later, just as the crises continue apace. The present volume has been curious about the most fruitful inquiries in these various fields, remaining committed to theoretical pluralism to explore this manifold and nebulous category – hence, too, the plural "economies" in the title. It

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Gammon and Duncan Wigan, "Libidinal Political Economy: A Psycho-Social Analysis of Financial Violence," in *Global Political Economy: Contemporary Theories*, ed. Ronen Palan, 2nd ed (NY: Routledge, 2013), 205–16; Maureen Sioh, "Manicheism Delirium: Desire and Disavowal in the Libidinal Economy of an Emerging Economy," *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 7 (2014): 1162–78; Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010); Frank B. Wilderson, *Afropessimism* (NY: Liveright, 2020); Ashley Woodward, "'White Skin': Lyotard's Sketch of a Postcolonial Libidinal Economy," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 51, no. 4 (2020): 337–51; Aaron Schuster, "One or Many Antisexes? Introduction to Andrei Platonov's 'The Anti-Sexus,'" *Stasis* 4, no. 1 (2016); André L. Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (NY: NYU Press, 2020); Barbara Markowska, "Homo Libidinous and the Economy of Desire: Reading Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money* after Freud," *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 4 (2018): 485–98; Bara Kolenc, "Voyeurism and Exhibitionism on the Internet: The Libidinal Economy of the Spectacle of Instanternity," *Filozofski Vestnik* 43, no. 3 (2022); Alessandra Campo, "Pierre Klossowski's Libidinal Economy," *Vestigia* 3, no. 2 (2022): 7–21; Ilan Kapoor, ed., *Psychoanalysis and the Global* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018); David Hancock, *The Countercultural Logic of Neoliberalism* (London: Routledge, 2019); Jordan Osserman, "'Gay Culture Rampant in Hyderabad': Analysing the Political and Libidinal Economy of Homophobia," in *New Voices in Psychosocial Studies*, ed. Stephen Frosh, Studies in the Psychosocial (Cham: Springer, 2019), 179–93; Mark Fisher, *Postcapitalist Desire: The Final Lectures*, ed. Matt Colquhoun (London: Repeater, 2021); Luce DeLire, "Full Queerocracy Now!: Pink Totaliterianism and the Industrialization of Libidinal Agriculture," *E-Flux*, no. 117 (2021); Fredric Jameson, "Schematizations, or How to Draw a Thought," *Critical Inquiry* 50, no. 1 (2023): 31–53.

117 Kapoor et al., *Global Libidinal Economy*; Amin Samman and Earl Gammon, eds., *Clickbait Capitalism: Economies of Desire in the Twenty-First Century* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2023).

has also been intrigued by the sources of libidinal economy's return, while moving beyond the basic observation that the fallout of the financial crisis is the sole cause of interest in the idea. Something is afoot, but we do not quite know what it is. As the preceding has explored, the libidinal economy in capitalist crises touches on areas of deep significance for understanding contemporary life. The chapters in this volume have continued that exploration of life in all its pleasures and pains.

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