

Maxi Wallenhorst
**Like a Real Veil,
Like a Bad
Analogy:
Dissociative
Style and Trans
Aesthetics**

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e-flux journal #117 — april 2021 Maxi Wallenhorst
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Am I even real? is a cringe question to begin with because, even as a rhetorical one, it doesn't seem worth asking. Its cheap thrills, however, point to the fact that sometimes, your feelings are *not* valid. By "your feelings," I mean, among others, mine when they don't feel like mine. By "sometimes," I mean a kind of frequency that is hard to tie to the level of the anecdotal or the structural. To say that some feelings are not valid, contrary to the assessment of pastel infographics, is not to say that they are *really*—unblurred by an edgy reading—something else. They are not valid in the sense that they, formally, do not pass as personal, not even to yourself.

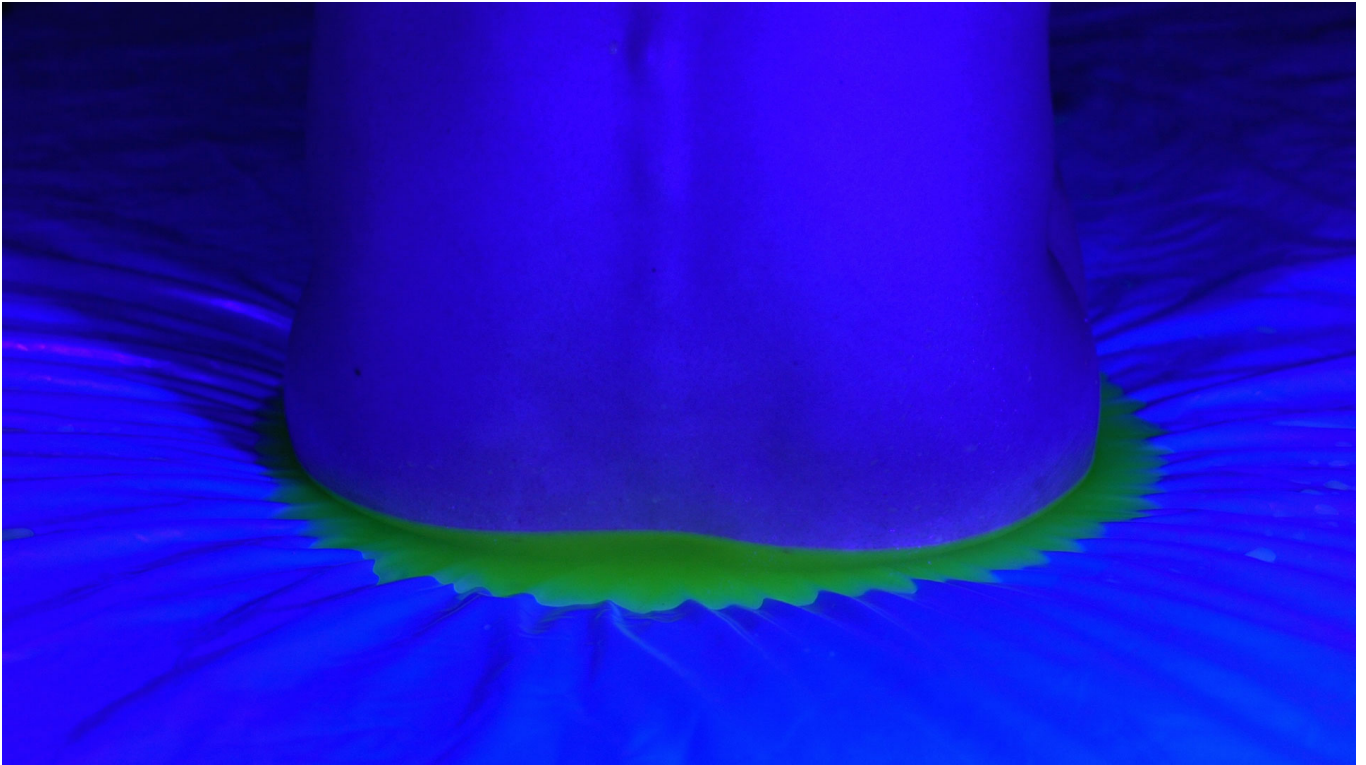
We tell ourselves stories in order to live, but what if these stories are too pulpy? The word "dissociation" is increasingly used to describe episodes in which feeling doesn't feel like feeling, in which it can't sufficiently get across the effects of personhood on the one hand and reality on the other. In 1845, fifty years prior to the proper invention of dissociation as a distinct pathology, the psychiatrist Jean-Étienne-Dominique Esquirol paraphrases one of his patient's experience of the world like this: "Objects do not come to me, they do not identify themselves with my being; a thick cloud, a veil changes the hue and aspect of objects."¹ Which is a lot. In its melodrama, it also resembles a kind of too-much-ness that sounds like ordinary life in a world in which social relations appear as a quality of things, though often out of focus (racial capitalism).

In more recent memes that name-check dissociation, we can see a veil that is not attached to objects but to the sketchy, literally cartoonish form of personhood: it is often surrounding anime or animated characters, mostly SpongeBob SquarePants, splitting them up into doppelgängers, as if they're frozen in movement, casually detached from the animation that is surrounding them in time and space. In another version of this meme, however, SpongeBob has created a real rainbow with his bare hands, captioned as, in the detached tonality of all-caps, DISSOCIATION.

In the affective zone between vibe and (self-)diagnosis, dissociation has become one of the concepts describing complications in linking personal experience to the social world. On this side of a more straightforward pathologization, dissociation is described as something that you realize you're doing during sex, on ketamine, or while trying to remember a childhood. It gets applied to a wide range of situations, from slightly vague episodes deep within the everyday to a blur of threateningly biographic shape.

A relatively paradoxical form sets these accounts apart from some other allegedly

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Vika Kirchenbauer, *UNTITLED SEQUENCE OF GAPS*, 2020. Video still. Copyright: Vika Kirchenbauer & VG Bild Kunst

contemporary feelings: within sentimental genres from the niche meme to the feminist long-read, they manifest an intense lack of intensity – or at least, a lack of a kind of intensity that would indicate significance, presence, or coherence. In this applied use, dissociation – not unlike alienation – functions to make relatable where relation isn't recognizable as relation, especially to the ones who are in the middle of it, overwhelmed.

Which is most of us. The veil feels normal. If everyone knows what it feels like to not feel like yourself, where does it become a problem only some have? The impossibility of scaling dissociation down to such an evaluation, even on the spectrum of pathologization, seems to be part of the missing link. If there is a dissociation mini-trend, then I would suggest it is not a phenomenon from which it is possible to retrieve a new, or bad, or queer feeling with a particularly valuable relationship to “the” contemporary. Dissociation is an archive of *not* feeling it.

Here I want to trace how people, mostly trans people, navigate the shattering and clouding that dissociative language describes as a real layer of life – as it is mediated by anesthetics (not limited to ketamine), and by extension, aesthetics. However, I do not think that the weak descriptor “trans” in itself touches on a distinctly severe or particularly expert variety of dissociation. As Oren Gozlan writes, “If gender functions as a *veil* for the constitutive instability of the subject split by her unconscious, it can be argued that every gender disposition carries a kernel of helplessness, anxiety, and guilt, and therefore it is susceptible to dissociation, splitting, and idealization.”² Gender itself functions as a veil, one would have to polemically add, for the operations of racialization and capital.

If *am I even real?* is one of the cheap catchphrases of dissociative style, it has a particular place in both the internal monologues of gendered imposter syndrome and transphobic hate speech. When being trans is constantly transposed to the tonality of sentimental debatability and scientific diagnosis, *am I even real?* is not just a rhetorical and/or pathological question. It can describe social abstractions that are both part of life and hovering outside of it, blocking access to it. The veil, in this sense, is real. It also hides certain struggles (also real) from others: it is a clichéd veil of loneliness for some but is life-threatening for others. Trans and dissociation both seem like concepts that are most useful in distinguishing a set of situations in their divergence, not necessarily where they overlap or have proximity to each other.

Being good at keeping one's distance, at zoning out in the right moments, is a crucial

technique for hanging out – but how does one get better at it? How do you develop it as a style? As Charlie Markbreiter has put it: “How to wield dissociation so that it makes you more collectively-minded and not less?”³ This is a particularly nontrivial question. Clinical literature often describes the blur of dissociation as a defense that turns into a “collapse of relationality – both intra- and interpersonal.”⁴ The absent-mindedness I'm following around here, however, often can't afford such climactic characterization, as it is involved in figuring out forms of not being alone that are too precarious to break down. Improvising a convoluted collectivity in this way might or might not amount to the kind of world-building that Lauren Berlant, if I remember a 2017 talk correctly, has called a “dissociative poetics.”⁵

When something terrifying happened in front of my eyes two years ago, I wasn't shocked by how I didn't feel anything but by how normal not feeling felt. “But isn't that also part of the trans magic?” a friend offered over coffee. Then we went to join a protest for trans rights in front of the US embassy in Berlin-Mitte, even if we both didn't *really* feel it, though we did meet friends. Now I imagine this kind of magic to be the slightly underwhelming cheap trick of letting something disappear, and even though everyone feels as if they know it hasn't, the trick still works, every time.

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Dissociative Symptoms: The Bad Style of Pathologization

In clinical psychology, too, in trauma-based, interrelational, psychoanalytic, and other models, dissociation seems to be an attractive concept not despite but because of its vagueness. Dissociative symptoms are described from the therapy-talk truism to the case study labelled as “severe.” They are often first explained as ordinary or even structural mental processes with which one adapts to the inherent too-much-ness of the social, including where it's internalized – muffling it by keeping certain modes and parts of knowing, feeling, thinking at a distance from each other. In this “normal” sense, dissociation seems to be one way to describe everything that's rounding off the messiness of relations to a relatively functional fantasy of being involved.

Clinically observed at the other end of what

is almost always flattened to a spectrum are cases in which this tips over to what the DSM-V classifies as “dissociative disorder.” One popular idea seems to be that one initially dissociates as a way of zoning out of the traumatic aspects of a relationship in order to not be overwhelmed, and then staying that way. In Dissociative Identity Disorder, formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder (and many things before that), this splitting then is said to manifest as parts and selves oscillating between me and not-me. This “shattering” is often observed along not only lines of sex and gender, but of class, age, and race, too. Depersonalization-derealization disorder, on the other hand, hyphenates other kinds of detachment, from the world, feelings, self, body, everyone you love, etc.

As condensed into self-help talk, the description of dissociative symptoms that evade rigid categorization often invokes feeling trapped in the wrong body. Or, as if on the wrong end of a similarly difficult analogy: behind a glass wall, in a movie, dream, or cloud. If one of the great inventors of dissociation, late-nineteenth-century psychiatrist Pierre Janet, has described dissociation as the inability to tell a coherent story about oneself, it is little surprise that the style in which its symptoms appear is often kind of bad.⁶

It might not feel like a movie, if it did not feel *too much* like a movie, overdone. “Dissociative style” comes across as over-aestheticizing, but to *anaestheticizing* effect. It demands too much emotional performance while doing too little to elicit it. The connections and parallels that dissociative style draws, also the doodles, are unmotivated. “The most common dissociative intrusions include hearing voices, depersonalization, derealization, ‘made’ thoughts, ‘made’ urges, ‘made’ desires, ‘made’ emotions, and ‘made’ actions.”⁷ Here the social form-ness of feeling shines through.

The diagnosis of dissociation is in itself a judgment of affective capacity. It’s an evaluation that a given patient (or person) could potentially learn to be more competent at feeling, which is feeling real, present, and personal. As Abby Stein has pointed out, those who are non-allegorically but literally incarcerated, even when meeting criteria that are in themselves highly biased against them, are often not attributed either the diagnosis of a dissociative disorder and its treatment nor, by extension, the benefit of the doubt of “just not having been themselves” that does legal wonders for some. From infographics to new materialisms, feelings are often presented as unified in form and universal in distribution. Even if squidgy, affect is a resource that everyone has relatively equal access to – if they would just lean into it! Again, it would be to

underestimate dissociative symptoms and the style derived from them to reduce them to failing at this sentimental chore.

The problem of dissociative style points to the social abstractions that are blurring the background: Kyla Schuller shows in *The Biopolitics of Feeling* that affective capacity – the capacity to affect and be affected – is *not* commonly shared, but assigned, split, and kept apart by regimes of racialization and sex difference.⁸ Whether one feels as if they are real enough or whether others feel as if they are real enough indexes real evaluations that appear as social relations. In this sense, the performance of showing off intense relationality, as it manifests in demands from radical vulnerability to vibrant matter, often also gets caught up in the aesthetics of the virtuousness of white feelings.

Dissociated Episode: The Soap Opera of Good Sex

The aesthetics of gender dysphoria, too, are sentimental. Even where it is transposed to an emphasis on euphoria or a universal condition of female fucked-ness, dysphoria entangles the possibility of self-knowledge with feeling intense. Mostly, dysphoria is still coded as a particular way of feeling intense – not fucking and being high, but rather respectable suffering. In a very few parts of the world the medicalization of transition has shifted from the spectral model of the invert, via the singular model of the identity disorder, to a model of gender dysphoria that is supposedly more in touch. In those situations there is now a wider range of anecdotes that one can dish out to doctors (or memoir publishing houses). Getting what you want from having feelings (a prescription; a pronoun) is related to tone-matching the genre conventions of dysphoria.

Some trans activists have argued that gender dysphoria should be considered in the treatment of dissociative symptoms, as a possible cause. It might seem cheap, to turn this hierarchy on its head and instead suggest dysphoria as one particular style of dissociation. Transition can be about wanting to feel better, or hotter, or worse but *differently* worse, but it is also, on a more fundamental level, about changing how life relates to its own story-ness. Without ignoring the limitations of dissociation, where it problematizes the immediacy of feeling, it also nudges the discourse of transition towards its social, or socially awkward, dimension.

Like in sex! Sex can be one of the scenes in which the unfeeling of embodiment steals out of isolation. In Torrey Peters’s novel *Detransition, Baby*, however, it is dissociation, clocked under this name, that both hides and contains the



Elif Saydam, *selfing*, 2020. Detail. Courtesy of Elif Saydam.

possibility of sex that is good in itself and also related to at least “some kind of redemption.”⁹ When Amy, one of three main protagonists, suddenly goes internally AWOL during sex, the narration follows the trajectory of her episode, to sex as well as gender scenes of her partly pre-transition past. Ones in which her acute absentmindedness can’t be told apart from having fantasies. Fugue-like states almost, filled with dreams of switching positions, cross-dressing, being someone else, that, in the precise multi-edgedness of fantasizing, will have turned out to be more than that while also, in the moment, actually keeping Amy from acknowledging them.

At the end of the story, after her transition, this form of dissociation is a guard that Amy is capable of letting down, at least for a while. “For Amy it was the first time she saw herself fucking as a woman without laying a psychic *veil* over whatever sexual scene was occurring.”¹⁰ Going *somewhere* in your mind is of course not just a pre-transition move, or sex-negative self-state. What sets these kinds of being in a fog apart from other kinds of feeling bad, including dysphoria, is that they are also immensely desirable in themselves. Losing a sense of self in one specific way instead of another can be something you want from gendered life, too. Jamie Hood talks about “the sexualization of dissociation” that she terms “fucking like a housewife” – alluding to the depersonalization that heterosexuality, specifically, is so good at edging on.¹¹

But back to *Detransition, Baby*:

“Baby, why are you crying?” Reese had asked. Because some combination of hormones and poppers had made possible the sex that Amy had given up on. The poppers made her too dumb to flee into herself, to send herself somewhere. So there she was with Reese. Not off elsewhere working to see herself as a woman when she lay on top of a woman, or replacing a man with someone else while he lay on top of her. She simply was a woman present with a woman. It felt like some kind of healing, some kind of redemption.¹²

This breakthrough to intimacy that tautologically feels like intimacy is neither separable from nor reducible to some ratio of anesthetics (poppers, in this case) and transition. It is also held by the woman that Amy is sleeping, then crying *with*. Reese, who is also trans, has dated and fucked trans women for longer time and is seemingly capable of *seeing* Amy. Which also means seeing *through* parts of her, but like, “casually.”¹³

A casualness, fermented in trans relationships that can be fucked up, can be saving and also boring (which is to say normal), making possible the trust exercise of leaning into relation without falling into where category is threatening. To break down dissociation in this scene is then not just getting better at being yourself and present, at wanting – although here, it might well be that, and it seems fun. Neither is it just submitting more to not being yourself. To dumb oneself down into being present hinges on an environment where the related/non-relatedness of sexual intimacy is held by a sociality that in turn holds the immediately personal by extending it.

If all this sounds melodramatic that is because it *really* is. Torrey Peters has said that initially, the project of writing *Detransition, Baby* was to address specific trans issues within the framework of a soap opera, a genre characterized by a cheap and sentimental gloss.¹⁴ Counterintuitively, there seems to be something about the complexity of trans life that the novel wants to figure out, including dissociation, that is only appropriately captured under a soapy film. In this scene, on that day, sex is good again, actually. This is not an allegory. But the possibility of fucking through and working around alienation and/or dissociation is itself noncoherent to the point of sometimes feeling unearned, cheap, too much. It is also real. In this scene, to take dissociation seriously means to commit both to the possibility of overcoming some of its parts while making it an art to deal with others. *Dissociative virtuosity* then, I think, includes both managing and submitting to – so power-bottoming for? – something like noncoherence, while neither romanticizing nor vilifying what’s noncoherent about it.

Dissociative Style: Afterwork Non Sequitur

Dissociation does not only take shape as a relatively distinct episode one is able to leave behind by being melodramatic – or not. Skillfully abstracted away from experience, it can also become its own style. A style in which the fact that there are parts which don’t seem reconcilable indicates neither romanticist fragmentation nor pseudo-deconstructive relativism. Their non-integration is not reduced to a formal gesture but becomes a formal infrastructure in its own way – that can hold, for example, the beautiful and the analytic, in their disparity, without collapsing one into the other or approximating them in a collage.

I think of dissociative style as the poetics that shine through a Juliana Huxtable DJ set. When she plays two or more tracks at the same time, that doesn’t mean they are being mixed, even if they match. They drown and sound out

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each other from a distance. Dissociative style is riffing on form itself, that is, “the nonviolent synthesis of the diffuse that nevertheless preserves it as what it is in its divergences and contradictions, and for this reason form is actually unfolding a truth,” but going down this spiral even further, and tending to the violence in nonviolence.¹⁵

At the same time it is also spiraling further into this negativity, tending to, e.g., the violence in nonviolence. One thing that often seems to shift into view, in this way, is a violently depersonalized relation: work, but mostly its absurdity. In one of Huxtable’s poems that is called “WORKING,” we follow a lyrical subject waking up not at home and making her way to work from there, in the tonality of the all-caps flat affect that permeates Huxtable’s poetry. The odyssey to collect “ENOUGH OF MYSELF” plus an outfit, navigating a hangover-veiled New York, culminates in the absurdity that work didn’t really need her that day: “AND FINALLY SAT DOWN AT MY COMPUTER ONLY TO REALIZE NO ONE WAS IN THE OFFICE TODAY AND I HADN’T RECEIVED A SINGLE EMAIL. WELCOME TO SUMMER.”¹⁶ Sometimes, dissociative style feels gimmick-y in the sense that Sianne Ngai has outlined: it seems to have comically bad timing in catching up with its supposed significance, or value. It’s running late for work, or worse, early.¹⁷

In a different vernacular, Nora Fulton’s poem “suqu” opens with the description of a closing shift, the contradictions of which have infested the modality of description itself, as a pun: “I was working at the franchise I’ve never worked at.”¹⁸ She, perhaps almost a lyrical subject, is just about to close up shop as two other trans girls text her that they can relate to “suqu,” a term that the almost-lyrical subject can’t remember ever coming up with. “I love them both, but we have little in common in terms of our transness, so suqu couldn’t have to do with that.” She then drives home – through mist, naturally – to arrive at a party at her apartment that seems similarly blurry:

The light music and soft clamour of people was all around me, and the rent was due. I stood the long flat black box upright below the slatted window. The people who were and weren’t there totally accepted my presence, welcomed me, but I was distracted. I tried to think of everything I’d said to ____ and ____ – in that strange form of trans temporality both of them are much younger than me, but having transitioned earlier, also much older – and I couldn’t remember coming up with some nonce term like suqu to describe something that, years later, would probably seem like the

most obvious and oft-restated component of a world that was, at the point when I had coined it, more unknown than I knew, and deserved a term that constituted more than the entirety of my descriptive capabilities. I was sure I hadn’t coined it and would never coin it. As soon as I woke up the next morning I searched the word and could find nothing; or rather, I found any number of irrelevant meanings, because language rarely helps. I wanted to go back to sleep, but couldn’t, and then could.

Because the word “trans” is a weak descriptor most useful in only loosely relating one situation to another, the kind of sociality it invites often feels particularly crunchy. Fulton’s “suqu” formalizes how the challenge of being trans, but with others, is mediated by a virtuosity in keeping several forms of temporality and knowledge apart. A kind of virtuosity that is vibrating in the only slightly less negative sentence structure of viral tweets à la *just because x is y, doesn’t mean that z*. Just because someone, in non-trans temporality, is younger than you, that doesn’t mean that, in trans temporality, they are not also older. This is not just funny because it satirizes a detached mind game that online teenagers play but it is also funny because it is true. Trans discourse dissociates, too, in that it speaks to a rapidly shifting taxonomy that sometimes indexes an actually existing infrastructure, and at the same time to anti-trans violence that just persists in undoing its groundwork.

The distracting attempt to remember a possible common ground is framed by the end of the workday at the beginning of the poem and then at the end, a kind of sleep that might be more than just reproductive. “The light music and soft clamour of people was all around me, and the rent was due.” From the smudginess of collectivity suddenly, connected via non sequitur, the deadline of property emerges. On the other hand, the “and” syndeton places party and money almost side by side. Constellated in this way, value shows up as something that is derived from and informs social relations, but is also separate, as its own thing. An applied formalism of noncoherency makes it possible to carefully depersonalize narrative so that it can intertwine these two levels of analysis, and life, in their disparity.

Coda

Trans life is clouded and sparkling with a veil of unreality that can be as cheesy as it can be deadly. This veil is real as it is abstracted away from the “assumption that trans women’s very existence *means something* outside itself,” as

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Emma Heaney puts it.¹⁹ The figure of the trans woman supposedly encapsulates a kind of dissociated knowledge that is knowledge not for her but for other people: writers, doctors, and queer theorists, for instance. Heaney shows how a specific transfeminine experience becomes the go-to allegory for the writer's alienation, both from oneself and society. The transfeminine experience is "read as mere allegory and reduced at the same time to the too literal," as Jules Gill-Peterson writes.²⁰ Value is extracted from it, even if it appears as sentimental value, or diagnostic value. If dissociation can be the name of a process that slows down or even freezes the imaging processes of metaphor and that precede this valorization, it is no surprise that it pops up in proximity to this emotional overload.

What does it take to move away from over-stylized readings resembling this transfeminine allegory, e.g., as Grace Lavery puts it, "descriptions of trans as instability, fuckery, or interstitiality that reduce such ontologies to intellectual or aesthetic patterns"?²¹ And how can we at the same time not assume trans experience as something that only appears in the tonality of self-recognition and sincerity? Counterintuitively perhaps, the refinement of a style of analysis that is more scaled to life might include a commitment to the bad analogy, as it points to the anesthetic patterns that are clearly structuring it, too, if painfully or blissfully.

To take noncoherency seriously as an elaborate style, rather than kitsching it down to a constitutive lack or campy gesture, might ultimately hint at a way of describing the complex relationship of gender to value – while facing the challenge that Kay Gabriel has so brilliantly formulated: "to think capital's instrumentalisation of gender without reducing the latter to the former as epiphenomenon or, indeed, a handmaiden."²² After all, as Ngai puts it, sometimes an "abuse of logic ... is required to show how the basic relations and operations of capital work."²³

Weirdly enough, if sometimes dissociation fills in as a word for alienation, where we can wield it collectively, it can also become a word for the messiness of relating that works in our favor. As *The Faggots and Friends Between Their Revolutions* reminds us, "WEAK LINKS IN THE CHAIN ARE LINKS IN THE CHAIN."²⁴ There is a dissociative tension that vibrates in those social relations that make "an association of free people" both more imaginable and also more unimaginable, in the gossipy way, in the sense that they blur what we thought we knew about what feeling real feels like.

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