

WHAT CAN A SOCIAL MEDIA APP DO? PHILOSOPHOSPIRITUAL DIFFRACTIONS ON TIKTOK

by

ELLEN WYNNE

(Under the direction of Donna Alvermann)

ABSTRACT

Gen Z and below stand to inherit an inhospitable world where they are directly affected by climate change, gun violence, and a downturn in the economy. Organized religion may help some cope, but fundamentalism's oppressive structure and lack of critical thought have been instrumental in perpetuating these issues, leading many to abandon it. On the other hand, atheism does not work for everyone, and the position that it is the only rational option are positivist: ideology masquerading as logic. Spiritual communities offer an alternative, but here there is a kind of "anything goes" culture where there is little way of judging ideas. If there is little room to help students work through these issues in the classroom, social media offers a space to engage others in philosophical and spiritual thought. This post qualitative inquiry centers on a four-month period during which I attempted to do exactly that on TikTok.

INDEX WORDS: TikTok, social media, post qualitative inquiry, agential realism

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ELLEN WYNNE

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ELLEN WYNNE

Major professor:	Donna Alvermann
Committee:	Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre Ajay Sharma

Electronic version approved:

Ron Walcott Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School

The University of Georgia

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Problem

I would not be writing these words were it not for my contrary attitude and a history of horrible existential anxiety. Where I might otherwise have been happy to follow the fundamentalist Christianity I was raised with, I deeply resented being told what to think and having my own thoughts dismissed. Even so, contrariness alone might still have allowed me to settle into my own more liberal version of the doctrine; it was anxiety that pushed me to my limit, spurring me to question and poke holes in the beliefs that were critical to my mental well-being.

At age 10, it occurred to me to obsess over my own version of solipsism: how could I know for absolute certain that my whole life and everyone I loved was not merely a dream? Although this fear seemed absurd even to me, I felt as though I was seeing “signs” all around me from my subconscious, wherein I knew it was true. No matter how much time I spent in logical obsession, I could not find a way to prove that my life was *not* a dream. Much to their frustration, my parents did not know how to help me. Fortunately, this seemingly insurmountable problem resolved after about a month when I suddenly realized that I did not really believe it to be true because I did not actually expect to “wake up.”

This crisis was a mere inconvenience, though, compared to what I would face my sophomore year of college. This time, my Developmental Psychology class threw my conception of free will into question, which further undermined my dualist philosophy of mind. What

followed was an entire of year of constant, torturous obsession over free will, philosophy of mind, and the implications for meaning and death.

By that point I had come to think of the literalist Christianity I had grown up with as illogical, and thus baseless; it was not even an option. On the other hand, the positivist dismissal of anything that cannot be physically proven drove me to absolute despair. I could not even settle there, however, because it, too, seemed logically flawed: the heart of my obsession was over the notion that sentience is a product of strictly material reality.

No matter how long and deeply I thought, no matter how many angles I considered, the idea seemed like an absurdity on the level of $0 \times 0 = 1$. Not to mention that I could not logically justify the dismissal things like the near-death experiences; I was familiar with cases where the only “scientific” explanation that stood to reason was that everyone involved was lying. While of course I could not claim to know that was not the case, how was it scientific to claim that it definitely *was*? To make a claim to *the truth* about others’ subjective experiences? Did that attitude not treat reality as contingent upon our ability to prove it?

And yet! I could not help suspecting the works on these experiences of being touchy-feely drivel meant for the old, the dying, and the grieving; where was the academic rigor? How could so many intelligent, educated people be wrong? How could I presume to know better than a neuroscientist about sentience? Surely to do so was to make the same mistake as fundamentalist Christians when they argued against the theory of evolution. I *felt* like I must be wrong, so around again I went, trying one more time to make 1 out of 0.

Even at the time I knew, logically, that my fears had little to do with logic: quite obviously, I was placing far more weight on what I feared than what I had hoped; was this self-torture really so different than what I had done at 10? Had solipsism not felt like the logical

conclusion at that time? Later, I would learn to call the absurdity inherent to strict materialist philosophies of mind *the hard problem of consciousness* (Chalmers, 1995), and that many intelligent, educated people (including, yes, neuroscientists) had made the same arguments long before I arrived at them.

Where was all this information when I was suffering? Neither my private Christian school nor my secular public school had addressed these issues. If philosophy classes were available to me in college, I did not have much room for them in my schedule. More importantly, I seemed to be adept at making up existential issues to torture myself with all on my own; somehow it did not seem like a good idea to put myself in classes where I would be introduced to more (and what's more, obligated to keep thinking about them under threat of failing grades).

One problem had been that the intensity of my anxiety had put me off researching the issues that concerned me entirely: anything that supported my point of view made me feel like I was simply engaging in confirmation bias, while anything to the contrary triggered me to the point that I felt light-headed. But I believe the deeper issue was the bipolar nature of modern western culture; I felt that my choices were faith that abandoned reason, or "reason" that eliminated any possibility of meaning.

How did I find my way out of this impossible conundrum? I took a break from college and found a therapist who validated both my critiques of strict materialism and my suspicion that what I really needed to do was to resist the compulsion to obsess (overwhelming though it was). How silly it seemed that I needed a professional to tell me what I already knew!

And yet, how could I blame myself? How could I have expected myself to feel convicted of my stance when (it seemed to me) the whole world was telling me I was wrong? To counter the horrible weight of anxiety and to forge a philosophical path all on my own? I was simply

relieved that I had made it to the other side alive. And that is the urgency of what I am talking about: I do not think it at all dramatic to say that, had my anxieties not been centered around death in the first place, forget *writing these words*, I might very well not be here at all.

As I think I have made abundantly clear, my crises were not independent, self-contained phenomena (any suggestion to the contrary is meant in jest). While I believe biology played a role (both my mother and maternal grandfather suffered terribly from anxiety), I am no genetic determinist; my anxieties (especially their content) came out of social forces on the levels of both local communities and the broader cultural context those communities existed within.

Sadly, I do not see that much has improved regarding the hegemonic binary of religion/atheism. And if the rift between these two positions has not exactly widened, I still feel justified in saying that the kinds of existential issues I faced are more pressing now than they were when I was struggling with them, especially for Gen Z (those born from 1997-2012) (Dimock, 2019), and following generations.

The reason for this is that the world of 2022 is more hostile than the one of 2008 when my worst crisis occurred; this downward spiral shows no signs of stopping, and the grim future faced by the generations below me bring anxieties about meaning and death to the forefront, even for those who might otherwise not think much about them.

If I found it easy to deny climate change in the now distant year of 1998, increasing instances of catastrophic weather events have made this luxury unavailable to modern youth (Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Tyson et al., 2021). Where the 1999 school shooting at Columbine High School was anomalous and shocking, mass shootings at schools (and beyond) have become routine, to the extent that many feel their only options are desensitization and despair (Abrams, 2022; Graf, 2018; Gramlich, 2022). A pre-existing downturn in the economy has not been helped

by the crisis caused by COVID-19, a pandemic the likes of which was unseen even by the Baby Boomer generation (Parker & Igielnik, 2020).

If organized religion is a comfort to some, the blind eye it turns to many of these issues seems only to be exacerbating these problems, and indeed seems to have played a role in how we got here to begin with (Delio, 2021; “Religion and views on climate and energy issues,” 2015; “White evangelical Protestants less likely to have been vaccinated for COVID-19 than other religious groups,” 2021); Christianity is also on the decline (“In the U.S., decline of Christianity continues at rapid pace,” 2019), leaving many struggling to come to terms with their loss of faith.

But if Christianity has contributed to many of our current existential woes, I would ask those who think its disappearance might save us to consider how, exactly, viewing the earth as an inert thing to be used to our benefit has helped matters (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947/1972). That is not even mentioning the role of greedy corporations who push neoliberal ideology focusing on individual action to obscure their own overwhelming responsibility (Hinchey & Konkol, 2018; Stoner, 2021); while this ideology may have felt empowering three decades ago, their failure to deliver on their promise of a greener future is increasingly obvious.

Research seems to support the characterization of Gen Z as hopeless (“U.S. surgeon general issues advisory on youth mental health crisis further exposed by COVID-19 pandemic,” 2021; Schaeffer, 2022); where can they find support? Therapy may be a boon for those with access to it, but, as it can be expensive, even those whose families have the means may be prohibited by parents. School is a possible site of addressing concerns, but since standard curricula are more focused on making students test-ready rather than helping them work through existential issues, even the most well-meaning teachers are limited (Hinchey & Konkol, 2018). This exclusion not only deprives students of the means to deal with their concerns but carries an

implicit message that topics such as philosophy and spirituality are not worthy of study (Hinchey & Konkol, 2018). What can I, someone who am not even a teacher, possibly do to help?

Purpose

Even at my worst, even when every waking moment was colored by a mental anguish, even when I did not truly believe I could recover, even then, I thought that if I ever *did* make it to the other side of anxiety, I would be the perfect person to help others going through their own dark night of the soul. After all, if *I* could get better, there was hope for everyone.

But when I finally did recover, I found a roadblock: *how*, exactly, was I supposed to reach people? Become a chaplain? But I was no longer Christian. Write a book? But publication is no easy feat. I felt aimless after graduating from college and further struggled to find my footing after a series of hardships including losing both parents. Even so, I was able to find joy in the little things in my life: music, TV and movies, social media.

Social media. It is characterized by many as a frivolous distraction at best, and there can be no doubt that it has many deleterious effects, ranging from depressing comparison of one's own life with the curated presentations of others (Fox & Verdania, 2016; Maglunog & Dy, 2019; Tosun & Kasdarma, 2019), to contributing to fascism and terrorism through misinformation and echo-chambers (Koro-Ljungburg et. al., 2019; Sampson, 2020).

And yet. And yet it does not appear to be going anywhere anytime soon. And yet these problems cannot be admitted without also admitting the power of social media to influence. And yet here is where I was introduced to terms like *the hard problem of consciousness* and *panpsychism* (Goff et. al, 2001/2022). And yet this was *exactly* the place where I found myself addressing helping others through crises like my own.

My natural habitat is Reddit. Having begun frequenting fandom forums at age 14, the text-based platform catering to a broad variety of interests came easily to me. Even in my aimless years when the future felt blank, I felt a strong sense of purpose in talking to those losing their religion, and/or grieving, and/or just trying to find meaning in the mundanity of everyday life.

If I did nothing else with my life, *that*, at least, meant that my life had not gone to waste. I treasured these interactions, but I cannot say I was surprised to find them. I had spent my days in fandom helping others work through the trials of obsessing over fiction (an existential issue that had not caused me quite as much grief as the others mentioned here), cocreating identity (where before I had felt like the only one who got so hung up on fictional relationships), developing not only my writing style but my skills in literary critique, argumentation, and debate. This previous involvement was something I sought not because I wanted to learn something but because I was passionate and engaged with the subject matter, but, after all, is that not the very context in which learning thrives?

If I excelled at English (my eventual undergraduate major) in school, it was because I had long been engaged in exactly that kind of thought. What's more, I was able to take what I had learned about storytelling and theory back to the forums. I am far from the only one for whom the in-school/out-of-school binary failed (and continues to fail) to make sense (Alvermann et. al., 2007, Alvermann & Moore, 2011).

Yet I have found Reddit to be somewhat limiting. The vast number of users makes it incredibly difficult to stand out and develop an online persona. Not that I need fame, but more popularity would allow me to reach more people at once. Because those whom I am speaking to are usually not familiar with me, I find myself recapitulating my life story, my views, and my references over and over. While this repetition has led me to new thoughts, it is also time-

consuming and monotonous, to the extent that I end up passing by many posts and comments where I think I could be of help.

Not to mention, Reddit's userbase is mainly Millennials like me; Gen Z and those behind them have shifted to more audio/visual platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok (Bytedance, 2019) (Aslam, 2023; Beer, 2021; "Distribution of TikTok users as of September 2021, by age group," 2021; Rodriguez, 2021).

TikTok is a social media smartphone app featuring short videos up to ten minutes long (although most are under three minutes) that play on loop until audience members swipe past them (Geyser, 2022). Upon opening the app, users are immediately presented with the "For You" page where a video will immediately begin playing ("How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou," 2020). Although the experience is somewhat randomized, the algorithm begins tailoring user-experience according to how long the user watches a video and whether they "Like," "Favorite," "Comment," and "Share" videos ("How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou," 2020); users can also "Follow" creators, and they can toggle to a "Following" page where only videos from those they are following appear. Although users can "Search" for specific creators, topics, hashtags, sounds, etc. ("Discover and search," n.a.), these more randomized experiences are featured. Creators have the option of filming directly from the app or uploading videos from their phones. In either case, they can "Edit" their videos in app and choose from a variety of "Filters," special "Effects," and sound clips to enhance their videos (Geyser, 2022).

Despite TikTok's enormous popularity (Aslam, 2023; Geyser, 2022), TikTok has been a controversial app from nearly its inception in 2018 (Geyser, 2022). Concerns centered on how the short video format and swipe affect audiences' attention spans (Fallon, 2022), on censorship

(Biddle et al., 2020; Kelion, 2019), and on privacy: TikTok was created by Chinese company ByteDance, and the app was found to be harvesting user-data that might be accessed by the Chinese Communist Party (Chan & Hadero, 2023). These concerns have led India and Afghanistan to ban TikTok entirely (Murray, 2023), and even in the US, the app was recently banned from government-issued devices (Chan & Hadero, 2023).

The US government has attempted to ban TikTok multiple times starting with the Trump administration (“Factbox: Why a broad US TikTok ban is unlikely to take effect soon,” 2023). The most recent ban-attempt, however, has come paired with the RESTRICT act (2023), which many argue would give the US government almost totalitarian power to decide what apps its citizens are allowed to use; this power would be an infringement upon first amendment rights (Hamburger, 2023; Metzger & Relman, 2023). Why does the government not instead crack down on data harvesting in general, including with US-based platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Kelley & Greene, 2023)?

On TikTok itself, many are arguing that the US hates the app because users’ ability to voice their experiences and concerns disrupts the government and mainstream media’s grip on what information citizens are privy to (@christopherclafin, 2023). For example, TikTokers in Palestine, Ohio documented the environmental effects of the recent train derailment, countering the narrative that attempted to minimize the damage (@thenewboo2). It is precisely this power to counteract hegemonic metanarratives that interests me.

I had first noticed it while doing graduate research for Dr. Donna Alvermann on the use of social justice hashtags on TikTok: despite suppression, Queer content was flourishing: hashtags such as *Queer* and *LGBTQ+* were sitting at over a billion views. I did not need peer-reviewed studies to tell me that social media allowed for the expression of Queer themes because

I had seen it myself: discussion of identity, personal experience, and attitudes on anonymous text-based platforms like Reddit (Triggs et. al., 2019) and even earlier with fanfiction exploring Queer romantic relationships (Llewellyn, 2021). But TikTok's iteration was different: while these textual discussions and fanfictions continue to be critical and have their own strengths (for example, the articulation of abstract ideas), it can feel disembodied, which can lead to an understanding of gender based in feeling.

On the other hand, the TikTokers I saw were constructing their gender identities (or lack thereof) in a more physical way, not only through dress but through physical gesture, vocal performance, and even environment; what's more, these performances were often exaggerated, calling attention to the constructed, arbitrary nature of gender (Wynne et. al, 2021). I could easily see how this more performative (in the colloquial sense) expression led to a more performative (in the academic sense) understanding of gender à la Judith Butler (1993).

I was already familiar with (and a huge fan of) video essayists on YouTube like Contrapoints who call attention to their own construction of gender while simultaneously discussing Queer theory. Undoubtedly, much of Contrapoints' popularity comes from her compelling insight, her razor-sharp wit, and understanding of aesthetic appeal. Even so, she herself admits to being privileged in terms of race, beauty, and financial status (the detailed sets and costumes she employs are not available to everyone, and such staging takes time that not everyone can afford). While of course TikTok does have issues with racial bias, its informality (relative to YouTube) makes it more accessible, and, perhaps more importantly, its somewhat randomized nature makes it easier for new creators to find an audience.

While many do follow their "real-life" friends and family on TikTok, the focus is more on sharing common interests with strangers; although the swiping features does encourage users

to create eye-catching visuals and/or entertaining vocal performances to grab user attention, nothing so elaborate as Contrapoints' presentations are necessary; a cute outfit, skilled dance, or funny impression will do.

Thus, the seed was planted. If I initially felt that I was too old for TikTok or would not be able to stand out, the more I thought about it the more I felt it was exactly where I needed to be, not only because it was Gen Z's preferred platform but because its features would allow me to do what I had not been able to on Reddit: build a persona and an audience. My preferred mode of expression may have been writing, which of course has its strengths, but I did sometimes find myself frustrated by the medium's limitations. Try as I might, words could never completely capture a sarcastic tone of voice, an eyeroll, a shrug. I still believe there are aspects (perhaps whole versions) of myself that can be known only through writing, but the same is true for more embodied expression. At some indefinable point I decided: I wanted to try becoming a TikToker, and I wanted to focus my content on the philosophical and spiritual content that had been so absent in my own times of crisis.

Question

My study is more post qualitative inquiry than research (St. Pierre, 2021) and as such does not have a research question per se. But if I had a *guiding question* going into my TikTok channel, I believe it can be summed up with a question inspired by Benedict de Spinoza (1677/2017): *What can a social media platform do?*

More specifically, what kind of *change* could intra-action with TikTok create? My previous qualitative research with TikTok (Wynne et al., 2021) put me in uncharted territory, as I found little previous research on the app that was not focused on demographic statistics and/or marketing. My research there was focused instead of broad, not only in terms of subject matter

but of level of engagement: I was researching as an audience member. An inquiry where I was *creating* TikToks was not only new for me, it was something I had never seen done before.

There was so much to explore: how might my content affect audiences? Could my intra-action on the app really help them with issues they are struggling with? Of course, I never thought of this relationship as unidirectional: how might audience response change my content? How might TikTok's features influence me? Other TikTokers' content? How might these elements change *me*? of affects, thoughts, and behaviors might come into being as I filmed and edited? I also expected from the beginning that focusing my MA thesis on my channel would have an effect; how could it not? The same would be true for my *expectations*.

Of course, these expectations were not perfect predictions. I have heard it said that one can only truly know oneself through *action*, but for a long time, which did not make sense to me: was I not aware of my own feelings, sensations, and opinions? In fact, the convention "aware of" suggests separation where I felt none; if anything, I did not *know* my own feelings, sensations, and opinions because I *was* them, but I did not think that was what the statement about knowing oneself through action meant. Now, I believe I understand better: I cannot know exactly how I will behave or think in a given situation until it happens; I might even behave and think differently than I had before in similar circumstances. Likewise, the only way to even begin to answer the question, *What can a social media app do?* is to intra-act with it.

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CHAPTER 2

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Post qualitative inquiry.

As previously mentioned, my last excursion into TikTok (Bytdance, 2019) (Wynne et al., 2021) was qualitative research, which means I was writing in terms of *method* and *findings*. Qualitative research was what I knew how to do, but these parameters felt somewhat arbitrary to me. My standards for TikTok and video selection were important to helping me find material that fit my theoretical framework. As I admitted in the article, however, when it came to deciding between multiple suitable videos, personal preference entered into it; ultimately there were no “best” choices. My methods felt more *descriptive* than *prescriptive*, less the objectively right way of doing things and more what *I* decided made sense for what I was writing about.

I believe *post qualitative inquiry* leans into this sense of arbitrariness rather than fighting it, as it is not a method but the *refusal* of method (St. Pierre, 2021). Following the theory of postmodern thinkers like Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze & Guattari, it points to the constructed origin of the methods we often treat like gods or natural laws. This construction is often born from a kind of science-envy and plays into the positivist mindset that science and logic are the supreme ways of knowing, that we should use scientific methods in all disciplines, that this method will give us objective knowledge of the world (St. Pierre, 2012). But how can something created from human subjectivity ever hope to provide objective knowledge?

This stance does not call into question the use of things like the scientific method, which has of course been instrumental in innovation from the vaccine to the quantum computer. It does

argue, however, that even this holy grail of method cannot produce *value-free* knowledge; that is, knowledge that does not include human perspective and biases.

For example, the periodic table of elements frames material reality as constituted by different elements, where the difference between elements is determined by differences in atomic structure: helium atom has two protons, one or two neutrons, and two electrons, while a carbon atom has six protons, six neutrons, and six electrons; these elements behave differently because they have different content and structure. But are separate elements really something that exist “out there?”

After all, these elements are all made of the same parts, the same subatomic particles; would we not be justified in dropping the distinction between elements and speaking strictly in terms of subatomic particles? (Note that even the word “subatomic” points to atoms as the defining unit of measurement.) I do not mean to argue that the periodic table of elements has no relation to reality, nor that it is an unhelpful way of understanding the world.

On the contrary, it exists because it *is* an excellent way for humans to understand, predict, and act in and on the world (including ourselves). The key word here is *human*: this system of categorization comes out of human perspectives and persists because of how helpful it is to *us*. Far from being neutral, it affects our conceptions and our actions. If we did one day decide to focus solely on subatomic particles, perhaps more people would realize how big a role human perception plays in the distinctions we make.

Post qualitative inquiry further argues that pre-established methods *are not the sole valid way of knowing*. The scientific method may be great at what it does, but it does not follow that it is appropriate for *all* research. I believe that it is especially *inappropriate* in matters concerning the subjective experience of others, which is neither quantifiable nor directly observable.

While researching the phenomenon of audience identification with fictional characters, most of the research I found, while compelling, was full of arbitrarily defined concepts and statistics drawn from Likert scales. I could not help feeling that the positivist mindset of these studies limited them. For instance, I saw assumptions being made about *why* participants identified with this character and not that one which, based on my own experiences of identification, I did not think were justified. My experience may be “anecdotal,” but what sense does it make to dismiss subjective experience when the object of study *is* a kind of subjective experience? Did my experience not count simply because I was not a research participant?

In fact, “object of study” is another concept rejected by post qualitative inquiry because it rejects clear boundaries between researcher and researched (St. Pierre, 2017). Returning to the example of identification with fictional characters, how would it be possible for my own experience not to come into it? I realized in my 20s that one reason I tended to identify more strongly with fictional characters than with the people around me because engagement with narrative puts my usual strong sense of self-awareness “on hold,” enabling the line between self and other to blur more easily. Imagine how validating it was for me, then, to see that this loss of self-awareness is central to theory of identification in media psychology (Cohen, 2001; Cohen & Tal-Or, 2010; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2017)! Obviously, I took this claim very seriously, and thought that the theorist must have had a similar experience, or spoken to someone else who had; how else would they come to such a conclusion?

On the other hand, another theory said that audience members do not identify with TV characters because the experience is not as immersive as cinema (Cohen, 2001); I literally laughed out loud at this statement (which thankfully is no longer taken seriously), because *all* my strongest identifications have been with TV characters. To me, that seems natural, because a

movie is something I may watch only once for an hour or so; meanwhile, I return to TV characters over and over, sometimes for years. But again, I suspected that the theorist's own experience is what led them to think that way.

The point is that there is no way I could be unbiased here, nor should I be: why should I *not* include my own experience in my judgments? What would be gained by having only those distant from the subject engage with it? If anything, insight would be lost. For example, when exploring why participants might want to be like a character (which desire is called *wishful identification*) (Cohen, 1999), researchers tended to focus on the idea that they wanted certain traits like confidence and compassion. Not that I find this reason unrealistic but that I felt a crucial aspect of my own experience was missing: the driving force of my own wishful identification has been my love for the characters I identify with. If I am like them, then, in a sense, I *embody* them, which makes them more *real*. For that reason, I been happy to resemble characters I love even when it comes to what many would consider undesirable experiences like jealousy and spite.

Not that my experience is definitive, but can I be unique? If researchers were to include this reason for wishful identification on Likert scales, I believe at least some participants would say that, yes, they have experienced it. Perhaps such a question would shape them into thinking of their experience that way, but my point here is that the experience of the researcher *will* shape the research no matter what they do. Distance, far from making the research more “objective,” can actually impoverish it.

I might simply exclude personal experience from my writing, but what would sterilizing it in that way accomplish? I would very likely only end up repeating arguments others have already made; what makes my point of view different *is* the different ways I arrived at those

conclusions. Not to mention, I *do* believe that to exclude personal details would be to change the meaning; if I can never perfectly communicate perfectly what I mean, if I can never make someone else understand it in exactly the same way I do, then making my argument impersonal certainly will not get me any closer. In my own experience, I have found that people have an easier time engaging with and understanding what I am saying when I *show* them how I got there.

Is it really worth omitting my own experience and interest in hopes of creating an illusion of objectivity? For that is all that could really be accomplished. Even with a less personal subject, I would still have opinions, hunches, and hypotheses; even scientific information is gathered through the five senses, through subjectivity. However well meant, this pretense to “objectivity” amounts to little more than deception, and not very convincing deception at that: are we to believe that the write-ups of scientific research come from the world “out there,” without any human intra-action?

Of course, there are methods that make room for subjectivity; why not try something like autoethnography? My answer is that such a method still attempts to create validity by imposing arbitrary rules on how research must be done, which again, is limiting. I am particularly struck by the notion that analyzing one’s own experience in certain ways makes one’s stories “more valid” and more worth sharing than otherwise (Ellis et al., 2011).

The idea is that such analysis serves the purpose of illuminating broader cultural forces, especially when used with methods like interviewing other members of that culture and referring to cultural artefacts. Again, these methods are arbitrary. For example, this research design may lead researchers to refer only to people and artefacts that match their own experience. They may also discuss possible flaws of the study, but does this not show the weakness of the method? For

this admission shows that validity is not possible; bias and local circumstances always play a role.

Because post qualitative inquiry comes out of postmodern theory, it rejects the sameness created by the fixation on cut-and-paste method in qualitative research; after all, how are we supposed to arrive at new ways of thinking and becoming if we are always repeating ourselves? To attempt to do such research with postmodern concepts is a contradiction, because postmodern thought seeks to destabilize method by showing its arbitrary nature. Philosophy offers not an analytic method that can be turned on and off, but an entirely different way of looking at the world.

For example, Karen Barad's (2007) concept of *intra-action* refers to the idea that no objects or processes exist apart from time and the rest of the universe; the term means "action within" a unified process, rather than "action between" independently existing entities. Ocean tides are created by the gravitational pull of the moon; the moon is held in orbit by the gravitational pull of the earth; the earth, by the gravitational pull of the sun. If what I have just written is an oversimplification, it serves to illustrate my point: none of these entities exist independently of one another. In fact, the moon may well be a fragment of the earth, and both have their origins in the same gas cloud as the sun; the sun continues to constitute the former entities by its radiation. No clear material boundaries exist here, or anywhere else. If I were to write about "examples of intra-action," I would be completely missing the point because I would be implying that there is such a thing as *non-intra-action*. Intra-action is not something that must be looked for but an entirely different way of understanding the universe.

This theoretical focus, then, is what defines post qualitative inquiry: it is *thinking with theory* meant not to *find* objective truth "out there" but to *create* different ways of understanding

the world and being *in* the world (St. Pierre, 2022). Understood through Deleuze & Guattari's (1991/1993) *plane of immanence*, the world is not constituted by "reality" represented "researchers" in their "studies;" researchers and studies are *part* of reality constituted and constituting in relation to everything else. Just as there is no boundary between researcher and researched, neither is there an objective boundary between writer and written, reader and read.

I could not be the sole cause of my thoughts and words unless they randomly "appeared," but if that were the case, how could they have any relation to the world I am a part of? No, my thoughts and words are constituted by forces that precede me, including the theory I have read; firings in my brain lead my fingers to move and transfer energy into the keys on my keyboard (and vice-versa) causing letters to appear on the screen; at the same time, I am reading my writing, feeling tactile sensation where my fingers meet the keys. How, then, can I draw clear boundaries between myself, the theory I have read, and my own writing?

Finally, if creation is the point, then *difference* must come into it. Barad, drawing from fellow physicist Donna Haraway writes, *the new can only come out of the intra-action of difference*. This concept of *diffraction* is drawn from the way waveforms will repeat themselves into infinity if left alone; however, when they intra-act when another wave, parts are cancelled out, parts are amplified, and a new pattern is created. Far from being a mere metaphor, diffraction is how reality constitutes and is constituted whether we are talking about atoms or concepts. To embrace difference is to reject generalization in favor of specificity: *this* person, *this* experience, *this* unique intra-section of *material-discursive* (Barad, 2007) forces (St. Pierre, 2017). Why would I ever want to deny it?

Agential realism

If *what* I am doing here is post qualitative inquiry, then *how* am I doing it? What is my theoretical perspective on my subject matter? An *agential realist* (Barad, 2007) perspective

grounds my understanding not only of TikTok but of the greater reality it exists within; as previously mentioned with the term *intra-action*, the concepts by definition cannot be limited to consideration of a single, independent entity. Even so, at first I disagreed with Deleuze and Guattari's (1991/1993) argument that concepts cannot be taken out of the context of their greater frameworks; is Barad's concept of *intra-action* not perfectly intelligible on its own, without understanding its greater framework of *agential realism*?

Now, however, I think perhaps I understand what they meant: it is not that intra-action as a concept cannot be understood without reference to agential realism but that intra-action carries the rest of the framework with it through logical implication. As previously mentioned, intra-action means that there are no independent objects or processes; everything is connected to, and thus affects (and is affected by) everything else, to the extent that the universe can be thought of as a single process.

If we understand reality in this way, how can we continue to think that humans are independent agents acting on a passive material universe? Agential realism is a posthuman philosophy because it argues that nonhuman forces are agential, and thereby decenters the human. The focus on *process* and *intra-action* also frames agency as *relational*, rather than something one *has*. It is *motion* and *change*, *affecting*, which comes through *being affected*. From this point of view, TikTok is not a passive surface or the object of TikTokers' creations, but TikTok and TikTokers mutually construct each other.

I feel that the application of the word *agency* to what many people would think of as inanimate objects also implies panpsychism, which can be defined as the broad philosophical position that sentience is fundamental and ubiquitous in the universe (Goff et. Al. 2001/2022), because how does *agency* make sense without experience? If we understand agency as the ability

to act (Schlosser, 2015/2019), then can we justify applying the term to strictly material stuff passively following physical laws? Of course, language is arbitrary, and some might make the argument that we can.

I, however, feel that agency implies *intent*, action according to *will* rather than strictly physical forces. Barad is one of many physicists (Vetlesen, 2019) who reject physicalist philosophies of mind that see sentience as a secondary product of strictly physical reality. This tendency of physicists did not come as much of a surprise to me, as I found that *intra-action* logically leads to a panpsychic understanding of the world long before I knew the words *intra-action* or *panpsychism*.

If I may, for a moment, return to my discussion of atoms and subatomic particles, the understanding of all material reality as being composed by the same fundamental qualities led me to the conclusion that sentience does not logically follow from these qualities. Forces like *mass* and *electromagnetism* might engage in all kinds of physical processes and patterns, but they *cannot* produce an entirely new quality like awareness. (Unless, of course, we argue that the universe might operate ways that are nonsensical to humans, but why should we privilege that possibility? If we do so, how can we make *any* judgment about the nature of reality? Why bother with trying to understand in the first place?)

If we seem to perceive all kinds of qualitative difference through chemical intra-action, it is just that: a matter of perception. Thinking of *color*, *sound*, and *heat* in terms of physical energy led me to picture an “out there” that is of one substance moving in different ways; how can *awareness* be understood in these terms?

This logical conundrum is what is meant by *the hard problem of consciousness* (Chalmers, 1995), and, as my experience indicates, it seems to be more obvious to people who spend a lot of time thinking about the universe in its most fundamental terms.

If we come from the understanding that all things are sentient as well as material, then it no longer makes sense to differentiate between *material* and *discursive* forces: all forces are *material-discursive*. My original understanding of this concept was that discursive phenomena make no sense without material ones, and further, there is no such thing as a material phenomenon that is not also discursive or *perceptual*. For example, how could words exist without some sort of physical marking that we can experience with our senses? And is there such a thing as imperceptible material?

Rereading Barad, however, I now believe that understanding was not exactly *wrong*, but incomplete. Barad defines *discursive practices* as those which make an *agential cut*. At first this definition seemed counter-intuitive to me: was Barad saying that there is no such ontological separation “out there?” Then I realized I had come to a similar conclusion. After all, if all of reality is physically intraconnected, then boundaries between entities can only be subjective. What I missed here is that, if reality is always at once material *and* discursive, that means that “out there” is as discursive as “in here,” and even if it were not, “in here” is still a part of what constitutes reality; my point here is that we may consider the subjective forces that make agential cuts as a part of objective reality.

A further point of confusion, though, was the implication that the discursive is defined by separation. On second thought, however, did that not make total sense? My own understanding of *discursive* up to that point was that it had to do with *meaning*. And how do we talk about meaning? Through definition. Had I not realized long ago that the very word *define* had

etymological roots in limitation? “Fine” is from *finite*, so to *define* something is to bound it, to specify, to say that it is *this thing*, different from everything else. Here, it is *discursive* to talk separately about “TikTok,” “I,” and “audiences,” and I will do so to write on my effect on TikTok, TikTok’s effect on me, etc. Again, just because such agential cuts are subjective does not mean they are not real.

Regarding TikTok, the devices it is a part of, the “buttons” it provides on the screen (e.g. “Like,” “Comment,” “Favorite,”), its algorithms, these material forces shape what kind of meaning is created on the app. For example, the app automatically uses the phone’s selfie camera, encouraging users to film themselves as opposed to landscapes or others around them. This focus on bodily representation in turn shapes how we conceive of ourselves; where a text-based platform like Reddit may lead to the identification of self with thoughts, interests, and opinions, TikTok may lead to a more embodied understanding of self that includes the way one emotes through facial expression and voice.

As noted in my introduction of *intra-action*, agential realism argues that there are no clear boundaries between researcher, researched, and measurement apparatus. For instance, when a photon is fired onto a plate to measure its inertia, the photon is now part of the material constituting that plate. If we humans tend to think of ourselves as looking out on the world from within, this perspective is not indicative of what is really happening: perceptual observation is not a detached process but an *entangled* one where observation is a negotiation of boundaries, a process by which we intra-act with the world on a material-discursive level; when we see light, we do not do so from a distance, but that light enters our eyes and triggers a chemical reaction in our brains, which means that literally becomes a part of our bodies. Thus, I know about TikTok

not because I have observed it from the outside, but because it is literally a part of me (and I a part of it).

All perceptual experience can be understood this way. That is why Barad collapses the distinction between ontology (being) and epistemology (knowing) into a single word: *ontoepistemology*. I made this same move independently of Barad and in fact used the exact same word as I argued that *knowing* is what constitutes my *being* (or more accurately, *becoming*) as a material-discursive entity; in other words, I am constituted through the material-discursive process of entanglement, which simultaneously constitutes my physical body and my experience of knowing. In fact, although I suspect I come from a different version of panpsychism than Barad, even in my philosophospirituality *body* and *experience* should not be understood as two separate things.

As previously mentioned, reality *can* be understood in terms of sameness: the same fundamental qualities make up all the universe. How can we reconcile this consideration with the postmodern focus on *difference*? I believe the answer is *diffraction*: the new comes through the intra-action of difference, where *difference* is not at the level of substance but at the level of *process* and *pattern*.

I believe TikTok fits very well into this understanding because it is constantly *becoming*. To begin with, video is a medium that depends on *time* and *change* in image and sound. There is no *finished product* because TikTokers are constantly uploading new content, changing what TikTok is on a material-discursive level. Intra-action on the app is constant, as TikTokers respond to each other in the form of both videos and comments. Many more passive users also engage by *liking* videos, *sharing* them, adding them to *favorites*, and *reposting* them. Not only does this intra-action show TikTokers what content their audiences want to see, it affects what

additional videos are shown to these audience members, as well as how many more people the app shows the video to.

TikTok as an app, then, has implications of *material-discursive intra-action*, *diffraction*, and *ongoing becoming*. Thinking with agential realism leads me to focus on how TikTok, my audience, and I (not to imply that these are really three separate considerations) shape each other through material-discursive intra-action, with a further emphasis on difference and change: in what ways is my content different from the TikTokers I have seen? How have I and my content changed through repeated intra-action with the app? How have my audience influenced me, and I, them? I cannot know *the objective truth* about these considerations, but if TikTok and my audience are part of my ontoepistemological constitution through entanglement, then neither are my notions baseless conjecture.

Philosophospiritality

If TikTok implies an agential realist framework through its mechanisms, *I have also made these themes an explicit focus of my channel*. The central theme of my channel is what I call *philosophospiritality*, which can be understood as a diffraction of postmodern philosophy, agential realism, and spirituality. As to what constitutes *spirituality*, I define it broadly as a focus on wellness and meaning that often (but not always) has an interest in metaphysical considerations such as the afterlife and divination (including practices like astrology and tarot).

In my experience, spiritual communities provide a refuge from both the positivist worship of science and logic and the dogmatism of organized religion. Even so, I often struggle to take them seriously when they devolve into a kind of *anything goes* relativism. *You can have everything you ever dreamed of simply by thinking about it real hard? OK. The earth is a prison we have been thrown into by a malevolent god? Sure, why not?*

To be fair, the latter idea tends to meet a lot of criticism, but I believe it remains persistent because these communities offer little way of how to judge ideas. Without critical thought, these communities are vulnerable to paranoia, commercial exploitation, and perpetuating harmful ideas and practices themselves (e.g. the appropriation of other cultures' spiritualities) (Smith, 2005).

That is where postmodern thought comes in. Much of what I have been doing could be considered Derridean deconstruction, reaching the points at which *things fall apart*, where binaries collapse (Derrida, 1974/1976/1998), in the doctrines of fundamentalist religion, positivism, *and* spirituality. As per Derrida, this deconstruction is not about tearing things down:

Deconstruction is a critical practice that aims to 'dismantle... the metaphysical and rhetorical structures which are at work, not in order to reject or discard them, but to reinscribe them in another way' (Derrida, quoted in Spivak, 1974 p. lxxv). Thus, deconstruction is not about tearing down but about rebuilding; it is not about pointing out an error but about looking at how a structure has been constructed, what holds it together, and what it produces. It is not a destructive, negative, or nihilistic practice, but an affirmative one. (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 482)

Lyotard (1984) defined postmodernism not as a *rejection* of metanarratives but as an *incredulity* toward metanarratives. For if we automatically reject all metanarratives, does that rejection not become its own metanarrative? Does it not imply that we *know* they are *not* true? I do not, however, come from the position that all metanarratives are equal; on the contrary, some (like positivism) fall apart upon closer inspection and/or are harmful to those who believe them and to others around them (including humans, but certainly not limited to them) (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947/1972; Vetlesen, 2019).

I believe that, while *the* truth of metanarratives cannot be known, they are also unavoidable; in that case, the challenge we face is how to judge them and decide which ones to

entertain; it exactly that way of judging that I hope to offer with philosophospiritality. I am particularly focused on the assumptions and implications of beliefs and practices; not that *reason* should play no role, but I am coming from the perspective that, if we cannot know *the* objective truth of reality, then what is healthy for us should play a role in these considerations.

Remember, one purpose of my work is to help others who have been harmed by fundamentalist religion and/or positivism, and who have found new-age spirituality to be lacking regarding critical thought. In service of this purpose, my TikTok channel has been focused on:

- a) Showing how the tenets of both fundamentalist religion and positivism deconstruct
- b) Advancing the possibilities of spirituality to those interested in philosophy
- c) Advancing critical thought to those interested in spirituality, especially through questioning the truth and benefit of popular ideas

Through this focus I hoped to minimize the hold fundamentalist religion and positivism have on people and to argue for spiritualities as valid belief-systems/practices. I chose the word *philosophospiritality* because I wanted an intuitive term that would be easy to say, understand, and remember. If any term is favored here, I believe it is the fully expressed noun *spirituality* rather than the adjectival *philosopho*, and this implication is fine with me: while of course I appreciate the rigor of academic philosophy, the history and jargon can create a high barrier to entry that not everyone has the time or patience to overcome. As such, I do have a focus on making academic philosophy more accessible to lay people, and I believe the term *spirituality* suggests this accessibility.

While I think of philosophospiritality not as a specific set of beliefs but as *any* spirituality that engages critical thought, *my* version of philosophospiritality does include attitudes that some might consider humanist. For example, drawing from anecdotes of mystic

experience (especially near-death experiences), I argue that *love* is a fundamental force in the universe. I do not, however, consider this position to be humanist because I am not emphasizing the human above all else.

In her book *The Hours of the Universe* (2021), theologian Ilia Delio, drawing from Teilard de Chardin, argues that cognitive thought makes humans *evolution made aware of itself*. If I might slightly modify this statement, I see us as *agency made aware of itself*. Drawing further from Delio, I seek to avoid reductionist implications *not* by attributing human qualities to non-human entities but by questioning whether experiences like *love* are uniquely human and by redefining what they might mean. I believe Whitehead was on the right track when he said that the most fundamental kind of experience is *will* (Vetlesen, 2019), but the will *to what*? If I take an agential realist view, I believe we are talking about a will to intra-action, and what I want to do here is to understand that will to intra-action as a form of *desire*, *longing*, and *love* for the other, even down to the smallest particle.

Why does this framing matter? I believe it comes down to the inseparability of material and discursive: if causation is never strictly material but *material-discursive*, then beliefs and attitudes have a material effect on the universe, including ourselves; they are part of the ongoing, universal act of *becoming* by creating the present. If I define intra-active becoming as love, I can see even the smallest particles as persons, persons whom I am entangled with in love as they constitute me.

Touching, listening, speaking, seeing, being seen, all become acts of the self becoming other and the other becoming self, and thus I become more driven to seek them out than I might otherwise. This drive includes the drive to engage with social media. Social media may have terrible destructive powers, but it is also not going anywhere; it has become so deeply entangled

with our lives that logging off is not an option (Sampson, 2020). If our choices, then, are to begrudgingly intra-act with social media as a necessary evil, or to focus on its constructive potential (while still acknowledging its pitfalls, of course), I choose the latter. Doing so drives me to take advantage of that potential, to embrace an intra-active, *loving* becoming with humans, technology, and others.

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CHAPTER 3

“METHODS”

Background with social media & TikTok

First, I want to show how my background with social media and TikTok (Bytedance, 2019) have shaped my approach to my own TikTok channel. But where should I begin? If my *way of thinking/doing* is *agential realism*, I must acknowledge that *no* phenomenon can be completely accounted for: if everything is intra-connected, that kind of total knowledge would require total knowledge of the entire universe all the way back to the big bang (and possibly before that point). Because that kind total knowledge is impossible, I must define some arbitrary limits to my inquiry. Thus, I must limit my inquiry to *my* experience of TikTok, which is still too broad to understand everything.

Although I saw TikTok videos on my PC before I downloaded it on my phone, I mark that download as the beginning of my relationship with the app. If there is no such thing as a “neutral context,” there was never even an illusion of neutrality here: the first time I downloaded TikTok, it was as a research assistant for Dr. Donna Alvermann, who was interested in whether hashtags associated with social justice such as “LGBTQIA” were trending on the app. They most definitely were, and this search not only showed me videos carrying the hashtags but influenced the algorithm to show me more of this content in the future.

I became interested in the many TikToks I was seeing on gender; at the time I was studying postmodern theory, including Judith Butler, and the presentation I was seeing on TikTok suggested an understanding of gender as an ongoing social construction rather than an

essence. What was it about TikTok that encouraged this kind of performance? I suspected a lot of it had to do with its audio-visual nature; while text-based platforms might lead one to focus more on how it *feels* to be transgender and/or nonbinary, TikTok seemed to encourage a more embodied understanding based in signals like clothing and physical gesture (Wynne et. al. 2021).

Because viewers can easily swipe past videos that do not interest them (through a direct physical intra-action of finger and phone screen, I might add, bringing quite a literal meaning to the term *digital media*), might it be the case that gendered performance, especially *exaggerated* gendered performance succeeds because it stands out? Perhaps TikTok encouraged a more social understanding of gender through its features. I was especially interested in those videos that focused on transformation: the construction of a drag look through the application of make-up and dressing in dresses and wigs, the progress made in gender transition through surgery and hormone treatment.

Since video is a time-dependent medium, it almost inevitably shows change; the dramatic change of the before-and-after element here might compel audiences to stick around to see the transformation completed. Another option popular among TikTokers was the use of memes, especially vocal clips, which suggested the imitative element of gender. In both cases, their channels were ongoing constructions as they continued to upload videos; often, their content changed over time, showing that we do not need to keep repeating the same performances.

Obviously, then, I was not a great fit for TikTok; my primary mode of expression, my preferred medium was and remains *words*. I grew up with a sense that most people would not understand the things that were important to me, and as such spent a lot of time trying to figure out what made me different, trying to put it into words that others could understand. I could never make drawings and paintings come out the way I wanted, quickly became frustrated and

gave up, but *words*, words were something I understood and enjoyed. Especially the written word, where I had more time to think about my statements, to try out different versions, to erase or delete and rewrite.

At about age 15, my parents got us a home internet connection and I discovered fan-community; my intra-actions with others there showed me that yes, even people who did not share my obsession with fictional characters responded to my explanations of my affective experience and my depictions of the characters I loved (the highest praise I ever received was a comment from someone who did *not* care about them saying that my fanfiction made them understand why I did).

Of course, I had always been honing my writing in school, going so far as to major in English in college, but these online contexts were different in that they were more casual and conversational. From about 9th grade until 2016, I also journaled extensively, and at some point, began to write as if for a future audience, complete with considerations of what that audience might think and say, then responses to those possibilities. Of course, these were not really three separate processes but an intra-action where my styles in each context shaped the others.

How could this focus on the written word possibly translate to TikTok? But then, it did not have to be the *written* word: if I were filming, would I not have that same space to rethink and rephrase that I had with writing? Not to mention, friends and relatives tell me that I have a knack for explaining things in a way that makes sense to them in conversation.

I had *some* idea of what it might look like to speak on philosophy and spirituality on TikTok: during college I began watching video essayists like Lindsay Ellis analyze media through vlog-style video essays. But these video essays tend(ed) to be much longer than the few minutes allowed by TikTok. Could I really say everything I wanted in that time? And would

audiences stick around to listen, when, as I said myself, the app is focused around creating immediate visual and/or audio interest? Apparently, it *was* possible: over time and through the curation of the algorithm to my personal tastes, I began to see a lot of TikTokers simply *talking* about history, science, philosophy, spirituality, their own personal experience.

I could do that. And, perhaps more importantly, I *wanted* to do it. Where I often struggle to get myself to do schoolwork and perform household tasks, I was already writing about my views and experiences (including spirituality and academic philosophy) online. Not only was I writing, but I was also *reading* others' perspectives, diffracting them through my own, then writing on that diffraction. I could see myself doing something like that on TikTok, and I was excited by the prospect of *speaking* instead of writing; as much as I love writing and as much as it has its own strengths, there are limitations, like the difficulty of expressing sarcasm. We find our ways around these difficulties (a popular way of indicating sarcasm on Reddit is to follow a statement with /s), but these can never express the same thing as the tone of voice I imagine and the facial expression I often actually make while typing.

Theoretical considerations

There are several issues here that made me worry that I was betraying my agential realist (Barad, 2007) framework, but I have found that such issues usually turn out to be a matter of perspective. First, I wondered whether I should not try to develop a more fully embodied mode of expression. If so, I did not know how I would work around this problem: I did not feel the same desire to create the kind of TikTok content I find more typical, I did not know how I would otherwise communicate philosophical concepts, and I did not think I would get very far by refusing to play to my strengths. But agential realism understands *all* action as embodied; speaking is no less so than dancing.

Still, if the focus of agential realism is on *change*, would I not be missing the point by focusing on what I already know, rather than developing an approach more in line with TikTok's strengths? I did not think so, because I did not think TikTok was *one thing*, and, further, I came into my inquiry with the assumption that my approach would change *through doing*, through posting content on TikTok. In fact, if agential realism focuses on difference and change through intra-action, then a different approach from the one I am used to seeing is ideal: what happens when these two different styles come together? What changes result? In fact, I could say that to try to fit into some mold of what TikTok content looks like would actually be an attempt to sameness.

The biggest worry I had, though, was that I would be engaging in *self-reflection* rather than *diffraction* by looking “inward” to my own thoughts and experiences for content; agential realism holds such reflection in contempt because of its focus on sameness. But in fact, I do not think that *self-reflection* is a thing that exists. That is, memory is never a perfect mental repetition of the past, but a *reconstruction* influenced by the past, yes, but also by present context. Here, part of that present context is my TikTok channel and inquiry, which shape what experience I find relevant, what aspect of those experiences I focus on, and how I frame those experiences to an audience.

Even if memories *were* simply a matter of recall, I could never intra-act with them in exactly the same way twice because *I*, as a process of ongoing intra-action, would still be different from one remembering to the next. To show what I mean, I liken that kind of memory to reruns of a TV show; we may understand a “rerun” as a repetition of an episode previously seen, but the experience of a rerun is not the same as a first viewing. For example, now that I better know what to expect, I may notice foreshadowing that I missed the first time. Memory is

material-discursive intra-action that is a part of the continual process of intra-active change that is *I*.

On a note related to memory, I have long considered myself a deeply introspective person, analyzing how I feel and why; what precipitated my actions; where my tendencies come from, etc. While my conclusions are influenced by affectual experiences, my consideration of them is no mere reflection: conscious awareness of those experiences, putting words to them, is not identical to a scenario where I was *not* consciously aware of them.

There is an entanglement here of sensations and words that, again, goes into creating my material-discursive constitution; the *I* that undergoes these considerations is a different process from one where they did *not* occur. For example, attention to affective experience led me to realize the embodied aspect of that which we call *emotion*. Far from being something that happens in my head, I realized that the experience of *anxiety* had quite a lot to do with physical sensation; anxiety, for example, has to do with a certain tightness in my chest, although words do not suffice.

I like to deal in metaphor and simile to help people relate to what I am saying. For example, arguing that superstition is not something people can simply decide not to do, I likened cognitive thought to swimming and affective experience to a current: we do get *somewhere* with the former, but the latter still holds powerful sway. The person I gave this simile to was a psychologist, and she asked whether I minded if she used it with her patients (of course I did not, and it is this kind of response that leads me to believe this kind of explanation is a strength).

Although I used the word *introspection* to refer to this kind of mental analysis, that word does not really fit an agential realist framework because this framework rejects the notion of objective boundaries that constitute an inside and outside. (In fact, how can we justify rejecting

“introspection” under such a framework? Does that rejection not reinstate the boundary?) True, my perception is limited, which even now seems like a conundrum to me: why should it be so, if all of reality is one process of intra-action? Why can I not perceive what is happening a galaxy away the way I can perceive what is happening with my hands? Why is the universe not a single sentient entity? Perhaps it is, but then, why do simpler entities exist within it?

Regardless of these queries (which I am not sure even *have* logical answers), given that the universe *is* one process of intra-action, *I* cannot be an isolated phenomenon, and everything I perceive as happening *inside my head* preceded me. I am talking about an understanding where *I* is constituted not by an essential personality but by the totality of this (admittedly limited) experience. Thus, to try to speak of anything beyond *I* is an exercise in absurdity: if I have intra-acted with it, then it is part of what constitutes *I*.

Concerns

My biggest concern when starting TikTok was whether to show my face. I value my privacy, and, on the off-chance I did become popular, I did not want to be approached in public. Especially since I am a single woman who walks everywhere, I was also worried about who I might be attracting. Not to mention, there was the risk of getting cancelled, which I have seen to some of my favorite online personalities over misunderstandings or a poor choice of words (XOXO Festival, 2019).

What could I do instead? I could show footage of nature—flowers, clouds, animal—and just do voice-over. But would that really engage the audience? I could film from behind, which might even work as a signature gimmick. But when I pitched this idea to my best friend, she said that turning your back sends a message. Thinking about it, I knew she was right: the material is

always discursive, and turning my back to my audience could signal distance, coldness, and aloofness, which I absolutely did not want.

On the contrary, I wanted to convey a friendly, fun persona that viewers would like and relate to and which would make them feel welcome. The best way to do that, I thought, would be to show my face: not only could I communicate much more through facial expression, showing my face, allowing myself to be *seen*, would communicate vulnerability.

I *also* thought my face would be an advantage in terms of getting views; at the risk of sounding conceited, I think I am conventionally attractive, which, though unsubstantiated, is said by many TikTokers to be an advantage. Perhaps more importantly, I seem to have a *memorable* face; people remember me years after meeting me only once or twice, and sometimes they think they have met me when they have not because they remember seeing me around town. I felt certain, then, that showing my face was the right move for my channel, but was that really more important than my personal well-being? Of course, I did not know anything would go wrong in the first place.

I did what I often do in cases where I am struggling to make a decision and turned to tarot, a divination system based in cards. While I am open to ideas that I may know things beyond my immediate physical perception without knowing I know them, that does not necessarily have to be the case for it to be effective: either way, it helps me think creatively about problems and to look at them from angles I may not have considered. Moreover, it is easier for me to tell what feels "right" with tarot than it is when I simply (over)think through things. In this case, the messages I was getting were that the real risk was in making myself paranoid, which made me feel more comfortable about proceeding.

To keep track of my progress for the sake of my inquiry, I decided to keep a journal where I would write about my intentions, my process, the response I was getting, and more. Again, I did not consider this practice *self-reflection* because the practice of writing is an intra-action that changes me, and therefore, my channel. In other words, this was not simply a record, a representation of exactly what I thought and did, but *a part* of the process of inquiry.

Setting Up

The first thing I had to do was to buy a new phone; my old one did not have enough storage for TikTok, and further did not have the best camera. I finally decided on the Google Pixel 5, which was a generation behind but within my budget. I also bought a cheap cellphone tripod.

Although I could have started making videos as soon as I acquired these items, I wanted to set up my profile page first. I already had a TikTok account, so setting up was mostly a matter of changing my name and username and providing a profile picture. I do not like to use my real name on sites and apps where I am communicating with people I do not know “in real life,” and often simply call myself *L* online; I like this simple initial because it contains the first syllable of my name without giving much of a hint as to what my name actually is.

My profile picture was also an easy decision: my selfie that I took to show off my favorite earrings to review them (which earrings are an important signature to my image on TikTok and beyond). In the selfie I have on my rainbow headband that I knitted, which I hoped would indicate a colorful personality; my half-smile and head tilt suggest a playful (and perhaps somewhat challenging) attitude. Finally, I like the way the pink roses in the background contrast my attire: I had always wanted to film my TikToks outdoors to associate myself with nature and openness rather, so it was essential that my profile picture also be outside.

My next consideration was my username, which was not as easy a choice. While I had several ideas, my final decision was *kindl_my_heart*: it is taken from the title of the song I heard in my one mystic experience; while I had little idea why *that* song at the time of the experience and did not yet have the concept of *diffraction*, months later it occurred to me that diffraction was exactly what it was about:

*Take my heart, take my heart,
kindle it with your heart;
and my heart cannot be kindled without you;
with your heart kindle my heart. (Doyle, 1995)*

“Kindle My Heart” is talking about a human relationship, but one thing I wanted to emphasize on my channel *was* the diffractive aspect of social media; social media is all about communication, intra-action with both human and non-human entities. The words I would use to describe this song (sung by a child) are *pure* and *loving*. While I did not wish to frame myself as innocent in that way, my impression here relates to my impression of the universe as ultimately loving (*if* my experience was really an encounter with the divine, it makes sense to me that they used *that song* to communicate).

Thus, this name is at once memorable, deeply personal to me, and indicative of my interest in the resonances I find among mysticism, science, and philosophy. Of course, much of this meaning would be lost on my audience, but to me that was not at all a disadvantage: on the contrary, viewers might be curious about what it meant, and it would lead me into talking about my mystic experience.

Finally, there was space to write an 80-character bio, which I might have used to say something about myself or what my channel was about. I was used to seeing people on social

media use quotes they liked in their bio sections, and, though I did not see many people doing so on TikTok, I decided I wanted to use a line from my favorite band, The Oh Hellos, who not only have been incredibly inspiring to me but who write along similar themes of deconstruction, social justice, and philosophospirituality of immanence. The line I ended up choosing is from their song “Boreas:”

*Maybe then my breath could embody
a wildfire starting... (2020)*

This song uses the metaphor of a controlled burn to talk about tearing down old structures to make way for the new, so that younger generations have a chance to flourish. It does not speak of accomplishing this work by oneself, but of merely *starting* a wildfire, which can be taken to be about inspiring others to think and speak up in turn. Finally, the reference to a spreading fire is in keeping with my username.

If the intent of this bio may be unclear to audiences, here I was more concerned with the aesthetic, with presenting myself as someone who loves music and metaphor, and (admittedly) with getting people interested in my favorite band.

“Methods” & Expectations

Following Derrida (1974/1976/1998), I am using quotes around “methods” to put the word *sous rature*, *under erasure*. That is, I am not using the word to refer to *prescriptive method* as is common but to refer instead to a *descriptive* account. Even “descriptive” has implications like “reflective” that I do not intend, but here I use it to contrast *prescriptive*, similar to how the terms are used in linguistics to talk about understandings of grammar. That is, I am not talking about any kind of rules that I followed, but simply writing about what I did (or remember doing, anyway) and am still doing.

Unlike Derrida, I prefer using quotations to crossing words out because the latter feels like a *rejection* to me, or at least a begrudging use that is used strictly for the lack of a better term. But if words have no fixed meaning, if they are always in flux, then there is no such thing as a definitive definition; “method” could very well come to mean to what I am doing (and in fact I believe that meaning is common in more casual contexts). I am suddenly struck by a realization: “quote unquote” probably has its colloquial origins in referring to someone else’s speech. If someone refers to someone else as an “influencer,” they are referencing an established term, perhaps quoting someone who calls themselves that, but also saying that the word is inappropriate, and that most “influencers” are far less influential than they would like to believe. Am I not doing something similar by taking the term out of others’ mouths and using it as I see fit?

I admit that I see a limit to this method: I would do away completely with the word “supernatural” if I could, because its implication that its referent is above and separate from nature and logic is rather explicit and does shape our thought. On the other hand, I feel that “method” is far enough removed from its origins (I had to look up the etymology to see if those origins had that prescriptive sense) that this problem is avoided.

When I began my TikTok channel, I expected that my content would change very much over time; I would probably begin engaging in trends and making much use of the *Duet* (where TikTokers share the screen with a video they are reacting to) and *Stitch* (where TikTokers preface their video with a short clip from someone else’s video) features. I would probably learn more academic philosophy, both because I was pushing myself to read more so I could talk about certain topics (some of which commenters might ask me to talk about), and because commenters would give me suggestions for reading. Of course, I would also learn about filming, probably at

least in part from trying out what I saw in other TikToks. Finally, I would become more confident and relaxed over time, and maybe not just in my videos.

But that would come later; my first goal was to set up my basic philosophy. First, I would make a video detailing who my channel was for and what I intended to do with it, and then I would talk about my experience in chronological order, starting with my deconstruction of Evangelical Christianity. I thought it would be easiest for me to *explain* my point of view in a manner similar to how that point of view had developed in the first place. By making my subject-matter personal, I also hoped to engage viewers, to make those going through similar struggles feel less alone, and to validate the doubts of those still questioning.

Here, I planned to be frank and humorous both to make my point and to entertain. There were several Christian thinkers I wanted to refer to who also deconstructed harsh fundamentalist teachings. Next, I would get into my big existential crisis in college, what precipitated it and how I dealt with it. The natural follow-up here would be a discussion of the hard problem of consciousness (Chalmers, 1995) and panpsychism (Goff et al., 2001/2022). From here, I would move on to postmodernism, detailing important concepts in their own videos, and then I would define my concept of *philosophospirituality*. The final big video I had planned would be on my big mystic experience. I thought that I would probably finish this establishing process in a couple of weeks, and then figure out where to go from there.

As for how popular my content would be, I did not know exactly what to expect there. I had heard that first videos tended to get a boost from the app because the goal is to get TikTokers to keep making content. What if I blew up right away? What if I were an overnight sensation? I did not think that was likely, but it seemed *possible*. On the other hand, what if I got little response at all? Even if that happened, though, I thought that I could probably attract an audience

if I just kept at it; my channel would probably grow slowly over time. Audience response would also probably play a major role in shaping my content, as I repeated ways of performing that seemed to get many views and likes. If I did not become popular, at least I might develop a dedicated following.

As previously mentioned, I would keep a journal to keep track of my thoughts, intentions, influences, etc., and the writing process would further develop my thoughts and plans. When I began writing my thesis, I had already created and posted over 300 videos to my channel, far too much to write about in my inquiry. For this reason, I had to set limits; since part of my question here is how my channel might change over time, it has made the most sense for me to document my videos chronologically, setting a cut-off date for shortly after my most popular video.

My reason for choosing that video is partly that it gives me enough videos, enough context to see patterns and gradual change. As for why I chose my most popular video as a marking point, getting so many views for a single video and having my follower count suddenly explode felt like achieving some kind of goal. I *could* stop there, but this explosion was a major change that caused me to adjust and rethink my content; that rethinking continues to exert influence on my channel.

My next step was to write about my channel. But *how* should I write about it? Though I had some mind to my agential realist framework, I began by writing about what interested *me*; “coincidentally,” “what interested me” seemed to fit an agential realist framework just fine. I focused on *novelty* and *difference*, videos where I tried new things. I also homed in on the *intra-active* nature of my channel (and beyond) by focusing on my *influences* (or at least, the ones I was conscious of) whether they be people, dreams, media, other TikTokers, etc. I was interested

in *what worked* and *why*, not only in terms of what seemed to grab audience attention but in terms of what was sustainable for me.

As previously mentioned, I was also interested in audience response. This focus, however, proved to be more difficult, as I could not know what they were thinking. Of course, there is rather a lot I cannot know, but what I mean is that, while we are intra-connected, much of their *ontoepistemological becoming* is beyond *this ontoepistemological becoming*. For example, I know the way to my own home because I have experienced the route time and time again; that knowledge is part of *this* ontoepistemology. I cannot do the same with someone else's home simply from intra-acting with them. They would have to tell me how to get to their home, and I would not know until I tried to get there whether they were lying or otherwise misrepresenting the route.

Under my philosophy of mind (where there is “that which experiences” and “that which is experienced,” where the latter is constituted by physical process), the reason for this limitation may be that my experience is constituted by *this* physical process (which includes but is not limited to the brain); part of what constitutes *this* physical process *is other* physical processes, but it is not a *complete* entanglement. That is, my entanglement with others takes the form of sensory experience, which is limited: I can see others' eyes and skin and hair, I can hear their voices. On the other hand, I am *not* experiencing their neurotransmitters; what I experience of them may have *started* with the action of neurotransmitters, but that is not the same thing as experiencing *them* the way I experience *me*.

My stance on knowledge and memory are not based in the recognition of individual bits of matter but in *patterns*. To return to an earlier example, we can say that we watch the same episode of a TV show over and over, but the reruns are not constituted by the exact same

material stuff as the previous times we saw it. We recognize it and can say what is going to happen in reruns because the material is arranged in a *pattern* similar to what we have seen before. Under this understanding, even exchanging the material of our bodies does not add up to the same *knowing* it constituted for the other person; not that it is totally unrelated to their pattern of knowing but that it is not identical.

Returning to my initial point about audience response, I was at least able to look at comments and other forms of feedback. While I could not know that people were being sincere, it was the best I could do, and besides, I had no particular reason to think that people were being dishonest. After all, what could be gained by someone lying about their agreement (or disagreement)? While many admit to “Liking” all the videos they see to support creators, typing out a comment takes more effort, and Stitching a video, even more. I hardly think that many, if any, people were intra-acting with me in bad faith. Of course, they may be unintentionally “misrepresenting” their thoughts, for example, trying to sound confident in their stances than they really felt. But I think that risk is unavoidable.

I was especially interested in audience intra-action that caused me to respond in turn, whether that be addressing a question or researching a topic they wanted me to talk about. I have only included audience comments that were made within the time period I set for my inquiry.

Of course, if I am coming from an agential realist perspective, I could not write a the detached “findings” of my channel; I could not stand outside my work and produce a “reflection” about it. Instead, what I wrote was *produced* by my work on TikTok, at least in part, and so cannot be considered a separate phenomenon. Any “description” is also subjective: my language and what I decided to focus on are not inherent to my TikTok channel itself. Finally, if my “description” was produced by my channel, it follows that that “description” is itself productive:

I developed insight in the process of writing it, which I decided to include, because the written element here is not *about* my inquiry but *a part of* the inquiry, a part of the diffractive process of change. In fact, I have been treating *all* of my writing here that way, and plan to continue doing so when I write my “analysis.”

As for that “analysis,” I want to focus on what kind of difference I made, and what kind of difference *made me*. What changes did I see that were affected by intra-action on TikTok? How did my expectations play out? What seemed to be the driving forces of my channel? While I have already been engaged in these kinds of considerations in the “descriptive” chapter, the analysis will be a broader consideration as I step back and take a broader focus: here I will be analyzing not individual videos but the broader shape of my channel. What got amplified? What got canceled out? And, as always, *why*? Of course, I already have an idea of what I will be writing, theories on why the entanglement of my audience, technology, and me played out the way it did. But, as previously mentioned, the “analysis” will not be a representation of what I did but a further entanglement, a diffraction, that should drive even further theoretical development.

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CHAPTER 4

“FINDINGS”

As stated in the previous chapter, my “findings” are not really findings, not a detached description of what I did on my TikTok (Bytedance, 2019) channel, but an ongoing part of the inquiry intended to help me reach even further conclusions than those already made through making videos. That is, the “findings” are not “outside” my channel but follow from it and have led to further changes in my channel in turn (although these latter have been outside the time limit for my inquiry and so I have not written about them). I have tried to focus on my influences (including the app and audiences) and those times when I tried something new. Finally, I have tried to emphasize audience response, especially in regard to whether my audience was finding my content helpful in the ways I had intended. All of these foci are meant to be in keeping with my agential realist framework, which, as previously mentioned, denies strict material boundaries among phenomena, and understands *newness* as coming out of the intra-action of difference (diffraction).

The first video (June 02nd)

My ideas for my first TikTok video began over a year before I created my channel, but at that point, it was mostly speculation without much intent. Having heard rumors online that the app boosted the visibility of first videos to encourage further content creation, my initial ideas concerned how I would use that boost to get a single message out there: I would talk about the *hard problem of consciousness* (Chalmers, 1995) and *panpsychism* (Goff et al., 2001/2022), or about my favorite band, The Oh Hellos.

The decision to not only make my channel ongoing but to make it my MA thesis, however, meant that my approach would have to change. My goal shifted from getting a single message out there to introducing my channel: the subject matter, the approach, the persona. In other words, this goal was centered less around what was most urgent for *me* to say, and more around what would attract an audience.

But *what kind* of audience? While I thought (and still think) many people, from fundamentalist Christians to hard atheists to New Age spiritualists, would benefit from deconstructing their views and considering other possibilities, I was specifically interested in those who were doubting, those who felt anxious and confused and lost because they did not even know where to look for guidance. I turned to my own experience here: what kind of message was I looking for back then?

What I remember wanting more than *anything* at that time was to hear from someone who had been through the same kind of horrible anxiety that I was going through and come out on the other side, just so I could know it was possible to get better.

With these considerations in mind, I felt like a direct approach would be best: I would appeal to questioning Christians, atheists, and spiritualists, and those who felt like they did not fit in *any* of those categories. I edited and edited this script, making my language concise, perfecting the tone. If I had had hook, it was, *Do you just. Want. Answers?!* Followed by, *Well, I can't give them to you! Anyone who says they can is probably selling something!* I would briefly explain that, while no one else could provide the answers *for* you, *Figuring it out FOR yourself does not have to mean figuring it out BY yourself* (a line I remember being particularly proud of).

Next, I would outline my own experience, beginning with how I had felt there were only two sides to choose from: one said *trust religion over science*, and the other said, *if it's not*

science it's not real. I would put special emphasis on how I had felt like I was *losing my mind*, and how my purpose on TikTok was to be the person I felt I so desperately needed back then, how what I *could* do was to talk about the ideas that helped me. Finally, I would say that I wanted to hear from my audience and to respond in turn.

This approach is obviously staged, but I did not mind that; in fact, I wanted to avoid what Lindsay Ellis (2018) calls *manufactured authenticity*, referring to a content creator's pretense that there *is* no persona, that they are being transparent in their content and showing audiences their "true selves." On the other hand, obvious staging creates no such illusion.

Obviously, humor was part of my approach here. I realized while I was writing that I sounded like I was trying to sell something, which I decided to lean into and then *subvert* by admitting that I do not have *the answers*; the line about those who claim otherwise trying to sell something was drawn from the popular film *The Princess Bride* (Reiner, 1987), which I thought would go over well with audiences. At the time, I thought humor would make for an entertaining, likable, and relatable persona, which would draw people in.

Thinking about it now, however, I think humor was playing another role here. At the height of my crisis, I went to a therapist at my alma mater's health clinic. She said that she was concerned about whether I would be able to finish the semester (I was not), and her tone was so worried and sad. Instead of helping me the session made me feel like I really was that bad off.

On the other hand, the therapist who *was* able to help me took a very casual tone and treated me like a peer; he told me that the points I was making about (what I now know as) positivism were valid, and that I did have the resources I needed to get better. At the same time, he never made me feel like my anxiety was silly.

These experiences, then, led me to feel that a light-hearted approach would be reassuring to those in crisis: if I *told* audiences how bad it had been for me and *showed* them that I was now able to make jokes about it, maybe they would feel the same was possible for them.

Throwing stuff against the wall (June 05th-June 08th)

Katie Steckly had not specified how many videos a new TikToker should post, but the general consensus on Reddit's r/tiktokhelp was that new TikTokers wishing to increase their viewership should post two to three videos per day. *Two to three videos per day?* How was I ever going to accomplish that when it took me an entire afternoon to film and edit *one* video? With my script written, all that was left to do was to shoot the video. I thought bright, open spaces would be more attention-grabbing than the sickly yellow walls of the place I was renting at the time, and I wanted to associate myself with nature, so I decided to shoot at UGA's trial garden. I went out to film wearing my pink top with a bold floral design, my rainbow headband that I knitted, and my favorite hoop earrings.

The earrings were of special importance to me; I had chosen them because they suggest the sun to me, which carries desirable associations for me: light; knowledge and wisdom (or at least their earnest pursuit); life; "source," or a unified divine becoming many. While I did not plan to address the meaning of my earrings right away, I hoped someone would ask about them, prompting me to make a video on the subject (which eventually did happen; by that time I realized that the pattern might *also* suggest nondualism).

Color, of course, would be important for standing out, and this look was in keeping with how I style myself. In fact, perhaps it is not very postmodern of me, but I feel like this look indicates a lot about me, or at least about how I see myself: colorful, bold, feminine, youthful, unusual. Although it is no stable essence, I feel certain ways to myself, and some outfits resonate

with these senses of self where others clash. I think of clothes not as *representational* but as *constitutive*; that is, they do not *reflect* “me,” but are part of what *constitutes* “me.” Not only do they contribute to my self-image, but they affect what kind of self I feel like that day, which in turn affects my behavior.

Perhaps it is fair to say that there is *consistency* in the pattern of *me* even if it is not static; the pattern tends to change slowly rather than all at once, and as such new elements like different clothes are more or less easily incorporated; perhaps that is why some changes “feel right” and others do not. In any case, I believe the clothes I wear can help others *intuit* how I feel to myself. After all, can my interpretation of the clothes I am wearing be so far off from that of others who are constructed in the same culture? If I feel a bright, youthful vibe from a top, does it not follow that others in my cultural matrix will feel the same?

I do not believe these cues are entirely social. Barad expands on Judith Butler’s (1993a) *performativity*, writing that the relationship between social and material is not unidirectional; that is, discourse does not dominate matter, but matter influences the social, too. Do we think the label *floral* for certain shades of pink came strictly out of social codes, with no reference to flowers? *The material and discursive cannot be thought of separately.*

On May 25th, I went out to UGA’s trial garden as planned, found a spot where the lighting seemed good, and set up my tripod (which took me a bit of time since it was my first time using one). I set up my phone facing away from me, which meant I could not see what I was filming as I was filming it. But I had bought my phone partly based on its nice camera; was I really going to use the inferior selfie camera after that? I kept my laptop open beside me so I could reference my script as needed.

My heart was pounding and my hands were shaking; *I was so nervous!* I had not been expecting to feel that way at all, because I had never had much of a problem with stage-fright when performing in front of crowds. So why now, when I was alone and could do as many takes as I wanted? I suspect that it simply felt unnatural and awkward sitting there and talking to myself, especially when the material felt so cheesy to me. In short, I was *self-conscious*.

I spent all afternoon doing takes (many of which were incomplete because I fumbled my words) and ended up with a video thirty minutes long. Granted, many of these takes were of the same lines, but I could not decide between them, and, furthermore, I could not figure out CapCut (Bytedance, 2020), the editing software I had downloaded.

I had decided on this software because it was free and made by the same company as TikTok to be compatible with it, but I had never edited videos before. Uploading clips to make a video was a straight-forward process: simply hit the big “New project” button near the top of the screen and tap the videos you want to include. But what exactly was happening when I hit the “split” button under the “edit” menu? How did I delete only the sections of video that I did not want, rather than entire clips?

The worst part was that I did not like what I saw. If I had not wanted to create an illusion of authenticity, this intra-action between me and the videos of myself that I had just shot was jarring and embarrassing; I did not like the way it affected my self-image. While I had seen other TikTokers pull off such content, the image I was seeing did not feel like *me*; it felt like I was trying too hard to be clever and funny. The fact that I was already talking about what I planned to do on my channel like I was *sure* it would be a success felt, if not presumptuous, then *naïve*.

When someone tries *so hard* to win an audience over, I am usually among the first to balk because I feel like my intelligence is being insulted. Do they think they have to act like a clown

to keep my attention? Do they think I do not know what they are trying to do? I end up feeling like they are trying to manipulate me into liking them, but if that is the case, it backfires.

A tarot reading reinforced my intuition on the matter: I would be better off not trying too hard, *winging it* instead of sticking to a strict script. Not that I would go in with no planning at all, but that I would be more direct and trust that people would be engaged by what I had to say. To use all these tricks, I realized, would be to almost *hide* from my audience; I was trying to act more confident than I felt, which was an avoidance of vulnerability.

Writing about it now, I am struck by how a personable approach suits the personal subject matter: I was talking about some of the most meaningful experiences of my life, explaining how they had led me to the conclusion that neither fundamentalist religion nor hard atheism worked. *Why on earth* was I treating it like a sales pitch for a used car?

No, this approach was not going to work. When I first heard Lindsay Ellis talk about manufactured authenticity, I could not help feeling that there is still something to the idea that some performances come more naturally than others, some are more compatible with the pattern of self. Some possibilities for the becoming that is *I* are more desirable than others. Regardless of how other people might feel about this first attempt, it felt dishonest *to me*. And how could I expect others to like that *me* when *I* did not like that *me*?

My next attempt was set at Dooley Square where there are concrete blocks to sit on in front of some beautiful trees; I sat in front of a particularly green willow that I thought made a good background. My approach here was more straight-forward: I detailed my experience like before, but without the attempts at humor that had felt so forced to me. This time, I went into my experiences with both spiritual communities and academic philosophy and explained my concept of *philosophospirituality*.

Once again, I was nervous while filming; worse, I could see that my perfectionist streak was going to be a problem. Sometimes I fumbled my lines, and sometimes I forgot what I wanted to say next. I wanted to get *the best shot* and speak the *best words*. But what *was* best? How far away should I place the camera? And at what angle? Deciding the words I wanted to speak was relatively easy because my experiences writing fiction and poetry had helped me develop a style that was concise without sacrificing detail. But where should I place emphasis while speaking, and what should my cadence be like?

Again, I shot take after take, going until I lost the light. I was noticing another problem, too: the more takes I did, the more scripted I sounded. I added little “ums” where a pause felt natural; was that manufactured authenticity? Maybe, but my purpose was less to trick people into thinking I was being natural and more to make my video the way I had imagined it, the way that *felt* good to me. Even so, was what I was doing obvious?

That night, I finally figured out how to use CapCut: *split* made a cut in the footage and allowed me to section off pieces that I wanted to delete; what had confused me before was that, with any clip but the beginning and end, I needed to make *two* cuts to section off a piece to delete. But now I was faced with another decision: where should I cut? Should I cut out the parts where I inhaled, or would that feel rushed and unnatural? I edited late into the night and still was not satisfied with the resulting video: I felt I had not said everything I wanted to say.

The next day I went back to Dooley Square and reshot the video, again doing takes until I lost the light. Editing the video that night, I liked my speech better, but I did not think I looked as good as I had before: the lamps in the square had come on when it started getting dark, giving my skin a greenish tint. In the end, I decided I liked the video I had shot the day before better, and finally posted it.

Then I anxiously awaited response. I tried to distract myself by watching videos online, tried not to check my phone too often. But an hour later, I still had no views. Had the app simply not calculated the views yet? I now believe that was exactly the case, as I have had other videos take time to show statistics. At the time, however, I felt terribly discouraged and ended up deleting the video. Perhaps I was wasting my first-video boost, but if I could shoot a better video, perhaps I could make up for it.

I began researching how to get popular on TikTok, starting with YouTube. The video I watched was called, “How to Grow a Brand New TikTok Account in 2022” from YouTuber Katie Steckly (2021), who advertised herself as running “a small digital creative agency that produces content for all kinds of creators!” She said that while TikTok’s algorithm is largely a mystery to users and there were no guarantees, there were a few tips to increase the odds of success: find a niche topic, do your research by *watching* a lot of TikTok videos. These items were already checked off on my list. Katie Steckly especially emphasized jumping on trends, which was a bit discouraging: would I really be able to get any views with my subject matter? But maybe there were trends that would mesh well.

Researching “TikTok trends May 2022,” several sites suggested “put a finger down.” While it was not the hottest trend at the moment, it *was* tried and true, a consistent trend that never really went away. I knew what these videos involved: the TikToker starts by holding up five or ten fingers, then says, “Put a finger down if...” followed by a character trait or an experience. The TikToker ends with all their fingers down because they are talking about themselves. At the time I made the video, most of the “put a finger down” videos I was seeing had moved in a different direction: TikTokers included only one item that was extremely

specific, usually an unusual experience. Still, I did not think the original iteration was exactly outdated; as previously mentioned, it was a stand-by.

Not only was “put a finger down” versatile and easily suited to my content, it encouraged audience participation. The idea is to get audiences to play along and see how many fingers *they* put down, which might encourage them to stay to the end. Furthermore, they might *Duet* the video. In duets, the screen is split between the original video (which in this case would be mine) and the new one made to respond to the former. With “put a finger down,” TikTokers show themselves putting fingers down alongside the person they are responding to. Not only would duets give me more exposure, but I was especially interested in intra-action with my audience. Finally, I thought participating in such a trend would be a good middle ground between doing my own thing and molding myself to TikTok: here was an approach that would show I was willing to play the game of TikTok but would not require me to perform in a way that felt unnatural. I did another tarot reading, which this time I interpreted as being about practicality, putting the work in, which seemed to fit the situation.

I quickly came up with a list of ten items to include in my video; from my journal:

Put a finger down if you...

1. Grew up religious but questioned everything constantly
2. Have had a major existential crisis
3. Didn't end up atheist, either
4. The spiritualist community is too woo for you
5. You've studied philosophy and it's not woo enough
6. Feel like you don't fit anywhere because you end up debating everyone on all sides

7. Have been proselytized by religious people
8. Have been told you only believe in God because you don't wanna face reality.
9. Have been laughed at for being open to the "supernatural"
10. Have ever felt like the world is ending, so what's even the point of anything?

I filmed on June 1st, again in Dooley Square, in front of the willow tree. I kept my earrings and headband, but this time, I wore my new white top that looked soft and floaty to me; I knew that that white, black, and red stand out (which is why extras are not allowed to wear them in movies and TV), and if there were associations with light and positivity, I did not mind: that kind of visual short hand did say something about the tone I wanted for my channel, which statement would have been clumsy to explicate in words. Was I reinforcing a binary that associates light with goodness? Perhaps, but I did not plan to wear white in *all* my videos. In fact, I did *not* want people to see me as perfectly pure and innocent; I hate being understood as *good* and *uncomplicated* because I actually do love the not-so-nice side of myself and do not want to deny it.

Again, I did many takes for the same old perfectionist reasons. I wanted to do the video in two shots, one for each hand, because I thought it would look weird if I split it up more and my fingers were not in the exact same position from take to take. By this point, I had broken down and decided to just use the selfie camera on my phone, because it was too hard to center the shot without looking; I filmed myself in close-up as I had seen many TikTokers do, including in "put a finger down" videos.

In the end, my top was barely visible, as my hand, held near my face, covered most of it. My headband and earrings, though, were on full display. I did not stick strictly to my script, adding details (“...the spiritual community is too woo for you and sometimes makes you wonder if you’re deluding yourself”) and making some more personal (“...you thought you were having a nice lunch with a family friend and they ended up proselytizing you”).

Watching this video now, I notice how I look away from the camera and draw out my *ifs* in places as if I am thinking about what I want to say next. As I remember it, some of this behavior was planned, but some of it really was that I needed a moment to remember. I took an especially long pause before my last item, “...you just don’t know *what* to believe.” I was still nervous (looking closely, I can see my fingers shaking in the video) and still trying too hard to be perfect, but I assumed that these tendencies would fade as I made more videos and became more comfortable.

This video did not take me as long to edit, and I uploaded it to TikTok. I titled my video, “put a finger down: spiritual-but-not-religious edition!” (black text on a white background near the bottom of the screen, covering part of my hand) with TikTok’s *Text* function, and added the description, “Who’s stuck in the middle with me?” to appear in the bottom left-hand corner of the screen along with my username and hashtags.

The video was one minute four seconds long, and my hashtags were *putafingerdown*, *duet*, *duetwithme*, *spiritual*, *spiritualbutnotreligious*, *spiritualtiktok*, *exchristian*, *exreligious*, and *capcut* (*capcut* adds automatically when uploading directly from the app and can be removed, but I thought it was more likely to increase views than discourage them). All these hashtags had been used before; I hoped that their use would make my video show up for people who

frequently watched videos with the same ones, and that they would make it show up when people searched for them with the *Search* function.

I posted the video on Thursday, June 02nd at about 7pm because I had heard that that Thursdays at that time were best for getting the most views. Again, I did not get views right away, but this time I felt more confident that it was simply the app being slow. By June 04th, I had amassed 450 views and seven likes, a respectable start to my channel.

Throwing stuff against a wall (June 05th-June 08th)

Katie Steckly had suggested “batch” recording, which means recording multiple videos over the course of an entire day. I would have to up my production and let go of my perfectionist tendencies, but I could do that.

I was already worried about losing momentum, but fortunately I got off work early one night and headed off to the park and walking paths near UGA’s Tate student center. I had worn my red sundress with a tropical pattern of green and yellow leaves and white flowers.

I tried out different locations in the park, trying to optimize my background and lighting. I settled on a large rock and spent a long time fiddling with my tripod, trying to set it up at just the right angle. This time, I pulled the camera down so my upper body was visible, and I spent a lot of time trying out different poses. If my face could gain me attention, then so could my body. In my day-to-day life, I do not put too much emphasis on it, but I enjoy dressing in ways that are flattering; I enjoy that image of myself and it makes me feel confident and good about myself.

Further, I did not want to create an image on TikTok that equated intelligence and academic subjects with conservatism and/or masculinity: people can be smart *and* feminine. For these reasons, showing a little skin on TikTok did not feel manipulative or dishonest to me.

The first video I filmed that day was titled “Philosophical concepts explained 1: Deconstruction (pt. 1)” (the title here was added directly in CapCut rather than on TikTok; text added in CapCut automatically disappears after about 4 seconds, so this time the title was not on the screen for the entire video).

I had read online that creating series of videos could be effective, as audiences might be inspired to go to your channel and check out the rest in that series. I did see a possible drawback: as an audience member I might check out previous videos in a series if I am interested in the subject matter, but I also often skip past these videos because I assume they will not be totally comprehensible without the context of the previous videos; more often than not, getting that context feels like more effort than it is worth to me.

Even so, I thought that it might make academic theory more digestible if I divided it up like that. Derrida’s (1974/1976/1998) deconstruction seemed like the perfect place to start for two reasons: first, if we do not talk about “foundational thought” in poststructuralism and postmodernism, then I think it is still fair to say that deconstruction is useful for helping others to understand what those schools are about (to wit, defamiliarizing grand narratives and binary thought by examining the points at which they stop making sense, as well as their underlying assumptions and implications).

My second reason for starting with deconstruction is that *deconstruction* is often used colloquially to refer specifically to *religious* deconstruction; I frequently saw (and continue to see) it used in the subreddit r/exchristian, often in a context where someone is asking what it means. Since I was about to talk about my own religious deconstruction, I thought it made sense to first explain what the term means and how it applied to my experience.

This time, I did not worry about jumping on trends, as I had noticed many popular TikTokkers who simply told stories about their own experience (I particularly remember @gregisms, a teacher who has many videos on things their elementary school students have said).

In the resulting video, which I posted on June 05th, 2022, I am in close-up against a background of green foliage. I had not prepared a script for this video but began by talking about the contexts where most people hear the term deconstruction, which are the aforementioned religious context, and also the context of the English classroom.

On the other hand, here I am interested in what Derrida meant by it, which I sum up in the phrase, “when our systems of thought stop making sense.” I go on to talk about how I initially learned about deconstruction when I majored in English in college, specifically in my Literary Criticism class where, “one kind of paper we would write was a textual deconstruction.” I make sure to clarify, though, that it does not only refer to texts but to “any cultural idea, especially cultural binaries,” and, “*you* don’t stand outside the text and deconstruct it, but deconstruction happens.”

For an example I used Derrida’s example of incest prohibition from his essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences” (1967/1978): if nature is defined as that which is universal to all humans, and culture is defined as that which is written into law (because laws are not needed to regulate behaviors that we [do not] engage in *naturally*, without being told), then what about incest prohibition? It is a law common to all cultures, so is it nature or culture?

I note that I had a contention here, which is that incest prohibition is *not* universal: royalty from around the world used it historically to keep power within the family, and, lest we

think of that as a mere political move that went against “natural” tendencies, familial abuse is unfortunately common. But, I explain, I realized that with that contention that the concept of *universal* was deconstructing; we think of disgust toward incest as unnatural because most people are repulsed by it, but clearly that is not so for everyone. Clearly, then, *natural* is *not* an objective concept based in universality; this realization destabilizes the term.

Going into this video, I was concerned that it might get flagged for the word *incest*. What if the video got taken down? What if I got banned? Researching online, I found that it was very unlikely I would get permanently banned, but “shadow-banning,” in which the user’s videos temporarily stop appearing to everyone but their followers (without notification, no less), was possible. I was especially concerned because I needed to write out the word for a trigger warning.

I saw other TikTokers speaking forbidden words, though, working around them with intentional misspellings, sound-alikes (e.g. “Yahtzee” instead of “Nazi”), and asterisks, and so thought it would probably be fine. In the end I went with, “TW: Non-descriptive, academic reference to inc*st,” again editing it in with the CapCut app instead of on TikTok so the text faded after a few seconds, although I used white text with no background to differentiate it from the title.

Further, I wrote out references for the texts I was drawing from, as well as the fact that Derrida was drawing from Claude Levi-Strauss when he talked about incest prohibition. This latter citation was necessary because I had misspoken in the video, attributing the statement to Ferdinand de Saussure; for a moment I had been afraid I would have to reshoot the entire video. There was no way I was going to willingly spread misinformation: not only did I not want to be called out for it, but I was aware that TikTok had a reputation for misinformation and did not

want to participate in that culture. It was a relief, then, when I realized I could simply cut out the reference to de Saussure and refer to Levi-Strauss in text.

My description for this two-minute, 13-second-long video was, “This is pretty basic; y’all want pt. 2?” At the time, I had not yet decided if I would make a part two and hoped that audiences would tell me what they wanted to see. My hashtags were *philosophy*, *philosophytiktok*, *exchristian*, *exreligious*, *deconstruction*, *religiousdeconstruction*, *poststructuralism*, *postmodern*, *derrida*, and *capcut*.

I did not write much in my journal about the making of this video, but I notice that I cut much more frequently than in my first; I remember paying more attention to how often other TikTokers (including @gregisms) cut in their videos so I could follow suit. I change position, at one point bringing my arm to the front and covering my chest. I look less scripted here as I make frequent use of “ums” and “uhs,” and look around as I think about what I want to say.

To my memory, this behavior is mostly unintentional: my takes were still longer than what I am doing now, forcing me to remember what I wanted to say in larger chunks. I do, however, specifically remember doing several takes for the pronunciation of *Jaques Derrida*.

I see this video as an important step in my channel because I established several elements that would become patterns on my channel: it was the first in my series on “philosophical concepts,” I talked about my own process of learning about these concepts and understanding them on my own terms, and I used text to cite references and make corrections. I also stuck with many of these hashtags, and *philosophy*, *philosophytiktok*, and *exchristian* are still mainstays.

Looking at it now, I think the video is visually striking, especially with the contrast of colors between my dress and the foliage. I can hear birds in the background (another element that

would become common in my videos), which I think is a nice touch, and, overall, I think I come across as unassuming.

It was not the only video I filmed that day; I also did one where I begin to talk about my religious deconstruction, specifically how I stopped believing in the teaching that non-Christians go to hell. First, I establish that I was taught this belief in the Southern Baptist church where I grew up, but that I began having doubts at a young age.

A specific memory that stood out was hearing someone give a talk in which he said that he, “just couldn’t believe that God loves *me*.” Here I made a pained expression, scrunching my eyebrows, and put my hand to my chest on the word *me*. Then I provided my tacit reaction to this statement, leading with, “And I was just sitting there like...” I look left, then right, as if looking around to see if anyone else in the imaginary audience thought it was stupid. “Why shouldn’t God love me?” I continue, shaking my head slightly.

I made sure to explain that I understood the concept of original sin, as well as the idea that one sin makes you unworthy of an imperfect God; although I do not mention it in the video, many fundamentalist Christians have assumed that I disagree because I do *not* understand (quite an infuriating experience).

Further deconstruction of the idea includes arguments like, “If Adam and Eve had no knowledge of good and evil when they ate the fruit, how did they deserve punishment?” and, “It’s kind of like if an adult left a toddler alone with a hot stove and told them not to touch it, and they come back and the kid has burned themselves, and instead of treating the burn, they disown them and lock them out of the house? Like, who’s the bad guy there?” I had originally seen this example on Reddit but had since seen it elsewhere; since it was somewhat mimetic and no original author could be identified, I felt it was all right to use it without crediting.

I made sure to clarify that my understanding attitude toward “sin” extended to others beyond myself: I understood that some people lacked empathy and/or only felt something when doing horrible things, I could sympathize with villains on TV. It seemed to me that people did the bad things they did to protect themselves and make themselves happy, and if *I* could relate to that, “What sense does it make that almighty God, who knows us as intimately as we know ourselves, can’t?”

Further, if God is supposed to be all-powerful, what sense did it make that Jesus *had* to die to pay the debt of sin? And to whom was this debt paid? God himself? Satan? Neither made sense. I referred specifically to a mental image I had carried with me in my childhood and adolescence of people being tortured in hell crying out for salvation, and God being like, “You had your chance! Guess it just sucks to be you!” I finally concluded that this idea that non-Christians go to hell is irreconcilably logically flawed.

Most of this video looks much like the one before it: the setting is the same, I am sitting in nearly the same position. I had written a script for it sometime before (in fact I think it was before I even shot my first video) but decided not to use it. Reading from a script had not been working for me, and the script had been long; if I wanted to keep audience attention, I would need to break up my religious deconstruction into multiple shorter videos.

Again, my performance seems off-the-cuff, and I make incredulous facial expressions, brows knitted, as I go through my questioning of the doctrine I had been taught. The title is “stay til the end to hear how I got over believing non-Christians go to hell, once and for all!” I remember being conflicted about this title, which used a tactic I had found suggested online but which seemed a bit manipulative to me. But it was such obvious manipulation that it did not feel like trickery. If anything, I was worried that it seemed a little needy and grasping, but perhaps

audiences would find it compelling enough that they really would stick around to hear what I was going to say.

Again, I was interested in breaking down how I reached my conclusions and hoped to reach different kinds of audiences: those who already agreed with me and who would like arguments to back up their positions, those who felt they must believe such things but did not feel right about it (like I had), those who disagreed and assumed that people who think as I do now must simply be misunderstanding something.

I tried out more expressive elements here: reenacting moments from my adolescence (as with my reaction to the speech detailed earlier), smiling and imitating God coldly saying, “You had your chance...” On this latter imitation, I drew myself up with my arms around my legs and threw my head back, smiling wide, as if mocking those in hell.

I remember doing several takes here and thought about excluding those more obviously constructed elements, fearing that they were *cringe* and would not be well-received. But, unlike with my initial ideas for my first video, *this* expression came out of how it sounded in my head when I thought about how to tell these stories (and in fact I had used certain phrases, emphases, and facial expressions when telling them to others face-to-face). If it did not come out exactly as I had imagined it, I thought it was at least dramatic and attention-grabbing.

Thus, it was not exactly as if I was talking without any thought to how I expressed myself, but neither did it feel try-hard. Rather, *it felt like acting out how I imagined myself telling the story*, how the story seemed to *want* to be told. This instance is the first time I have ever put it in exactly those words, but it feels right. Of course, “the way the story seemed to *want* to be told,” has much to do with social construction, including conversations with friends and TV and movies; I can feel specific influences here. It did not feel natural, exactly; I was definitely

thinking about the “right” way to do say things, the right facial expressions to make. But neither did it feel forced.

My hashtags for this video posted on June 05th, 2022 are *exchristian*, *exreligious*, *religiousdeconstruction*, and *deconstruction*. The description here says, “I’m committed to filming outside, still working on when to film and adjusting the brightness and stuff!” Indeed, the end of the video looks different from the rest; I included screen text at this shift that says, “(y’all I have GOT to stop trying so hard to get the perfect take...),” followed by, “(...this isn’t a 70s filter, just took too long and lost the light!)”

That is exactly what had happened: I had lost the light, but realized I could adjust it in CapCut. In CapCut, however, you cannot adjust multiple clips at once, but must do each one individually. I spent hours trying to get the lighting in the clips to match up, again trying to pick the *perfect* look. I remember being unhappy with the finished product, especially not liking that the end of the video looks so different from the rest; I did not want to look unprofessional. But because it had taken me so long to make the video and because I had wanted to keep posting content to grow my audience, I did not want to film it again, and hoped that the explanatory text might soften any criticism audiences might have. Looking at it now, I do not think it looks so bad at all; in fact, I think the muted colors that I claimed resembled a “70s filter” looks rather nice.

I got one more video out of this shoot, which was an outtake. There is no title, but the text on the screen says, “Me: I want to shoot outside to associate myself with nature! Also me:” which has been a popular meme format for the last several years. The second statement refers to what I am actually doing in the video, which I think makes for an obvious intra-action between text and action.

The clip was taken from my video on deconstruction, specifically the part where I am talking about my contention with Derrida's argument about incest prohibition; I stop talking when I am interrupted by the sound of a loud car or motorcycle. I blink rapidly and purse my lips in annoyance, look around and adjust my dress while I wait for the sound to stop. When it does, I start talking again, only for the vehicle to start up even louder, at which I roll my eyes.

This outtake was completely unscripted; I made it into a video because it made me laugh when I watched it, and I thought it might have the same effect on audiences. Further, it showed a moment that I had *not* planned to show to audiences at the time; here was how I behaved when I was not thinking about what others would think of me. I thought this video might also go toward deconstructing any implication that all I shot were the takes in the video. While I did not expect audiences to actually think that, I thought they *might* make the assumption unconsciously, without thinking about it much at all.

The video also shows that I am not, in fact, out in some wilderness, but rather close to roads, showing that this “natural” setting I preferred was constructed. Further, I wanted to try a shorter video that was meant solely for humor; would it not be so funny if *this* video were the one that blew up for me? My description reads, “Ah, the sounds of nature!,” which I meant to be funny, but which I also meant to trouble the nature/culture binary: why should birdsong be considered nature any more than motorcycles?

This video (posted on June 05th, 2022 with the hashtags *me, alsome, outtake, outtakes, bloopers, filming, filminglocation, foryou, fyp, and capcut*) was a sign of things to come: loud vehicles and other environmental sounds would become a huge annoyance in my filming.

The next video I shot, posted June 07th, was inside; I had not had an opportunity to get outside and film during the day but felt the need to consistently post videos. Wearing my purple

cold-shoulder top, I sat on the floor in front of a white door inside my home; I did not even use my tripod this time, instead balancing my arm on my knee and pointing my camera toward myself.

This video is the first in my “Anti-fundamentalist rhetoric toolkit” series (the title is “Anti-fundamentalist rhetoric toolkit pt. 1”), which I had been planning before I started my channel. I introduce the series in the beginning of the video: in it, I would read what I found to be compelling arguments against fundamentalist doctrine drawn from other thinkers, especially *Christian* thinkers (I note in text that I was calling it a *toolkit* rather than an *arsenal* because I did not want to lean into the fundamentalist tendency to treat it like warfare).

I started with who I refer to in the video as “the big daddy himself, C.S. Lewis.” I note that, in my experience, fundamentalists *love* to cite Lewis “the way the White Witch cites the old magic,” a line I was particularly proud of for its references to Lewis’ (1950/2008) book *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* in his *The Chronicles of Narnia* series (I realize now that I misquoted; it is not the “old” magic but the “deep” magic, which is slightly embarrassing).

In this video I strike at the heart of fundamentalist rhetoric by going for a common phrase used to justify “literal nonsense:” “we just can’t understand God’s ways!” I read directly from Lewis’ *The Problem of Pain* (1940/2009), which centers on a semantic argument about the meaning of “omnipotent.” Lewis argues that “omnipotence” means the ability to do all that is logically possible and does *not* include the ability to do things that are logically *impossible*. After reading from Lewis, I admit that he was writing not against fundamentalist arguments but against common arguments against the existence of God, including the problem of pain. That is, the problem of pain is not really a problem if we exclude the ability to perform logically impossible

acts from the definition of “omnipotent;” it would have been impossible for God to create a world where humans have free will but where we also do not inflict pain on each other.

I did not (and do not) believe, however, that this admission weakens the argument at all; it easily applies to ideas like the one I had previously deconstructed about non-Christians going to hell. I closed by saying that you could even replace “God” here with other concepts used to justify nonsense like “evolution,” and here I included text on the screen that says, “(i.e. Matter produced the secondary phenomenon of mind because evolution).” Then I say, “But we’ll get to that at a later date,” and point at the camera.

As previously mentioned, my original plan for my TikTok channel was to go through my experience chronologically and at a rapid pace, dedicating only a single video to my religious deconstruction. Having made progress with my channel, however, that plan seemed absurd: I was going to be on this subject for some time! I did want to reassure audiences, however, that fundamentalist religion was *not* my only target, and this brief reference to the hard problem of consciousness was meant to serve that purpose. The comment about replacing “God” with “evolution” as an excuse for nonsense was also meant to point to the similarities between fundamentalist religion and positivism.

For this video, I tried a different angle, literally; I held my phone at an angle so that I am framed diagonally, with the angle shifting with cuts. I read from my Kindle, and you can see the glow of it on my face. My voice here is loud and forceful; I enunciate important words and phrases, sometimes looking directly at the camera to emphasize the point. In the introduction and qualification sections, however, I speak in rapid, clipped tones, which was very much a conscious decision on my part.

I had noticed that I did not *sound* much like a TikToker; the TikTokers I was seeing spoke rapidly, which made for shorter videos (this one is one-minute, 24-seconds); if I stumbled over my words more frequently while attempting to speak this way, I also noticed that other TikTokers cut more frequently than I did, and following suit meant that I did not have to say as many lines in each clip. My hashtags here were, *exfundamentalist*, *exevangelical*, *exchristian*, *exreligious*, *theology*, *theologytiktok*, *cslewis*, *fyp*, *fyp*, and *capcut*; the first two I included because I wanted to perhaps reach an audience that was still Christian but no longer fundamentalist. I might have included *christian*, but I was aiming this video specifically at people who wanted arguments against fundamentalist rhetoric. Besides, I sometimes obsess and become anxious over online conflict, which in the past has led me to distance myself from certain online platforms; that was not something I wanted to happen with my TikTok channel.

At this point, I should probably mention that I had begun to include hashtags like *fyp*, and *foryou* because I had heard rumors that including them made videos more likely to appear on TikTok's featured *For You* page, which, while still curated, gives a more randomized experience to viewers that does not focus strictly on those TikTokers they are already following. *For You* is the main page which you are automatically taken to upon opening the app; I had begun noticing TikTokers using these hashtags to gain that coveted exposure when I first began using the app and had simply forgotten to include them myself at the beginning of my channel. I would, however, drop these hashtags shortly after I began using them, as I was not seeing that they made any difference in terms of views.

My next two videos were rather rushed as I tried to film before work and ran out of time, but I tried to lean into it. I thought I might find more success by making shorter videos that were

less planned in between my bigger concept videos; this approach would also make it easier for me to create a lot of content and post frequently.

For the first (which I actually filmed second), I tried TikTok's *Question* feature, which allows TikTokers to pose questions to their audience in the hopes of getting replies in the form of either videos or comments. The question appears on the screen with your profile picture and the question written out. My question here is, "I grew up feeling like I needed to be smart or great at something to matter... What about you?" Again, I went for a more casual tone and spoke rapidly.

This time, I filmed while walking to work: I had seen TikTokers be successful with such "walking" videos and thought there was no reason I could not make it work, too. In the video, I explain something I had thought for a long time, which is that our attitude that people must "contribute to society" to be worthwhile makes no sense: after all, the jobs we value are those that help people; how does that make sense if we do not value human life to begin with?

This video is the first that I was not pleased with: my hair was pulled back for the first time and looked too tight, and the angle is not flattering. I am squinting in the sun, which makes my face look shiny and accentuates the lines of my face in certain parts. The video is 24-seconds long and has the hashtags *capcut*, *youareenough*, *iloveme*, *selflove*, *spirituality*, *spiritualitytiktok*, *everydayphilosophy*, and *philosophyspirituality*.

The next video is along the same lines: here, I am sitting under a tree in Dooley Square and looking up at the camera, which I remember holding above my face as I balanced my camera on my knee. I speak on how I think we are often harder on ourselves than we are on other people: "With someone else we think, 'Oh, they can't help it, they were just raised that way,' but when it comes to us, we think 'I should've known better.'" I go on to cite a comment I read on social media (I believe it was YouTube) where someone described a dream in which they were

standing in a movie theater with their past and future selves, and all of them were watching their life on the screen. The person described feeling very supported; the message they got from their other selves was, *We know you're doing your best*. I said that I thought about that comment when I was down on myself, and that maybe it would help others, too. I mark this video as the first time I began edging into mystical territory.

My description says, "Online comments can definitely make a difference!" and my hashtags are, *youareenough*, *selflove*, *iloveme*, *dreams*, *spirituality*, *spiritualitytiktok*, *everydayphilosophy*, *philosophyspirituality*, and *capcut*. (these first uses of the hashtag *philosophyspirituality* are especially notable to me). This video is only one second longer than the previous one at 25 seconds, and both were posted on June 07th. I still do not like how I look here, but it is not as bad as the previous video.

I admit that I was trying to jump on a trend here with *iamenough*, which felt somewhat manipulative and dishonest to me. But were these not messages that might really help people? At some point in my adolescence I had begun to think that my thought was not "real philosophy" because it was not formal, but now I have come back to questioning the value of that distinction. I believe that here I was trying to elevate non-academic philosophical thought as being important for how it might change how we think of ourselves and society. In the second video, I specifically meant to combat an attitude I see frequently, which is that what we say on social media does not matter (ironically, it is on social media that I most commonly see these statements). On the contrary, this comment from YouTube had stuck with me for years and had been very encouraging to me.

In fact, some time after I made this video, I had the striking experience of feeling encouraged *by my own video*: I was going through my channel, I think for academic reasons, and

was feeling very down on myself for being uninspired and getting behind on my work. How strange, to be reminded by my own past self about this dream someone else had where they were supported by *their* past self! The experience was so profound and moving that I cried a little; I felt almost as if I had made the video for that exact moment.

My next video, however, posted on June 08th, is where I feel I really hit my stride. I sat down on the steps leading to the park near Tate (a place where there was plenty of greenery around) wearing my green top with the sunflower and an Amethyst pendent; my t-shirt is knotted at my bellybutton and I am wearing sunglasses on my head, which look I thought was especially casual and cool.

This video was my second on Derridean deconstruction; if the need for brevity may at first have seemed like an obstacle, I thought that breaking the concept down into parts might actually make it easier to digest. Of course, there was the risk that audiences may not have seen the first video, but I did a brief summary to compensate. If audiences for the first video did not see this one, well, they still knew more about deconstruction than they had before; I did not think they would develop misunderstandings if they did not see this one.

I love how I begin the video, saying, “Deconstruction part deux,” and holding up two fingers. This time my focus is how deconstruction is not about destruction and chaos but about justice; I explain how binaries are not neutrals, but one side (usually the left) is always privileged. I give the example of masculine/feminine, where masculine is considered “good and normal,” while the feminine is considered “weak, passive, and overly emotional.” Text on the screen says, “(it’s a bit muddled, but I’m also trying to address the idea that binary gender is biology).”

I further explain how Derrida said that the people in power do not want to give up these binaries because they help them retain power, so we must *flip* the binary; here, we must make feminine normative and good, and frame the masculine as “overly aggressive, repressed.” I take care to note that the point is not revenge but to, “get people where you want them to go.” Here, people might argue that men are not inherently repressed, that it comes mostly out of societal forces.

“And to that you say, *exactly*,” I say, pointing at the camera. “See, now they’re doing our work for us.” Then I cut to myself tapping my right temple and saying, “Reverse psychology!” (I remember being so proud of this scene). Finally, I explained that the point was not to trick people but to get them to follow you when they are “disinclined to do so.” My description here says, “Flippin’ binaries like tables,” as a reference to Jesus flipping the moneychangers’ tables in the Bible, which I meant to frame as symbolic of overturning power structures. My hashtags here are *philosophy*, *philosophytiktok*, *deconstruction*, *derrida*, *justice*, *philosophospirituality*, *foryou*, *fyp*, and *capcut*.

This video is the one that made me feel like a real TikToker; I look great and I seem more confident and casual, and watching it now, I feel like I finally understand why: *I seem like I am having fun*. I felt like I had a good grasp on the subject matter and I liked my own jokes; I was not worried that they would come across like I was trying too hard.

In my June 08th journal entry, I wrote that I felt like my channel was not doing great: I had yet to receive any comments, and my views were less than stellar: at that point my highest view count was for my second video, the first one on deconstruction, which had 142 views. My confidence in this new one, though, would prove to be well-founded: looking at these first

several videos now, it has substantially overtaken all but my first (which has 650 views) at 460 views. The next highest is still the first entry on deconstruction at 360 views.

Seeing what sticks (June 09th-July 06th)

By this point, I had established a few series of videos: one on my own personal experiences and views, one on philosophical concepts, and one on anti-fundamentalist rhetoric. Instead of doing one series at a time, I alternated so audiences did not become bored of the same thing all the time.

One reason I was able to stay dedicated to my channel was that I was *always* saying something I thought was important; where with writing fiction, I felt it needed to be perfect right away or it was not worth it, here there was an urgency that drove (and continues to drive) me forward.

I also began to address positivism. Here, I am sitting under a tree at Barrow Elementary, wearing a red top and sunglasses on my head (a look which had previously appeared in my video on creationism); I appear in portrait from the waist up, which became the most consistent framing on my channel. There is no title on the video, but the description reads, “I’m not superstitious, but I am a little stitious,” a well-known quote from popular sitcom *The Office* (Silverman et al., 2005-2013).

My point was that, not only did the pattern recognition of superstition keep us alive long enough to even develop scientific thought, but we also cannot simply turn it off; I specifically cited research that suggests placebos are effective even when we know they are placebos. While I cautioned against blind trust in superstition, I argued that, since it is not going anywhere, the best thing to do is to make it work *for* us rather than against us.

This statement on superstition led me into talking about tarot and how I use it less to predict the future and more as a diffractive tool for creative thinking about problems, looking at things from new angles (hashtags: *tarot*, *intuition*, *spirituality*, *spiritualitytiktok*, *philosophospirituality*, and *capcut*).

The video after this one, shot directly afterward on the same bench in the park in Five Points and wearing the same sea-green top, is titled “Stay til the end to hear something really cool!” This video would be the last time I used this tactic to try to retain audience attention, as it felt needy and obvious to me. For my description, I used a quote from the video: “Sometimes looking as something as fact gets in the way of seeing the truth in it;” my hashtags were *exchristian*, *exfundamentalist*, *exevangelical*, *spirituality*, *spiritualitytiktok*, *myth*, *mythology*, *bible*, *thebible*, *philosophospirituality*, and *capcut*.

The subject matter is a statement I felt I needed to make to clarify that, while I am anti-fundamentalist, I am not anti-*Christian*; I hate both Biblical literalism *and* the dismissal of Bible myths as, “just a bunch of stories primitive people told themselves when they didn’t understand the world.” In fact, I think there is a lot of insight to be gained through the metaphor of Biblical myths; taking these stories as historical fact actually gets in the way of that kind of understanding. Here I was further trying to relate fundamentalist religion and positivism.

I got my first comments on this video, a day after I posted it. While that might have been exciting for me, the comments (both from the same user) read ““ [sic] How dare you use his name without thinking of his pain. Jesus did what he didn’t have to when he died for you,” and “I wrote this tonight before I saw your video.” As I rarely take that kind of online comment from fundamentalists very seriously, I was not exactly bothered by it, but I was rather disappointed that it was not a more positive or constructive comment. I had wanted to respond to comments,

but I was not going to engage in debate here: I have found that debates with fundamentalists tend to go nowhere.

To take another approach and make fun might have appealed to some audiences, but it felt like punching down to me, and I did not want to be mean; neither did I want others to think I was mean. Part of that was wanting to create a kind, positive persona on TikTok, part of it was that I wanted to remain civil because I was writing about my channel for my thesis, but part of it was also that I genuinely feel bad when I hurt others.

My next comment, however, came from my very next video (06/11), which was a review of my favorite tarot deck, Yoshi Yoshitani's (2020) *Tarot of the Divine*. In the video I explain that what I love about this deck is how it brings together tarot and mythology, which both have a relationship to the unconscious. The deck is diverse and features Queer themes, plus the artwork is beautiful. I show several of the cards, and I remember making sure to show the diversity of mythological traditions.

Although I generally do not like advertising, Yoshitani is an independent artist I am happy to support. The comment I received here was, "One of my faves! [smiley with hearts emoji] it's beautiful" There was still not much to respond to, but at least it was an indication that someone liked what I was doing.

In this video I am wearing my white t-shirt with a sequin rainbow across the chest because I was batch recording, and my next video was a tarot reading with *Tarot of the Divine* that led me into talking about Queer theory.

This video (06/11), titled "Tarot reading/philosophical concepts explained 5: Qu**r theory pt. 1," is not only the first tarot reading I did on my channel but the first time I combined series. This video also marks my first use of the term "diffractive," as I explained that I was

reading the cards through each other. I did not draw cards blind here but reiterated a reading I had done earlier that made me think of being Queered into society and gender transition.

In this reading, I had drawn The Tower and Strength, both of which I show in the video. The Tower is traditionally about an inevitable falling apart, and paired with the German fairy tale of *Rapunzel*, it made me think of Judith Butler's (1993b) writings on being Queered into society. That is, Rapunzel is trapped in a structure built by humans and is violently expelled from it when she violates the terms of that structure (which violation is taking a lover). The link with gender is especially emphasized through the fact that her captor cuts her long hair, which, in modern western culture, at least, is associated with the feminine.

Strength is about *inner* strength, a relationship with self where one is neither controlled by nor represses one's own emotions, and the fairy tale for the card is the Scottish *Tam Lin*. In this story, the protagonist, Janet becomes pregnant, but refuses the choices her parents give her, and instead rescues her lover Tam Lin from fairies by holding onto him as he transforms into a number of terrifying beasts. The refusal of binary options can be interpreted as rejecting binary gender roles, and pregnancy may be seen as gendered presentation in development. Transformation is an obvious element here; on the card, Tam Lin takes the form of Amit, an animal that part hippo, part lion, and part crocodile, which I again, I think speaks to nonbinary identity. It could also refer to someone in the midst of transition who maybe "don't like what they see in the mirror." "But it's worth holding onto for getting to where you want to go, and not just that, but that self is lovable, too."

Although Janet does end up in the traditional structure of marriage, it is on her own terms. I received a comment here, "Absolutely love this deck!" from a different user than the one who commented in my previous video. Partly drawing from my own experience, I believe that

people are excited when they see something they love: giving positive feedback to this video was not only supporting me but supporting the deck. Further, some may feel a personal connection through shared fandom.

I continued my “anti-fundamentalist rhetoric toolkit” series with a reading from Francis Collins (2006), a Christian and a leader on the human genome project; this iteration of the series (/06/12) “cuts both ways,” against both fundamentalist Christianity *and* hard atheism (the description reads, “Fundamentalism: it’s not just for religious people!”). Here, I mentioned that I disagreed with the way Collins seems to place God above nature, that I subscribe to a view more in common with Baruch Spinoza, “who said that it’s all nature and it’s all God.” The comment I received on this video was, “Wow, another Spinozist in the wild!” suggesting that they had not encountered much agreement with (perhaps not even much mention of) Spinoza where they were not looking for it.

This video is also notable for being the first I shot on the bench in a park near where I work, which would become a favorite location for my videos. I am wearing my orange sleeveless top with a bold flower design, and a light blue skirt with orange flowers, which outfit would carry into the next four videos from the batch.

The other notable detail of this video is that it is the first where I noticed that I had made mistakes in editing: I cut off the beginning of a sentence, and included bits I should have cut, such as when I have just turned the camera on and am moving back from it. I worried over this: should I delete it and post a better edited version? But I already had views and likes. Should I simply post a cleaner version without taking the old one down? Would I get in trouble for “double posting” as I had on old forums? I left the old video up and reposted a better version a few days later, but the latter did not receive much response.

The video I posted after the one on Francis Collins, shot in the same outfit and setting, begins with text that says, “TW: discussion of anxiety, depression, and solipsism.” I begin by defining epistemology as “the philosophy of knowledge,” further clarified with “or at least the BRANCH of philosophy that deals with,” in text. After a brief explanation of the difference between epistemological and ontological claims, I say that I mark the beginning of my own epistemological considerations at age 10.

I did not know what “epistemology” was at that time and it was not a formal inquiry, “But I like to say that a philosopher is someone who can’t leave well enough alone:” at multiple points in my life, anxiety had led me to torture myself over, “questions that have no answer.” I punctuate this statement by flashing a big smile, gently mocking the absurdity of the situation. The quote about philosophers being unable to leave well enough alone had developed through my obsessive journaling in my early teens, and I was quite proud of it; I had always thought that if I ever wrote something really important or did something else that made me famous, maybe it would become a common saying (I still have not given up on this dream).

I continue to describe my solipsistic crisis at age 10, the terrible anxiety I had felt for about a month as I wondered whether my whole life might not be just a dream, the circles I went in trying to prove that it could not possibly be true. Although I no longer obsess over this question, the realization that I could *not*, in fact, disprove it, had “profound implications” for my worldview.

I filmed the first of a series of weekly tarot readings on the same day (same clothes, different location) but posted it on the 13th rather than the 12th. This time, I drew my cards on camera, which process took time. The reading itself was also long; it involved the passing of old ways that divide humans and nature and the rise of new ways that return to a focus on our

relationship to the world around us; I home in on the idea that it is time for new generations to take the lead.

While I think it was a good reading, the video is too long by TikTok standards at almost eight minutes; I believe that is why it got relatively few views (it still has not hit 100 views by the time of writing). By this point in my channel, I was still posting between two and four videos a day, although, as I wrote in my journal, filming three videos per day was proving to be taxing. Even so, it was starting to pay off: despite that one flop, most videos got 300-400 views within a couple of days. I was especially excited by the video following the tarot reading.

This video (06/13), entitled “My deconstruction: existential meltdown edition!” (still in the same outfit and back at the park) is about my worst existential crisis. Here I used beats that had developed through telling the story to friends and family: I say that I thought my worries about having such a crisis were baseless after getting through my Introductory Psychology class fine, then cut to me wide-eyed, shaking my head slowly. Describing how tense my whole body had felt, I say, “I was just *this* all the time,” demonstrating upon the word “this” holding up my hands to the camera in a rigid pose.

I cite both positivist and fundamentalist Christian rhetoric as contributing to this crisis, as the latter’s failed critique of the scientific community made me feel that my own critiques must also be a misunderstanding. Finally, I said that combatting *both* these ideologies was the main point behind my channel. This video was a milestone as it marked a completion of the personal experience videos.

What is more, posting it felt profound. During the time of my crisis, I had felt that I was thinking about heavy, important topics. But what could I ever do with that? Had not all the great

thoughts already been thought? What could I possibly have to say that would ever warrant publication? TikTok felt like *it*.

I wrote in my journal (06/14), “And last night when I was posting that video I had the sense of something being fulfilled. It was almost like... Like I almost felt taken back to my childhood self.” Reconstructing that moment now, I think it was that I felt like the child I had been, seeing the answer to the question I had asked unfold before me: *here was what I could do with it.*

During the whole experience of my channel, this sense of fulfillment has been the most major change I have noted most in myself: I have felt (and continue to feel) that I am having an effect on people, and what is more, that I have found what I was always meant to do. Here I am drawing from mystic experiences of people who say that to some extent, we choose our lives before we are born; I am open to the idea, at least, and if it is true, then I feel like diffracting on social media is my calling. As previously mentioned, I had felt this way about Reddit in some capacity: even when I felt like my life was going nowhere, at least *that* was meaningful to me. Walking to and from filming TikToks I felt excited and full of purpose in a way I could not remember ever feeling before.

I continued the series that were working for me while also adding new ones. True, not everything I tried stuck. If I was going to continue to do tarot readings on my channel, I would have to par down the time they took greatly, as my second weekly tarot reading did even worse than the first one.

Hoping to create positive change on TikTok (and to perhaps go viral), I tried to start a TikTok challenge that involved tracking progress as TikTokers attempted to break their bad habits (06/17). This series gave me something consistent I could make content about, and maybe

the accountability really *would* help me solve my issue with getting myself to go to bed on time. I had a hashtag to go along: *breakyourbadhabitschallenge*, and the bad habit I was trying to break was going to bed so late at night. Every video, I announced my progress and spoke on a different subject: in the first, I talked about how I wanted to start a healthy challenge in opposition to the kinds of dangerous stunts TikTok is infamous for; in the second (06/20), how I do seem to be groggy after I finally do get a good night's sleep; and so on.

While the videos were getting the typical views, no one seemed to be jumping on the trend I was trying to create; I never saw anyone else use the hashtag, and I was not getting comments, either. Worse, I was finding that having to talk about my progress on TikTok was actually making it harder to fall asleep because now there was even more pressure surrounding the issue (which conundrum I noted in a later video). I switched to making the videos once a week, and eventually began forgetting what day I was supposed to report on. In the end, it did not work on any of the levels I had hoped it would, so I ended it.

Another attempt at BookTok came in the form of conversation cards called *Lit Chat* (2017); I had found the deck of cards in a Little Free Library and it had felt serendipitous. Not only might this series help me get on BookTok, but it also gave me a reliable topic to make videos about, an ongoing concern as I tried to keep up my pace.

The first couple of cards I drew tied into my subject matter surprisingly well, almost as if it was not entirely random chance. Soon, however, my attempts to talk about these cards were thwarted: I was no longer drawing cards that “spoke” to me, and, while I might have tried my best to talk about what came to me or drawn cards until I picked one that resonated with me, the spell was broken and I no longer felt invested in the series.

One video I made from footage from a Bleachers (2014) concert as they sang their hit song, “I Wanna Get Better.” (06/16) There were many people between me and the stage who were included in the video (from behind, so no identification could be made), but I did not mind. In fact, I felt that their inclusion lent a sense of being part of a crowd, of connecting with strangers through this meaningful shared experience, literally moving together to the music. Was that atmosphere dissimilar to what I wanted to create on TikTok?

Over the footage I included text explaining what the concert meant to me, personally: I had been longing to see Bleachers again since the first time I had seen them years ago. That concert had been a rejuvenating experience at a time when I had been struggling with feelings of being lost (the day that preceded the concert had been especially bad). The concert in the footage had been occasion to look at how far I had come from then, and to speculate about where I might be the next time I see the band. The general impression I hoped to create was that, no matter how bad things seem, something different can always happen, which message is in keeping with the lyrics of the song.

I tweeted this TikTok at Bleachers’ account on TikTok hoping they might like it or retweet it, thus giving me a major boost, but they did not. I was also hoping I might draw in Bleachers fans and concert lovers by using the hashtags *bleachers* and *concert* in addition to *philosophospirituality* and those related to spirituality (I consider my experiences with music and concerts deeply spiritual). But the video did not hit my usual goal of 300 views. Even so, I liked it, and I would go on to make other videos from concert footage in the same manner.

Although at this time I was moving more toward deconstructing positivism than fundamentalist religion, I continued to do occasional videos on the latter. One of these (06/19) was about an experience being proselytized by a family friend, and one was about how I believe

fundamentalist Christianity was a factor constituting my late mother's somewhat emotionally abusive behavior toward me.

But I had my reservations about these videos: talking about fundamentalism in general terms was one thing, but was it really all right to talk about these specifics on TikTok? What if that family friend or my mother's family saw the videos in question? I was not naming names, but what if someone I knew who would know who I was talking about saw? I mentioned my mother's emotional abuse at the end of the one about the family friend, as something that friend had said was especially offensive: she suggested that I should read the materials she gave me in part out of respect for my mother with whom she had shared a belief system. Not only did I feel it was underhanded and manipulative for her to use my relationship with my mother, but I also blamed the doctrine for my mother's somewhat emotionally abusive behavior toward me. I made a couple of more videos speaking on these personal intra-actions (one about where I thought my mother's behavior came from and why I could not really blame her), but was a bit relieved that they did not do especially well.

I had written in my journal (06/17) around this time that I was glad I was writing my thesis about my channel because it kept me committed: where I might otherwise have gotten discouraged by all the work involved, there were important consequences here that went beyond the TikTok channel itself.

At this point, summer was finally here, which meant I could finally do my analysis The Oh Hellos' Anemoi Cycle. The Anemoi Cycle is my unofficial name for a series of four EPs named for the *Anemoi*, or the divine winds of Greek mythology: *Notos* (2017), *Eurus* (2018), *Boreas* (2020), and *Zephyrus* (2021). Each wind ushers in one of the four seasons, and as such, the series is focused on the *transitions* each wind brings. The Oh Hellos (2015) cite as their

inspiration the question, *Where did our ideas come from?*, and the series is specifically about a personal journey away from fundamentalist religion and nationalism.

There are seven songs on each EP, and I planned to do a separate video for each one of them. Unlike my other series, though, I did *not* plan to do these analyses in quick succession; instead, I planned to stay true to the seasonal theme, analyzing the songs of *Notos* during the summer months, *Eurus* during autumn, and so on. I had been thinking about doing these analyses since I first contemplated starting a TikTok channel, but that is not to say that my plans had not changed.

My initial idea was to just sit down and talk about the songs like I did with most of the other content on my channel, but how many people were going to sit there and listen to a spoken analysis of some song they had probably never heard? TikTok did indeed have all the songs available as sound clips (or at least, minute-long clips from them); I could play the songs and just sort of groove to them as a written analysis played over the action. But was that really the most engaging thing I could do? After all, it was *the Anemoi Cycle* by *The Oh Hellos*.

If it were not already obvious, I have an almost reverential attitude toward this music and the people who wrote it. Not only is this *the* most complex work of songwriting I have ever heard, it nails the harrowing experience of deconstruction, from loss and fear to regret to joy at developing a more immanent spirituality. As the seasonal motif implies, deconstruction is framed as a cyclic process where one never arrives at *the* answer, but constantly has to reevaluate and readjust. Importantly, the Anemoi Cycle condemns fundamentalism while never losing compassion for the fundamentalist; there is sympathy for the fear that drives the belief system.

I have long felt that this music is exactly what the world needs right now. While I understood and related to the series on that level, I related on another level: at the time *Notos*

came out when my life as I knew it had recently fallen apart, and the future seemed blank. Where I had been feeling depressed and directionless, *Notos* and *Eurus* (which followed *Notos* by about two months) made me feel *excited* about the possibilities that blankness presented. That excitement became a driving force in my life; I think it helped me believe in the opportunities presented to me and pushed me to pursue them. In summary, this music was (and continues to be) profoundly meaningful to me, and I wanted to give it and the people who created it everything I had.

I was going to have to get out there and dance. But could I really do that? I had taken a semester each of Ballet and Modern dance in college and had not done very well at either: I was simply too self-conscious and too focused on maintaining perfect posture to keep up. On the other hand, I *loved* (and still love) dancing around informally, moving in whatever way my body seems to want to move.

The point of the videos was not to show off my dancing skills or choreography but to simply create an engaging enough video that people would stick around; the kind of informal dance I enjoyed was enough for that. Besides that, I wanted to show how deeply I feel it, the joy I feel from it as the music becomes part of me on a physical level. The more I thought about it, the more excited I became about making these dance videos.

I put a lot of thought into my clothing choice and ended up wearing my floaty white top from my first video with a teal skirt with brown and pink paisley design, which twirled out and created good visual interest; I went barefoot. I felt this outfit looked summer-y, and thinking about it now, that white top was an especially good choice: it *is* kind of cloud-like, appropriate for a mountain that reaches into the clouds.

I chose to film outside at the top of the steps leading to the second floor of Aderhold Hall, a high-up place appropriate for the song “On the Mountain Tall” (2017). If I had thought this would be an easy shoot, I was wrong: the Georgia summer heat caused me to sweat and quickly exhaust myself. If I had only needed one take, it might not have been so bad, but I did *at least* three before I finally had a version I was satisfied with. By the end of it, I felt weak and trembly from exhaustion.

Was it worth it? Yes, it *absolutely* was. While I had used a music clip from TikTok and filmed directly from the app once before, at that point I had not realized that TikTok had a timer function, instead thinking that I could only film after immediately pressing the button. For this reason, I had to integrate moving away from the camera into the dance, which ended up working beautifully, especially since this video marks an opening to a series: it begins with my face in close-up, then I tiptoe backward (still bent forward), straighten up, and raise my arms (I do notice that the camera shakes a bit during the dance; at this point I was still using my cheap cell phone tripod). I express a lot with my arms (especially at lines like, “and a fear that shook the firmament”) and incorporate a lot of twirls.

I notice that my movements are *musical*, that is, my motions not only keep in time with the music but correspond to how soft and slow or fast and energetic it is; for example, my arm movements at a softer bit are what I would describe as “floaty.” I smile a lot, and the dance appears effortless to me despite knowing that it very much was not.

My analysis appears over the dance and talks about how the song is an invocation for knowledge and wisdom—it draws from the Bible verse 1 Kings 19:11-13 (New International Version, 1973/1978/1983/2011), where Elijah seeks God’s voice on a tall mountain, but God is not within the storms; instead, his voice is a quiet whisper (“quiet as a candle, bright as the

morning sun,” is especially in keeping with the flame motif of my channel). The song further speaks of building a wall to the heavens by, “firing bricks from broken canon and prose,” where “canon” is wordplay: spelled this way, it implies the weapon “cannon,” yes, but “prose” also implies the *Biblical* canon.

This video (06/23) did not immediately do so well, taking some time to get my usual 300 or so views. But while I wanted more people to see it, I was not at all discouraged from continuing the series: I was so happy with and proud of it, so excited about what I was going to do for future videos in the series, that I was not even that concerned about whether it made my channel popular.

I did receive somewhat of an increased following shortly after my dance video with a video responding to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* (1973). As I state at the beginning of the video (06/24), I had been planning to talk about Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1947/1972) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that day, a critique of positivism in the face of the stripping of women’s rights through fundamentalist doctrine did not feel right.

Here I wear a black top and a bright pink skirt with pink and purple flowers, and with it my pink pressed flower pendant; I am sitting in my favorite park. I argue that, while of course there are other manipulative doctrines, religious fundamentalism’s greatest advantage seems to be its appeal to the highest possible authority, which, combined with fear, guilt, and a discouragement of education, becomes almost immune to logic. “You can’t reason someone out of a position they didn’t reason themselves into.” Here, I am drawing from my own experience with fundamentalist Christianity and its followers, as well as the experiences of others I have known both online and “in real life.”

I make what I now see as a somewhat dubious claim that I believe birth rates will go down because childbearing will seem like too much of a risk; when I later made a similar comment on Reddit, someone replied that it has not worked that way historically. My following point, however, is that change is inevitable, even if it does not happen for a long time. I closed by warning against swinging to the alternate extreme: the idea that religion is the cause of all oppression in the world, which view I had frequently seen espoused.

Further, I say that it was important to “bear witness,” citing someone I used to know whose response to, “How are you?” was always, “It’s an interesting time to be alive.” I have tried to follow that attitude, to be interested in and curious about the unfolding of history, even when things are bad. I do not dismiss how painful and scary this moment in history is; how could I, when I am someone affected by the ruling? I was still worried my position might come across as privileged, but I shared it anyway, because if it has been helpful to me to think that I am living through something profound and important, perhaps it could also be helpful to others.

By June 27th I had 23 followers, and I had noticed a strong uptick following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. While I felt that I should not be happy that I was benefiting from such a terrible thing, on the other hand, was not helping people deal with spiritual concerns in the face of hardship exactly why I started my channel? I wrote in my journal that I was glad to already have somewhat of an audience by that point because I really did think reactionary takes against any sort of belief in God or the “supernatural” would be a problem: I was glad that I was already in somewhat of a position to counteract that.

I made one video on how it makes little sense to think of religion as the root of all evil, which took me into talking about Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (06/26);

here I begin by contextualizing their philosophy in light of their flight from Nazi Germany and view that Americans were also oppressed.

I read directly from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* much as I had done with Lewis' *Problem of Pain*, focusing on their critique of Enlightenment, its anthropocentrism and reification of the earth. I also give a direct message to those who were deconstructing in light of *Roe v. Wade*, focusing on the idea that deconstruction is hard, and that if others judge them for their former beliefs (and/or if they were feeling guilty themselves), we do not choose the factors that shape our beliefs and attitudes.

I give the example that, I, personally, had not been much affected by shame culture in the fundamentalist church, probably because my parents had treated me like I was "the best." That factor probably made it easier for me to deconstruct, as I did not feel like it made me a bad person.

Second, I emphasized that those deconstructing were not limited to binary options of religion or atheism. I took care to say that atheism is probably right for some people, but that does not make it right for everyone, nor does it make it *the* rational option. How could they develop their own sense of spirituality? "Haha, how long you got?" I say that maybe I could help through my channel: "Shameless self-promotion?" I shrug. "Maybe." But as I note, I started my channel in the first place because I wanted to help people, because that was what I had needed when I was struggling.

I began a series on the philosophy of shipping in this batch of videos, combining the second (06/27) with Roland Barthes' (1967/1978) concept of death of the author.

I filmed my first video replying to a comment (06/28), where the comment was, "Them bugs were trying to drown you out," referring to the noisy cicadas in my video on *Dialectic of*

Enlightenment. All I had to do was to hold down the comment until options appeared, press, “reply with video,” and film (or upload from the files on my phone). The comment appeared on the screen, although I could move it around.

I spoke on how natural forces go into constituting us: I was going to have to change my filming schedule because of the cicadas. I further talked about how in Japanese culture, cicadas symbolize summer, and more than just summer. This symbolism comes at least in part from haiku, which center on the passing of a moment, the passing of a season, and, by extension, natural cycles and the transience of all things.

I flexed my Japanese skills by reading a haiku by Yayuu (n.a./1919//2011) in Japanese, then a translation, and suggested that the poem is implying that the cicadas literally bring on nightfall by their cries. Again, I emphasized the impression that these natural forces happen regardless of human interference, and ended the video by saying that statement brought me “full circle” (which phrase I was proud of for how it played into the idea of cycles).

This video was the first I had made without a tripod in a long time, and I do not like how I look in it: I squint looking up into the camera, and you can see make-up lines and dark circles under my eyes.

During this period of my channel, I also began a successful series on philosophy in animation, starting with *Adventure Time* (Seibert et al., 2010-2018). I sit wide-eyed and with my mouth hanging open for a moment before saying, “Oh my *God*, that would go over the heads of most English majors!” (06/28)

Adventure Time, I say, reminds me a lot of how children tell stories because of how events of the story often seem to happen without much rhyme and reason, which many critics of the show found to be too “lol random.” But, I argue, what *Adventure Time* really reminds me of

is *mythology*. Not only is there less explanation for how and why things work the way they do in the world of the story, the human takes a back seat, as the protagonist Finn, is the only human in the story for a long time.

He is something of a hero archetype, but part of his development into adolescence is learning that there are consequences for venturing forth without regard or respect for the ways of the land of Ooo.

Here I was slightly concerned that I might be playing into “noble savage” stereotypes, which I mention in the video (only I say, “noble you-know-what’s,” both to avoid getting flagged and to avoid triggering anyone). I made a further video explaining my stance (06/30), which was simply that, while western storytelling has developed certain patterns that favor logical explanation, there are other ways of storytelling that are no less mature and complex; those ways of storytelling simply did not develop that particular style.

By June 28th, I had amassed 30 followers. In my second video on *Adventure Time* (06/29) I focused on how the series frames life as slow yet constant change. The characters may repeat certain patterns (Finn loses an arm, and it is revealed when we see his past life that he lost an arm then, too), but it is never exactly the same twice. In this video (and the one on storytelling), I am sitting outside the front of the main library and wearing a twirly dress, but only the brown halter top is visible since I am more in close-up.

Even the shapeshifting character Jake struggles when he begins experiencing unexpected change after learning that his origins are not what he thought they were. If there is a central theme to the show, it can be summed up in the song, “Everything Stays” (Olson, 2019), specifically the lyric, “Everything stays, but it still changes.” I would go on to make a dance

video with this song similar to my Anemoi Cycle videos (07/02), and another when I was not satisfied with the first one (07/04).

My third video on the show (07/01) would become my most popular, and in it I focus on how the show also focuses on cycles on the scale of history: the show is post-post apocalyptic, but there are still problems like war and interpersonal heartbreak. One thing I made sure to emphasize here is that the power of natural forces should not be used as an excuse for passivity. I really like how I look in this video: I am again sitting in my favorite park, this time wearing my black top with white and orange petals. The shot has what I consider my ideal angle and distance. Over time, this framing would become the main framing for my videos.

In the same batch as my second *Adventure Time* video I filmed, “Who’s afraid of postmodernism?” (06/30) with the description, “If it’s you, here’s your warning: run!” I sit in an unusual position for me, with my legs drawn up and my arms wrapped around my knees. “Have you ever noticed that everyone seems to hate postmodernism? Fundamentalist Christians, atheists, the right, the left... Why is that?” I quote Jean Lyotard’s (1979/1984) definition of postmodernism as, “an incredulity toward metanarratives,” emphasizing that it does *not* mean outright rejection of all metanarratives (embarrassingly, I call him “Jaques” rather than Jean).

I am especially emphatic that it does not reject science and logic but *worship* of science and logic: “In fact I think it’s saying that their worship is neither scientific nor logical... To think that I can understand the intrinsic nature of reality through logic is not logical at all; it is, on the contrary, insanity.” The latter part of this statement was another old quote I was quite proud of; I was developing a pattern of including my favorite aphorisms.

I do note here that I want to “go beyond” postmodernism and consider certain metanarratives, especially those related to spirituality. Rain can be seen and heard in the

background of this video; that is why I had taken cover at main library's covered entry, a pesky place to film as people came and went through the sliding doors.

Even so, this video did remarkably well, which surprised me: were TikTokers really that interested in postmodernism? My guess, based in my own experience, is that people frequently hear things described as "postmodern," but do not know exactly what that means (through no fault of their own; it took me a long time to get it, and the explanations I had found on YouTube seem a bit vague in retrospect); thus, they were curious to hear someone define it.

I went on to film a video that would be my first reply to a *contentious* comment: on my video about postmodernism, someone had written, "post modernists don't believe in the individual they believe in group identity" I begin this video (07/01) (filmed at home in close-up sitting on the floor in front of a white wall in my pink cold-shoulder top) by saying, "Hey, remember when I said that postmodernism is widely misunderstood?" "No shame to this person," I continue, admitting that there is a lot of confusing and misleading information on the subject.

The point of the video was not to be mean or to argue, but to use the opportunity to clear up a common misconception that others might have. Here, I argue, I think the problem is that most people have a more colloquial understanding of the word "individual," where postmodern thinkers are responding to a certain *conception* of the individual as independent and self-contained, as being an unchanging essence.

I also argue against the common misconception that postmodernism is about identity politics, as the two ways of thinking are mutually exclusive: postmodernism rejects any notion of stable gender, racial, and sexual categories, and in fact Judith Butler has come under fire from some feminists for saying destabilizing the notion idea of *woman*.

But, as Butler (1995) argues, how can we become free when we continue to subscribe to the cultural ideas that have been forced upon us? Are we not repeating the same violence onto others by expecting them to fit *our* categories? On the other hand, we can understand *woman* as having more meanings than there are women, because a person's understanding of *woman* can change over time.

We are all constituted by *different* combinations of forces, and so no two people can be exactly alike. By the same token, we constitute *each other*, and so we are not really separate from each other. I close by saying that, if postmodernists refer to the self *at all*, “they are talking about the continual process of becoming something new through the intra-action of difference.”

In this batch I also responded to a comment (07/01) from my video on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* where someone said, “This is random but you remind me of the 2000s and I find it really comforting and nostalgic.” In that video, I had been wearing my maroon cold-shoulder top with sleeves shaped like flowers, jean shorts, and my heart-shaped fused glass pendant with the green flower inside; I also had my sunglasses on my head. This comment struck me because I had not at all intended to style myself that way: it made me think of how the times we grow up in can shape the way we dress and do our hair for the rest of our lives. Further, I had not realized that my mere *appearance* could be comforting to someone, especially someone I did not know in person! That was definitely something I had never accomplished on Reddit!

During this time, I began to have problems with phone storage; I would delete all my takes after uploading my videos onto TikTok, as well as my CapCut drafts, but nothing seemed to be helping. It was incredibly frustrating and I lost footage because of it.

Even so, I finally managed to film my “philosophical concepts” video on the hard problem of consciousness (07/02), which I had been planning for some time (how had I ever

thought that I was going to clear through these videos one right after the other?) I wore a bright outfit: my pink sleeveless top knotted at the bellybutton with my dark blue skirt with bold pink flowers. I filmed under the gazebo at UGA's trial garden, and I think it is a good shot.

After briefly explaining that I am about to explain something I had said many times in my videos ("the idea that mind is a secondary product of material reality doesn't actually make any sense"), I read from an essay I had written where I felt I had perfected my elaboration of the hard problem. The description reads, "Y'all this one will BLOW YOUR MIND (if you're not already on the same page)! It's also CENTRAL to my thought!"

The video, however, did not do nearly as well as I had hoped; it is still sitting below 200 views. What happened? Well, first of all, it is a bit long at just over five minutes. Second, I do not think reading from my laptop for the entire video was an especially engaging technique. Finally, I had recently figured out how to use TikTok's noise cancellation feature and thought it was some kind of miracle cure for background noise; it is not. If there is too much noise, my voice ends up sounding garbled, to the extent that these days I often just include the noise rather than sound like I am underwater or have a bad phone connection.

Around this time I tried a *Duet* video with @twospiritcosplays (07/02), who had invited audiences to come eat and take care of ourselves together. Their video had played while I filmed mine, and in the resulting video, theirs and mine play together in split-screen: they talk, and I react by nodding and noting what I am eating (PB&J) in text. This duet was a good experience, but I have not used the feature since. If I am not talking in any given video, I am usually doing some kind of analysis in writing, and I do not want to distract from what the other person is saying in a duet. I did not try the *Stitch* feature until much later, but there, I was frustrated by having to film directly from the app (which is fine for dance videos, which I shoot in one take,

but a nuisance for any video with multiple clips) and by the tendency for the audio to become out of sync with the visual.

On July 4th, I posted a video on *Fight Club* (Palahniuk, 1996/2018) and postmodern deconstruction of the individual. I had begun filming in my favorite park between home and work, but then it had begun raining. I filmed a clip while standing under a tree to try to wait it out, but it kept raining, and in fact the rain picked up. I ended up taking cover at a nearby gas station, but by that point, I was drenched. On the other hand, the lighting was surprisingly good. *Neither rain nor snow nor dark of night*, as the saying goes. I finished up my video exactly as I was; maybe people would even find it an interesting change, maybe they would even admire my commitment.

I begin with another favorite quip of mine, this one developed on Reddit: “I majored in English, and now I have a rewarding career arguing with incels on the internet about *Fight Club*.” “Not because I hate *Fight Club*.” I hold up a finger and continue, “Au contraire, I *love* *Fight Club*!” My interpretation, however, is much different than that of many “rabid fans.”

After giving a spoiler warning I describe the plot, then move into my analysis: the narrator is *clearly* not one unified person, because Tyler Durden turns out to be his own alternate personality. The narrator thinks he is becoming more of an individual by rejecting materialism for Tyler’s toxic masculine ways of thinking, but all he has really done is to replace one prefabricated identity for another. Tyler explicitly strips his followers of any identity by making them shave their heads, wear uniforms, and give up their names. The fact that he is an alternate identity suggests that this ideology took the narrator over from within without even his notice.

At the end of the video, I argue that, while we do not all have alternate personalities, Tyler can be understood on a more metaphorical level: “We all hold contradicting ideas, we

behave differently in different contexts, and a lot of who we are comes from the culture we live in.”

At last, on July 4th, I posted my video on panpsychism, which I had filmed the 3rd but had been unable to post as I attended a party that night and had no Wi-Fi. I am wearing the same outfit as I had when I talked about *Fight Club* and am at the same gas station; my hair is obviously wet here. I defined panpsychism and briefly reiterated the hard problem, saying that it was about the irreducibility of mental qualities to physical qualities; I had gotten there on my own through sheer force of logic, and had only later found that many philosophers agreed with my position, including Albert North Whitehead (Vetlesen, 2019).

This video did much better than the one on the hard problem, which was a relief, especially since I had missed a day of filming. I followed with a video on the combination problem (Goff et al., 2001/2022) that same day, and the next (07/05) with one on panpsychism and process philosophy (which had also come from my July 3rd batch).

Here, I finally explained my philosophy of mind that I had arrived at when wondering whether rocks are conscious (here I overlaid the text, “As one does,” which line had occurred to me when I was filming but which I had not said aloud). The most logical scenario seemed to me that there is “that which experiences,” which is no substance at all, and “that which is experienced,” which is physical process. I note that I had wondered whether anyone else had put process philosophy and panpsychism together, and had eventually found that, yes, Alfred North Whitehead had done exactly that.

While before I had usually broken up batches of videos, here I had posted all of these conceptual ideas about sentience back to back to back; I wrote in my journal that I was “speeding up” with my conceptual content as I moved toward the “main point” of my channel. While I had

not expected it to take so long, “with everything going on in the world,” there had been things that seemed important to address in a timely manner, including the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. I wrote that I was worried about running out of things to talk about, but then it seemed like the world was going to “keep providing,” however sad that was. I planned to respond more to other TikTokers and draw from Reddit if I did start to struggle with finding things to talk about.

I had been somewhat worried that my channel would lose momentum because I had skipped a day of posting. I need not have worried, however: my video on *Fight Club* did especially well, I suspect because it is such a popular work. A comment I was especially excited about on that video was, “Love this content.” Not very descriptive, but the use of the word *content* rather than *video* suggested to me that the commenter was not only talking about that video, but about my content in general; if that was the case, it meant I had a dedicated follower.

Someone had also “stitched” my third video on *Adventure Time*. As previously mentioned, with *Stitch*, TikTokers use a clip from another user’s video to preface their own, usually because they have something to add or a critique (here it was an expansion on the show’s theme of transience). There seems to be an unspoken agreement among TikTokers that it is common courtesy to praise the Stitched video if they like it, and to encourage their own viewers to go watch the original. That is exactly what happened here, and it did give me quite a boost: I had 56 followers on July 5th before they created the stitch, and jumped to 73, then 100, the day after.

With my philosophy of mind clarified, I moved on to talking about how this stance affected my position on things like the afterlife (07/05): while there it did not logically follow from my position that experience continues after brain death, it did make “the door *wide* open” to the possibilities. I suggest that perhaps “that which perceives” exists “everywhere at all times all

at once.” “What if it retains the shape it was molded into by physical process?” I close by saying that I think there is reason to believe that it is something like that, and that I intended to get into that next time. This video did well at first, probably because the afterlife is an important concern to a lot of people, I thought, and predicted that it would be my first to hit 1,000 views. My prediction turned out to be wrong; in fact, the video is still sitting beneath 400 views, much lower than the two that follow.

In the next video (07/05), I talk about “supernatural” experiences I find compelling, especially near-death experiences where someone was able to accurately report what was going on in another room at the time they were clinically dead. “I have heard these stories from books, online, from people I know personally... Hell, I’ve had one or two strange experiences myself.”

I argue that, while I cannot claim to *know* that everyone involved was not simply lying, “*that’s the point:*” neither is it fair to assume that is the case. Further, I assume that these assumptions are not necessarily more logical, and in fact are often based in a severely flawed philosophy of mind (text here reads, “see: my video on the hard problem of consciousness.”)

This latter video did especially well, and I received several comments from people who had had strange experiences themselves. But I was especially pleased with one that said, “really glad i stumbled upon ur vids, love how you explain stuff [smiley emoji with hearts].” *Love how you explain stuff.*”

While I was happy to hear from people who already agreed with me, those comments did not make me feel that I was inspiring much change. On the other hand, the idea that I had led someone to feel they understood something where they had not felt so before, *that* was accomplishing what I set out to do.

The final video in this batch (07/06) was on YouTuber Contrapoints' (2018) concept of *masochistic epistemology*. I had mentioned this concept a couple of times before in my channel but had never gone in depth with it; by including it in my "philosophical concepts" series, I hoped to validate Contrapoints as a thinker whose concepts are worthy, even if she is no longer in academia (eager to come up with my own concepts I had previously done one on my own concept I called "the unobservability principle" of sentience; I now believe, however, that I jumped the gun a bit, as I have found that what I am talking about is generally just called *ineffability*).

The current subject matter was a great place to talk about this idea because I think *masochistic epistemology*, a kind of fatalistic thinking where greater weight is put on the feared and undesired scenario, plays a role in why people do not take "supernatural" claims seriously.

Looking at this video now, it is by far the most viewed of the batch I filmed that day at over 4,700 views; the next highest viewed is "Panpsychism and the afterlife pt. 2" at 1,475. It is a good-looking shot: I am at my favorite park on a bright day and wearing my dress with a colorful "paint swatch" pattern; over the dress I am wearing my sheer black shrug (I had thought of the ensemble as representing the ineffability of sentience: there was something colorful beneath the black shrug, just as there might be life "beneath" all material reality).

But that could not be all there was to it, or the other videos would have done just as well; in fact, I *suspect* that later videos filmed in the same outfit tend to perform a little less well, as people might swipe past a video that starts the same as others they have seen before. Besides, for reasons previously mentioned, I had expected people to be more engaged by discussion of the afterlife (not to mention, I had speculated that the term "masochistic epistemology" might intimidate people).

This video is not the shortest one in the batch by any means. At the time, I thought perhaps the high view count was due to my mention of Contrapoints, who is quite a popular YouTuber. But not all my videos that reference her have done that well. Perhaps it was simply this combination of factors. Perhaps the word “masochistic” also suggested that the video would be suggestive and/or subversive, an appealing violation of propriety. One comment on the video says, “I’ve got bad death issues as a result of PTSD. Thank you for this video.” That statement meant a lot to me; again, while it was encouraging to hear from people who already agreed with me, they were not my primary focus.

On the other hand, I received a comment on “Panpsychism and the afterlife pt. 2” that said, “If I continue after I die I’ll be vary [sic] disappointed.” This frame of mind *was* something I had thought about before; if the concept of oblivion is my worst fear, ideas about eternity come with its own set of anxieties. Usually, I simply tried my best not to think about the subject. Now, though, I wanted to address the concern, but I certainly did *not* want to dismiss it or offer simplistic aphorisms, which I find are usually of little comfort.

Those who have had near-death experiences often say that the things that make this life so difficult, including pain and low self-esteem, do not carry over into the next one; they say that our essential nature is love. How could I reconcile this position with a postmodern stance, where there is *no such thing* as an “essential nature?” Even before I studied postmodern theory, the idea that there is one “true” self had deconstructed for me, not the least because I *also* love the versions of me that are sad or angry or bitter.

Thinking about the subject so I could provide a strong response, though, I finally had what I considered a break-through: perhaps it was that the bad things in this life come out of *material* intra-action, which constitute *resistance* that we struggle against. But perhaps when we

die, the lack of physical barriers makes us able to relate to each other as directly as we relate to ourselves (perhaps even *more* directly). Thus, in the absence of a physical body, what is left is *love*.

Why experience this resistance in the first place (assuming we have a choice, which I have heard many who have had near death experiences affirm)? I say in the video response I made (07/06) (which I made in part because I had accidentally lost what I had filmed while trying to free up space on my phone) that I have *a* possible answer, but that I am going to save it for later. The answer that had developed, though, was that the experience of resistance and discomfort would still be important for helping push us to *create*, to create *change*, to *become something different*.

While the video did not break 200 views (I believe because it is shot in my room, where the lighting and background are not very appealing, and because my outfit (my mustard yellow floral cami under my slate blue vest, shorts, and my sea-green pendant) does not especially stand out), this experience was profound: I marked it as the first time intra-action on TikTok created a major development in my philosophospirituality. Of course, that development is ongoing; as previously mentioned, I have now advanced this stance by defining *all* intra-action as love. But that further development in no way detracts from the profundity of the experience for me.

Getting to the point (July 07th-July 17th)

As previously stated, every video I make is important to me. I would be lying, however, if I said that they all feel *equally* important. I was building up to talking about philosophospirituality, which I considered the central thesis of my channel. Five videos were dedicated to Karen Barad's work (*agency*, *agential realism*, *intra-action*, *diffraction*, and *material-discursive* in that order), with the first four being linked visually because they were

from the same batch, made at the same location in the same outfit; I posted these four on July 07th. I had worn a white dress to make these videos stand out visually, because I do feel aligned with Barad; this alignment makes her thought important for understanding *my* thought.

By this time, I had *finally* figured out where my phone's memory issues were coming from, or rather, my roommate had figured it out for me: the TikTok app had a cache, and also data; I had not known it was there to clear it. Clearing the cache totally solved the problem (temporarily: I would eventually have to start clearing the data, too, which logs me out of my account and makes the app give me tips like I am a new user—an annoyance, but one that has proven unavoidable).

I believe it was in this series that I found a solution to the problem of ending up with videos that were too long: I could simply split them into shorter videos. Sometimes I *did* have to reshoot because one part was much longer than the other, but then I could simply focus on that first part and cut off the bits that moved into the next subject. It was still easier than creating *two* new videos.

By July 08th, I had 200 followers. I realized that growth on TikTok might be exponential, as people share content they like, and TikTok rewards success (probably because it wants to retain viewers). I was beginning to get strong positive feedback, too: from my video on Barad's understanding of agency, "first one of these videos I've been able to sit through, nice job!" and "Good concept and explanation." The impression I was getting was that people thought I had an engaging style and that my explanations were easy to follow.

I *had* filmed a video on philosophospirituality by this point but had not posted it because, as I write in my journal, "starting out a clip with your head tossed back and your eyes rolled is a good way to look possessed!" I cannot remember exactly what I was trying to do with that clip;

my suspicion, based on my current habits, is that I was transitioning out of a digression by saying, “Anyway!” and it simply had not looked the way I had wanted it to. Regardless, I wrote that the clip had startled me when I had seen it; while I was able to laugh about it, I still did not want to look “evil” in front of my audience. The clip must have featured an integral point to my video, because I ended up scrapping the whole thing.

In this journal entry (July 08th) I wrote that I was feeling a little self-doubt, worrying about getting things wrong. But I had recently gotten back into *Hadestown* (Mitchell, 2019) the one musical I absolutely adore, and it gave me a lot more confidence in myself. Or rather, it helped me not to lose sight of the bigger picture. The musical is retelling of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and concerns themes of social justice. Orpheus is able to inspire people to fight back against their oppressors, but at the last moment he doubts himself, wondering who he is to lead them.

Even if it were not meant exactly that way, I took it as a cautionary tale: I did not want to look back. So what if I got details wrong or misinterpreted a concept here and there? Not that it did not matter, but the main point of what I was (and am continuing) to do is to deconstruct harmful hegemonies, to offer different ways of thinking, to show people that maybe their existential fears aren’t because of the “true nature” of reality but because of how they have been taught to think.

If I could really create that kind of change (and audience response was leading me to believe that I could), why on *earth* would I let fear of being wrong stop me? If anything, my greater inspiration drove me to get things right: I wanted (and still want) for people to be able to take me seriously, and in order to do that I need to know what I am talking about.

I was also considering addressing the topic of race at this time; there was another TikToker (@menudotuco) who had a lot to say about racism and how White people think. Not that he was entirely wrong; I did like his content and found a lot of it moving and insightful. But not all his statements rang true to me, and what is more, I felt that I had important insight on the racist attitudes of White people, being myself a White person who had once been conservative.

Basically, instances of racism against others had been *implicit* in my life experience (and vilified when they were not), while criticisms of Whiteness had been *explicit*, which limited perspective had led me to genuinely believe that White people were being victimized.

@menudotuco had talked about a need for White people to figure out their issues before we can make progress, and I thought I could play a role there.

On the other hand, I knew it was a delicate subject; even if I spoke perfectly it could go poorly for me. I consulted a friend, and she warned against it, especially now that *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was at risk; I followed her advice because I valued her insight. I was at least able to skirt the issue later, though, by talking about men's identity issues in the US, which I think comes out of a similar experience. As a woman, I was less concerned that I would be called out for defending terrible behavior.

Directly after a video on Deleuze and Guattari's plane of immanence (which did surprisingly well considering I shot it in my bedroom) and one day later (June 09th), I posted "Philosophical concepts explained 19: Material-discursive pt. 2." Here I am at my usual park wearing my light blue camisole with crocheted flowers under a blue striped button-up left unbuttoned (I notice that my gut pokes out over my jeans, which look I am not crazy about. In my hair I wear a bright red and gold silk scarf.

This video was a response to a comment on my first take on the subject, which was, “Wait. I don’t understand lol,” In that first video on the subject, I had used the body to illustrate: (discursive) gendered gesture only makes sense in relation to a physical body. And do we think the relationship between the social and the material is one of one-way domination? “No, we’re way past that!” I begin my second take by saying, “Let’s try a different angle! In fact, why don’t I do what I always do and tell you how *I* got there?” I explain that genes cannot be entirely material because they affect brain chemistry which affects the social, “how we think, how we see, our dispositions.”

The social cannot be strictly social, either, because when someone speaks, sound waves are *physical* energy. “It affects our body, including our brain chemistry, on a *physical* level.” Even though DNA is “stubborn,” we do know that it can change slowly over time due to environmental factors. The real breakthrough for me, I say, was realizing that genes and environment are not really separate substances.

I cite a metaphor that had occurred to me some time ago that I was quite fond of: “Think of water dripping on a rock. They behave differently, and we perceive them differently, but on a subatomic level, they’re the same.” I associate DNA with the rock and water with environment. “We’re always asking, is this more nature or nurture? But to me, that’s like asking, does the water change the shape of the rock, or does the rock direct the path of the water?” I give a big shrug and say, “Yes!” The person who had been confused by the first video did not comment, but I did receive other comments agreeing with me (one posted about a month later said that the metaphor was particularly helpful).

At this stage of my channel, I had established something of a rhythm, usually posting three videos a day. I was doing long strings of videos on related topics: Barad (07/07-07/09),

posthumanism (07/09-07/10), how technology has changed us (07/11-07/12 & 07/15), Baudrillard (07/12-07/14). While I was including stand-alone videos, these, too, were often part of series: my second Anemoi Cycle video appears here (07/10), as does the fifth in my philosophy in animation video (07/10) on *The Owl House* (Terrace, 2020-).

The video on social media and the internet (07/15) led me into talking about how those in identity crisis often end up attaching in echo chambers of right-wing ideology (07/15), which led into how we often intentionally model ourselves after fiction (07/16) (shot at home in front of the white wall and in my black top with neon pink and blue embroidery), and then into talking about how I had long felt my identity to be centered on my experience of shipping fictional characters (07/17) (shot in the same outfit and location as the previous).

My video on “main character syndrome” (07/19), where I am wearing my dark blue dress with bright red flowers and am sitting near the Butts-Mehre building, seemed to especially resonate with people: “When you think about all the countless works of fiction out there, isn’t there enough room for *everyone* to be the main character in their own story? I think the question we need to be asking ourselves is, *what kind of main character am I?*” I do mark a difference between *trying* to be something I was not as a child simply to be noticed and *acting* on the inspiration to sing and dance.

The former was about wanting to be seen for the sake of being seen, and the latter was about wanting to *show* the joy of who I feel myself to be. Suddenly I think of the *Steven Universe* (Sugar, 2010-2019) character Stevonnie, a nonbinary fusion of the boy main character, Steven, and his best friend, Connie. Stevonnie is Steven’s first fusion, and they are *exuberant* about their own existence, running and dancing and doing cartwheels simply because they are so happy to be themselves. That is my interpretation, at least. I also suddenly realize that Stevonnie

is where I need to focus my video on *Steven Universe*; I had wanted to make one on the *fascinating* concept of fusion, and now I am glad I waited.

Although I do not say so in the video, it occurs to me now that *trying* to behave a certain way feels like consciously *forcing* myself to do something, while *showing* joy feels like *allowing* an unconscious urge to take over, allowing myself *to be moved*. Suddenly I remember the poem “We Have Come to be Danced” (Mathieson, 2014), which speaks of dance in terms of primal, animal urge. Of course, the difference is not always so clear-cut, especially since even things that at first do not feel natural can become habit.

I was steadily acquiring followers: by July 17th I had 425, by the 20th, 447.

Becoming something new through the intra-action of difference (July 20th-September 05th)

The first time I did substantial research at viewer request was for my series on *metamodernism*, which someone had asked about on my “Who’s afraid of postmodernism?” video. This response came quite a while after the comment had been created (by TikTok standards), but I had needed time to read. At the time of the comment, my only knowledge of metamodernism came from a video on the subject by YouTube channel The Living Philosophy (2022), and, while I like that channel, the impression I had gotten from the video was that metamodernism was just postmodernism with a fresh coat of paint.

Metamodernism was framed as being more optimistic and open to metanarratives than postmodernism, but, since the latter is not necessarily pessimistic and since it is about *incredulity* toward metanarratives, not *rejection*, I wondered whether a separate term was even justified; what I had heard made me feel that metamodern thinkers were mischaracterizing postmodernism. In my first video on the subject (07/20), however, I note that often when I start out rejecting a philosophy, it is because I do not entirely understand it. Something I noticed

almost immediately when I started researching metamodernism is that it seemed centered on visual arts. I also noticed that some of the thinkers being included as metamodern were ones postmodernism claimed as well, including Derrida.

On the other hand, one author treated metamodernism as a *subset* of postmodernism, opposed on the other hand to *antimodernism*, and this stance made more sense to me. I failed to note what articles I was drawing from in this video, which makes me a bit disappointed in myself; neither do I have them saved on my new laptop. I have just found one of them again by searching *metamodern antimodern* on Google Scholar; one is by Stephen M. Feldman (2005) and is entitled “The Problem of Critique: Triangulating Habermas, Derrida, and Gadamer Within Metamodernism.” Briefly scanning the article, I can see that this article is the one I referred to that considered metamodernism a subset of postmodernism. I believe the article that led me to understand metamodernism as more focused on visual arts was Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker’s (2010) “Notes on Metamodernism,” which seems to have been a definitive article on the subject.

In fact, my next video (07/20), shot directly after the first and filmed in the same location, in the same outfit, focuses on this latter, and this time I *do* mention it in the description. In this video, I talk about how the article cites *oscillation* as one of the principle themes of metamodernism: “oscillation between hope and cynicism, between deconstruction and reconstruction...” Neither extreme is considered healthy, and a *swing* is needed when we veer too far in either direction.

“The idea is that we should *imagine* utopia even if we know it’s doomed to fail.” In their art, they use materials that are not the best suited to what they want to do, because they want to show a failure to reach perfection. “I don’t know what I think about that,” I say in the video.

There is the story about either the Amish or the Quakers (I could not remember, and it may apply to both) that they intentionally put flaws in their work because they do not want to be perfect like God. “Then I heard someone who knew that community say that that’s not true; actually the idea that we could even approach the perfection of God is ludicrous to them.”

While I did not know whether what that person was saying was factual, it made sense to me: does not intentionally putting flaws into works of art not suggest that perfection *is* possible if we did not do so? And *do we* know that utopia is impossible? “I mean, it probably isn’t, but do we *know* that? Like I’ve said about belief in destiny and stuff, I think you have to believe in it at least a little for it to work.” I got many comments on both videos expression agreement and interest, and some had their own interesting points to make: one person related metamodernism to game theory. I would return to metamodernism in one more video, but first, I did a series of three videos finally explaining philosophospirituality, all posted on July 21st.

The first two express what I find limiting about philosophy and spirituality on their own. *Finally*, I got to “Philosophospirituality: Introduction.” I was happy with the timing of the video, because it ended up being my 129th; 129 is my number: I was born on January 29th, off of I-29, and I have noticed that the number always catches my attention. If it feels like a sign and is comforting to me, if it makes me feel more confident about my work, why should I not lean into that? I begin by saying that my followers may have noticed me using the hashtag *philosophospirituality* (in fact I had hoped that someone would ask what it meant so I could do a reply).

I sum up my previous two videos by saying that I have found “spirituality too woo for me, and philosophy not woo enough.” I explain that, “Philosophospirituality is *not* philosophy and spirituality side by side,” and here I hold my hands out parallel to one another, “but more

like...” and here I knit my fingers together. “I don’t think I’d call it a synthesis, though, because from where I’m standing, they’ve never looked like two entirely different things to begin with.” I say that I constantly find myself talking about academic philosophy in spiritualist communities, “Because they get into a lot of the same ideas, just from different angles.”

I reemphasize the importance of bringing more critical thought into spiritual communities, then say, “One thing I want to make clear here is that this is a way of thinking and *not* a set of beliefs.” If we cannot *know* “the truth,” then what is healthy for us should play a role, and different things will work for different people. At the end I invite others to use the hashtag if they want to engage in this kind of thinking on TikTok.

This video did not do as well as I had hoped at first, but it has received more attention since I *pinned* it, which makes it one of the first to appear on my channel. Even so, comments were positive: “I love your videos and mind. Keep it up! Your so interesting and have a wonderful way of communicating,” (from a TikToker who had become a consistent commenter). “I LOVE THIS I’ve been trying to find a word for how I’ve felt for a while!! I grew up with a dad who was strictly religious and was not healthy for me.” “I’ve been looking for this and thinking about this for so long.” “New age spirituality holds some truths but the deception side of it promotes laziness. I like that you’re wanting to incorporate critical thinking.”

These comments made me feel that I was accomplishing my goal of providing something like the kind of guidance I had needed way back when. I was now at 487 followers.

Directly after introducing philosophospiritality I returned to metamodernism (07/22), focusing on an article by Allard den Dulk (2020) called “New Sincerity and *Frances Ha* in Light of Sartre: A Proposal for an Existentialist Conceptual Framework.” I speak on how den Dulk defines the new sincerity in opposition to both the *realism* characteristic of *classical cinema* and

the self-referential *irony* of postmodern cinema. “The author draws from Sartre to say that *sincerity* is not necessarily pre-conscious. And what I think they mean by this is that sincerity doesn’t have to be expression of a true, essential self: it can be self-aware, it can acknowledge contradictions and artifice.”

In other words, *the new sincerity* is defined by an acknowledgement of artifice that does not intend to undercut meaning or affective experience for the audience. I had watched *Frances Ha* (Baumbach, 2012) before I read the article and enjoyed it, but ended up thinking it was not the best example of metamodern film. “Yes, it does reference cinematic tradition, but you know who else does that?” Here I hold up my hand and point down at my head. “When life imitates art and art imitates life, it kind of becomes like an infinity mirror, doesn’t it?”

In my next video I talk about a film I think fits the metamodern paradigm much better, Satoshi Kon’s (2001) *Millennium Actress*. *Millennium Actress* happens to be my favorite movie of all time precisely for how it blurs the line between fiction and “real life;” the main character, Chiyoko, is an actress whose characters all resonate deeply with who she feels herself to be. For her, the movies she acts in are as real as her life as Chiyoko.

I believe one thing that makes the film so effective is that it *does* reference not only Japanese history but Japanese cinema; it is what many would call “a love letter.” By doing so it calls to mind nostalgia, audiences’ own relationships to films. Although I am no Japanese film buff, Chiyoko’s deep identification with her characters, as well as her devotion to a man who lives on in her imagination after only one meeting, hit me on an affective level that I do not at all believe would have been possible in a more “realistic” depiction.

In my video (07/23), I recall a statement made in an earlier video that, “I would use that movie to show someone what it feels like to be me. Something is communicated there, *through*

artifice, that I can't give you just by sitting here and talking about my life... It's about *personal truth* rather than *fact*." I close the video with the closing lines from Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819/n.a.): "Beauty is truth, truth, beauty—that is all/ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." (lines 49-50)

In fact, the use of this line made me realize that *Millennium Actress* and Keats' "Ode" have a central theme in common, which I made a further video about (07/24). Speaking on the "Ode," I say, "It's got this theme about how *art* and *imagination* can be sweeter than real life. And also how art is kind of frozen in time." I speak on how Chiyoko's love for the man she met so long ago becomes a driving force in her life, how it gives her something to always hope for and look forward to. "But on the other hand, there's a very painful side to it."

Chiyoko lives in a state of unfulfilled longing: "The thing that is most joyful and meaningful to her is also the most painful." I tried something new here: crying on film. "That movie gets at something *very raw* within me." The tears were not at all faked; while I believe it is fair to say I *allowed* myself to cry, I could not force myself to do so if I tried. That day, I thought perhaps I had seen an old unrequited love with his girlfriend and daughter, which had made me feel very bitter about still not having what he had.

I vaguely reference the event, assure audiences that I will be all right, and say that the reason I decided to show them this side of me is that, "I want to show people who I really am, in the sense of who I feel myself to be... I want to *connect* with people. Maybe I can't communicate exactly how it feels to be me, but... This is my best attempt." I had taken a risk posting this video, as it may have just made audiences uncomfortable, but it did well in views and likes.

Of course, this video was not very postmodern of me, but it would feel dishonest if I toed its line. Although I was aware of it before, writing about my TikTok channel has made my concern with *honesty* and *sincerity* stand out to me.

In another video posted on July 25th, I speak on my relationship with the character I identify with most, who is Helga Pataki from *Hey Arnold!* (Bartlett & Harrington, 1996-2004). While I grew up with this cartoon, I do not think I completely understood my identification with that character back then. Now, however, it seems obvious: the intensity of her emotions and her love/hate relationship with them, the way she hides that side of herself. Where Chiyoko is very much a romantic heroine, I say, I identify more with Helga precisely because she is “a hot mess.”

I identify with her on the level of shipping because it is something that is at once very meaningful and awkward and embarrassing. As a cartoon character, Helga behaves and speaks in exaggerated ways; her whole character is dramatic and over the top. But, I argue, in keeping with metamodernism, that exaggeration is exactly what makes her feel so real, because “those feelings are big and intense and dramatic!” I wore a pink sleeveless dress and a pink pressed flower pendant; I have my hair in a bun and tied the pink hair-tie I knitted around it. This outfit was very intentional, as pink is Helga’s color (I had knitted the hair-tie some time ago specifically because of the pink bow she always wears).

My videos on my relationship to specific works of fiction and characters within them seemed to hit a nerve with people; I mention in particular a long message someone had sent me about their own relationship with fiction, which they were somewhat troubled by. I was somewhat surprised that *this* subject was getting so much attention; I had thought that people would be more invested in existential concerns about the afterlife.

But then, when I was a kid, what was the very first thing I did with my new internet connection? From my journal on July 27th, “I suddenly had access to collective knowledge stretching across generations and cultures, and what was my one burning question that took precedence over everything else? Whether there were others like me who obsessed over fictional characters.”

In the midst of these videos on fiction (in the same batch as some of them; I am wearing that same pink outfit) I did a series of videos exemplifying philosophospirituality. The first of these was “Philosophospirituality: Near death experiences” on July 24th. I briefly redefine philosophospirituality, then continue to highlight that it is not simply about what is objectively true, but about looking at the assumptions and implications of beliefs. I argue that it is this angle from which I look at near death-experiences, that I do not believe we can know their “true nature.”

But if we cannot *know*, that means that we cannot assume that they are simply hallucinations or lies, either. “If you don’t believe there’s anything to it, I want to ask, even if it turned out not to be true, what’s lost by entertaining it? I’ve found so much wisdom in what people who have had near death experiences have to say regardless of the true nature of the experience.” I end by saying, “Now, I don’t mean *at all* to say that we should just accept what they’re saying uncritically. The point is that we should be able to listen and think seriously about the implications.” Although I had been doing philosophospirituality for my entire channel, this video marked the first time I gave an explicit example of analysis.

I did a couple more of these analyses, one on *manifestation* (the general idea that our thoughts influence material reality) (07/25) that did particularly well. I also continued old series: I did several videos on my all-time favorite cartoon (and show in general), *Hey Arnold!* (07/25-

07/26) there are a few more dance videos, I did several videos on how TikTok, specifically, has changed us (07/28-07/31). Looking at my videos now, I do notice a shift away from numbered “Philosophical concepts” videos; not only was I finding it too easy to forget what number I was on (a problem not limited to this series), I was simply moving on to broader topics like cultural appropriation (including why people might do it).

I had rather a profound realization during a video talking about what kind of ships (fandom-speak for fictional romantic pairings) I fixated on and what they said about what I value, which is unconditional love. My realization was that this value gave me something in common with those who had had near death experiences, who often say that our core is *love*. Growing up, I considered shipping the core of my identity, in part because it made me different from others, I am sure.

But that was not the only reason: the experience of unconditional love I felt there was so intense and meaningful; even as I began to deny the notion of a “true self,” I could *not* deny that this version of me *felt like* my truest self (which I had realized before this point is ironic, because in the process of identification I “dissolve” into characters, in a sense). That resonance makes me think perhaps I was *onto something*, after all.

A comment here that I particularly loved was, “I love your videos so much you validate things I knew as a child but ended up pushing away in attempt to resonate with the way our society is.” While I am cautious about claims made about “the wisdom of children,” again, I think there is sometimes something *to* these claims. Perhaps there are things we are taught out of and into, including positivism.

Shipping was a part of my spirituality and shaped my worldview since long before I knew to think of it that way, and I argue in my video that this kind of personal meaning can serve

as an antidote to the consumerist spiritualities I had been talking about in recent videos. Not that it was healthy to only “look within;” we should also listen to others. “Well it’s not really two different things, is it? Who you are is everything you perceive, including your encounters with others.” Although I neglected to mention it, had the fictional characters and pairings I loved not been inspired by the works of others? I was especially excited about this video because it “knotted together” so many threads in my thought—spirituality, fiction, philosophy—in a way I had not even been expecting.

In August, I did two videos on learning respectfully from other cultures’ spiritualities (on the 08th and 09th) and ended up focusing on insights I had learned from intra-acting with Japanese manga and anime (08/09-08/13). The use of both Buddhist and Christian elements in certain works had helped me better understand not only Buddhism but the Christianity I had grown up with (08/10). My videos on the films of famed director Hayao Miyazaki (08/12-08/13) did especially well and helped push me to over 800 followers. I also had two videos on how to develop “a healthy sense of spirituality,” including the spiritual experience of music (08/12).

Around this time there is a shift in my videos, as I had realized that buildings on campus like Tate Student Center and the main library were good places to film; because it was often easier to film at night after work and because it eliminated some environmental noise (including the ever-present cicadas), I began to take advantage of these settings. At this point, I was usually posting two videos per day.

I had noticed this shift before, but simply looking at the thumbnail covers for my videos on my channel, the posing in my videos became a lot more relaxed around this time. Before, I had usually sat with my hands crossed on my lap; when the pose was different, it was usually because I was sitting on steps and could easily do things like rest my elbow on my leg, my chin

on my hand. Now it seems readily obvious to me that the reason I became more relaxed was that I started intra-acting with *different kinds of furniture*; where sitting on benches in parks had left me with little else I could do besides fold my hands, tables and plush chairs and couches made spreading out and leaning easier and more comfortable.

From here I moved into a series where I attempted to reconcile humanity and its destructiveness with the earth (08/18-08/21); I had been planning this series for some time but had not found the right moment until this time. “The right moment” came in the form of a tarot reading I had done some days earlier where I pulled The Hierophant, which represents authority, leaders, structure. He is very linked with the *social*, but, interestingly, Yoshi Yoshitani represents *her* as The White Buffalo Woman from the Lakota Sioux tribe.

The White Buffalo woman is a divine figure who transforms into a buffalo; she teaches the Lakota Sioux their roles in life, how they should do things, and provides them with a herd of buffalo to hunt when they are in a period of famine. However, I had pulled her *reversed*. A reversal in tarot can mean many things and the interpretation is up to the reader, but it often suggests that something is out of balance. On the card, The White Buffalo Woman is holding a peace pipe, an instrument I had been thinking about a few days before I tried to film the video.

As I state in the video, it had taken several tries because I was having so much trouble saying everything I wanted in three minutes or under, which by this time was my goal for videos; I ended up splitting it into several different ones. Sitting back in main library by a window, in a mustard yellow chair with my arm slung over its back, I say, “When I think about what nicotine does for us, it calms us down, it soothes the nerves. And I totally see how that could be useful in a spiritual or diplomatic context.”

Of course, colonizers capitalized on tobacco, and violating the earth and Indigenous peoples in the process. I *could* interpret this reversal as being about that violation, like the scout who approaches the White Buffalo Woman out of lust (whom she promptly smites). Excess could play a role here, too, because of how tobacco is harmful when abused.

“But I think there’s another side here with this five of swords reversed.” The five of swords is typically about winning the battle but losing the war, and Yoshitani represents it with the story of Osiris, Set, and Isis. Again, there is the element of gods teaching humans their ways, as Isis teaches humans the healing practices she learned to help her family (including the funerary practice of creating mummies).

But these are gods at war, and, what’s more, there is a *cycle* of gods usurping each other: Set usurps Osiris, but Set is usurped in turn by Osiris’ son, Horus. “And I look at this binary we have in our culture, like, how neoliberal values say that nature is impulsive, and violent, and debased,” (text on the screen reads, “While human reason gives us self-control and morality,”) “While on the other hand, there is a strong flipped binary that nature is pure and good and innocent, and humanity is bad and selfish and destructive. But to me, neither of these perspectives make sense because the binary doesn’t make sense in the first place. What I want to ask both sides is,” (here I cock my head and fold my hand under my chin), *where do you think humans and our ways come from, exactly?*”

From here I did two videos on how civilization may have changed out attitude toward ourselves and the world we live in (08/19); one is focused on the theory that civilization developed around crops we cultivated for the purpose of making alcohol, which is addictive. Civilization made us stuck in place, and being unable to simply pack up and move when

conditions changed made us vulnerable, creating a “man vs. Nature” mindset.” What I had intended to be my final video in the series is titled, “Nature and civilization: The big point.”

I begin by saying, “I feel like one reason a lot of people struggle with climate change is that they feel like it didn’t have to be this way; like, everything was going great until we came along.” But “it doesn’t make sense to say that we’re bad, selfish creatures who are destroying the good, pure earth, because we are what the earth made of us. *We are what the earth made of itself,*” (which quote I used for the video’s description). I go onto argue that destruction is bad in the first place because it is the loss of a point of view, and that *includes* humans: “We are one way the earth feels and thinks.”

Further, I argue, maybe conscious thought *can* help us solve climate change; after all, is that not how we came to realize what the problem is in the first place? I contrast us with invasive species who cannot think about the consequences of overhunting. “I think preserving ourselves as a part of the world and preserving the world as a part of us is a pretty great motivation for change.”

This video did all right, although not as well as the previous ones in the series. One commenter, however, had some contentions, and wondered if I were not minimizing the role of humans in climate change, especially people with a lot of power who knew full well what they were doing. I argued back that their own selfishness and short-sightedness was *also* a product of the earth, but they finally asked, “of course, but what's actionable about the observation?” I explained in the comments and thanked them for bringing the confusion to my attention; the conversation ended amicably. I had thought I was being clear, so I was glad to know that I needed to clarify my point.

I decided to make another video entitled, “‘We are what the earth made of itself:’ Why it matters pt. 1” (08/21). I begin by talking about when I transferred to private Christian school in the third grade, how I never fit in there, how the girls whom I had been friends with in public school were *still* friends when I returned to public high school. But by that point, I had lost a lot of my social skills and had developed “this thing about people feeling sorry for me,” which led me to reject their invitation to sit with them at lunch.

I describe how watching teen coming-of-age stories made me feel like I had missed out. These stories framed adolescence as difficult, but “there are all these intense emotions, you fall in love for the first time, you have this tight friendship. I didn’t have *any of that*; I went to school and I went home.” I deeply regretted changing schools in the third grade, thinking about how much better my life might have been *if only* I had stayed where I was: “I would probably still have those friendships, right?”

But “First and most obviously, I don’t *know* how it would’ve turned out otherwise. But more importantly, hindsight is 20/20, I’m judging based on information I have now, back then I didn’t know better.” Text on the screen appears that says, “(which is not to imply that certain individuals didn’t know better here)” “Thinking like that helped me because it made me stop obsessing over this better life I could’ve had, and it made me stop feeling like the one I have now was wasted. It helps me focus on doing the best with what I have, you know, what can I learn from it?”

The relationship to climate change is that it feels a bit similar to me: thinking of how much better things could have been “if only a few key things hadn’t happened” made the current state of the world hard to accept. “Instead of appreciating the world in all its brokenness and thinking about what I can do now, I end up grieving for this alternate reality that may never have

had a chance at existing in the first place.” Not only does thinking of human destruction as natural shift me away from that line of thought, it makes me feel less *alienated* from the world around me. “And you know, I think it should be about more than the outcome. Because it occurs to me: what I’ve been talking about this whole time is *regret*. If we do our best and things still don’t work out, well, at least we know we did everything we could.”

I love how I look in this video, wearing my yellow top with white flower petals, a flower patterned maroon headband I had fashioned from the sash of a robe I do not wear, and a pendant hung from a chain with maroon beads. I am sitting on a bench in Tate Center in front of a window, and occasional flashes of lightning can be seen in the background (I would get caught in this storm as I walked home from filming, a torrential downpour that forced me to take shelter in the covered entrance to an apartment building for at least half an hour).

I can see by this time that I have learned to pull the camera higher so I am more on eye level with the audience; before, I had usually appeared to be looking down, which happened because of my concerns about leaving too much headroom. How did I learn to change my angle? I am not entirely sure. Certainly, no one explicitly taught me or criticized what I had been doing before. If I had to guess, I think I had initially pulled the camera higher without thinking about it much. Perhaps I realized the shot looked better when I did that at the time, but if not, then I feel certain I noticed the difference from seeing the covers of my videos side-by-side.

I followed shortly thereafter with a six-part series analyzing the Garden of Eden myth (08/22-08/25); I claim in the first video here that, if Adorno and Horkheimer consider *The Odyssey* the founding myth of positivism, “Then *my* founding myth is Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.” This claim is based on my analysis of the myth: I argue that it is about humanity coming into self-awareness and theory of mind (I.e. the understanding that others are

their own minds with their own thoughts and feelings), and consequently shame; that *shame* is a major part of what made us fall out of tune with nature/the divine; that the sexual imagery can be understood on both a literal *and* metaphorical level as being about us coming into our role as creators who could imagine and make our imaginings physical through intra-action; and that the eating and reproduction in the myth are about being tied to the cycle of physical life and continually becoming something new (much as serpents shed their skin). Most of this analysis I had already established through intra-action on sites like Reddit.

On the other hand, I definitely developed some new thought through analyzing the myth of Jesus (whom I call by his more likely historical name, *Yeshua*, to avoid attracting fundamentalists) (08/29-09/01). Before I went into this subject I made sure to be *clear* that I do not think myth is “untrue;” in fact, I say in one video, I think it often contains *profound* truth (08/29), in part because it is a form of *diffractive* storytelling (08/28). That is, it is storytelling developed over long periods of time by many different tellers, and as such, perhaps common experience and insight gets amplified. If focusing on “common themes” is not very Baradian of me, I would ask, why can we not consider both similarity *and* difference?

The binary has deconstructed for me, as I have found that “same” and “different” are often matters of perspective. For example, as mentioned earlier, we think of ourselves as watching the “same” episode of a show over and over, or we can understand that every iteration is a different experience. Thus, I believe we can look at what gets amplified in myth *without* sacrificing attention to difference. Here I argue that perhaps the shared themes of myth and mystic experience are “pointing to something.”

I introduce my series on Jesus by saying that what I am going to talk about is not facts (which I do not think we can know) and not *just* what is in the Bible, but also cultural interpretations, and what I see as the symbolism and broader themes of the story.

Regardless of whether Jesus' story is a literal fulfillment of prophecy, I say that I *do* see parallels between it and the story of the Garden of Eden (08/30): where the latter is about a falling out with nature/the divine, the story of Jesus is one of *reconciliation*. But how is that accomplished?

My own interpretation, partly taken from my dad's, is that the point is not to *worship* Jesus but to *live* like him. I note that I do not think I take this framing as literal historical fact, especially in light of the work of Biblical scholar Bart Ehrman (2014). But that does not mean I do not think it is not *true*. I highlight Jesus' anti-materialist message: "I mean, what did he tell his disciples? 'Leave your things behind and follow me.'" I also emphasize that his message was against legalism and judgmental attitudes: "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

I am glad that I went back and watched this video, because I had forgotten something: I end the video with, "And I wonder if perhaps part of it is not getting too caught up in ego." This statement will be important shortly. This video is particularly interesting to me visually: I am sitting in a chair on the second floor of Tate, and behind me are big circular light figures hung from the ceiling; they put me in mind of the Biblical angels that are basically giant wheels with eyes. I am sitting kind of sideways and slouched on the chair, leaning against the back of it with my arm slung over it. I am wearing a black camisole under a denim jacket and a tulle pink skirt that ties at the waist and looks like a ballet tutu. My blue High Priestess tarot pendent finishes off the look; I worn this piece because the High Priestess involves meanings of intuitive knowledge and occupying two worlds, which I relate to interpretation of myth, tarot, dreams, whatever. In

fact, I relate interpretation (and the arts themselves) to the sybils of ancient Greece who *channeled* the gods.

In the next video (08/30) (in the same outfit and location as the previous), I argue that the cross also mirrors the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (which is even more closely bound by their relationship to the Norse tree Yggdrasil, where Odin sacrificed himself to gain knowledge of the runes). Both trees and the cross are things “rooted in the ground that point toward heaven,” and I think the cross emphasizes the idea of intra-section between physical and sentient even more clearly because of its, well, cross shape. I say that I am especially interested in the theme of *sacrifice* in Indo-European myth, which is so prevalent that we have a reconstructed *proto*-Indo-European creation story where it is a major element.

But what is that element *doing*? Before I could really get into it, I took a detour to elaborate on a claim made in earlier that the verse, “The wages of sin is death,” is a mistranslation, and it should be “The wages of *death* is *sin*.” I believe I had read this statement on Reddit, and it was not that I had not researched it. But I have found that when searching for Biblical scholarship, there is often a lot of fundamentalist content to wade through, making it difficult to find what I am looking for.

I posted on Reddit to a Biblical scholar subreddit, and the answer I got was that it is complicated and there is no consensus (I got this answer before I posted the video [09/01] where I mentioned it and made a textual note saying so). Further, they said that our idea of *original sin* goes back to Augustine. The idea that I refer to here is that “Adam brought us into some kind of *cycle*. It was his sin that brought death into the world, but death is the reason we sin, not because we genetically carry his blame.” I note that even this interpretation is controversial, but I am interested in it regardless of whether it was originally intended in Biblical writing.

Before this point I had argued that perhaps we can understand *death* in the Garden of Eden more like *separation* from nature/the divine; perhaps it could also refer to *foreknowledge* of physical death. During my Google search I had found an article by a theologian named Paul Axton (2019) called, “The Real Tragedy of Augustinian Sin,” part of which I read in the video. The part of particular note here is, “Life in and through the *I*, or *ego*... all amount to the lie Isaiah characterizes as the covenant with death. The irony of sin is that it is a taking up of death, a *living death* under the auspices of having life. And this deception is the definition of sin.”

I remark that reading this passage had given me chills, as it had resonated with my own still-developing thought: *ego* comes with shame, and foreknowledge of death comes with attempts to achieve a kind of immortality through material possessions and/or fame; both involve fear and anxiety. I propose that the solution posed by the ministry of Jesus is *faith*.

The very next video (09/01) is about how, even at the time, I thought of my own existential crisis as a kind of living death. “That obsession, that attempt to *know*, was about control, about trying to protect my psyche. But that kind of certainty was impossible, so the only answer there was *faith*, the *acceptance* of uncertainty.” I make sure to note that I *do* value critical thought, but that it can only take me so far. “*Of course* I still have my doubts, but when I have them, I think, what if it’s *not* true? I still lived a life where I found meaning and purpose, where I was able to forgive and love people who do even the worst things. So in a way, believing in it makes it true, regardless of the facts.” (Part of the audio here was lost, so I had to write “makes...facts,” on the screen.)

“If we are part of the divine, then that separation was always an illusion, and all we need to do to overcome it is to take that leap!” (I am a bit disappointed to see that I did not mention Lacan’s mirror theory here, but I *had* gone into that in my fifth (mislabelled as fourth) video on

the Garden of Eden). It was here that my concept of the *leap of faith*, the first concept I *noticed* myself developing through TikTok, took root, which was exciting because it made me feel like a real philosopher.

My next video (09/02) is, “The (post-structural) fall,” where I relate the fall of humanity and this *leap* mentioned in my previous video to Derrida’s response to those who accused his theory of cutting the tree out from under us. “And Derrida was like, ‘Yes! But let me tell you why that’s not a problem!’ The reason it’s not a problem is because you never hit the ground. If we can’t access *the* objective truth, it means there’s room for subjectivity and *play*.” I argue that, if our institutions and structures are not objectively true, “we are not doomed to repeat them. We can always explore and try out different possibilities. We can always become something different. I think a free-fall where you never hit the ground is equivalent to *flight*.” There was totally a resonance with my own leap of faith.

I elaborate on this idea in my next video (09/02), where I speak on coming out of my existential crisis. While someone *telling me* that I just needed to have faith was not enough, I repeat my line from months prior about how thinking that I could grasp the entire universe through logic was not logical at all, but, on the contrary, insanity: “But I couldn’t know that until I tried. I was afraid of things like neuroscience and philosophy for a long time because like I said, I was afraid they were going to tell me something I didn’t want to hear.”

My leap of faith involved pushing through my fear to research the things I was curious about, anyway, trusting that *there was no ground for me to hit*; the “answers” I was so afraid of were not out there. Thus, faith is having the trust to move forward *in spite of doubt*. It’s through that experience that I think faith is less a feeling and more a trusting in yourself, in your own reason.”

This video seemed to resonate with audiences (a line many quoted in the comments was, “Faith that avoids being tested is not faith at all, it’s fear;”) one commenter, who would become one of my most devoted followers, said, “hard relate I’m paralyzed hard.” In response to this response, I made a video (09/03) about exactly how bad my existential crisis had been, focusing on how truly bad off I had been: “I was completely consumed by my anxiety, I couldn’t think about anything else, not even cartoons, not even *shipping*. I couldn’t live the way I was, but since it was death that I was so afraid of in the first place, 86ing myself wasn’t even an option.” (I used the word “86” here instead of “kill” to avoid censorship; “86” is a common term in the food industry that refers to being out of an item or leaving off an ingredient, but it has also been used to refer to murder.) “I felt *trapped*.”

The point I was trying to make was that, “If *I* could get better, *anyone* could.” Comments I got on this video included, “This is RIGHT ON TIME! I never thought anyone would feel the way I do! Thank you for existing, this gives me hope!” and “ok ur describing me too accurately i gotta come back cant rn lol, ily u solved a big crisis for me this mornin.” I am *still* receiving comments like that on this video, and only recently did another series on working through it. Of course, this response has been very meaningful to me: that is exactly what I have been trying to do.

Soon after, I expanded on my *leap of faith* concept by discussing the movie *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (Perischetti et al., 2018) (09/05), which depiction is its “perfect expression” for me. I describe the scene where the protagonist, Miles, *finally* gets it and gains control of his powers; he leaps off a skyscraper, and as he is falling, the camera inverts so it looks like he is rising instead of falling. “The script even says, *Miles is rising*” (which I had learned from YouTuber Sideways’ [2019] video on the film’s soundtrack).

That idea of the simultaneous rise and fall had been important to my thought since I began working through the Garden of Eden myth, the way humans had to stand, and Eve had to look and reach up to get the fruit. Exploring what allows Miles to finally make the leap of faith, the film strongly suggests it is *community*; it comes out of his family and mentors believing in him. That is not all, of course, he has had practice by this point in the film. But the missing element was confidence in himself, which had to be socially constructed. I say that I think one thing people are missing when it comes to spirituality is that sense of community, and that making up for that is something I am trying to do with my channel.

Blowing up (September 06th-September 20th)

There was one video I had been planning to do since before I began my channel, and my videos on the theme of sacrifice in Christianity *finally* set me up for it. It took me some time to edit, however, not the least because I thought I had accidentally deleted the footage. As it turned out, I had only deleted it on my phone, and was able to redownload it from Google. Even so, I was worried the moment had passed and that it would not receive as much attention as it might have otherwise.

The video is called, “The purpose of pain.” In it, I am sitting on a short table in the basement of Tate center wearing my orange and white dress with a sort of lattice design and my painted jasper beads; I am also wearing several bracelets. I am in kind of a corner where one side is a brick wall and the other side is a glass window, and there is a potted plant behind me (I still liked having greenery in my videos).

“There is a near death experience that has become *central* to my spirituality,” I begin. I describe the near-death experience of Sandi_T, someone who I have actually spoken to on Reddit and who has shared her experience on YouTube (2021) and NDERF.org (2020). Her first

experience came when she was a small child as the result of brutal child abuse. During the experience, the guide who was with her told her that she could have one question answered, and she wanted to know why she had to suffer like that. Sandi_T ended up learning that the purpose of *life* is pain: God as an infinite being of love and joy is limited by its own lack of limitation; it is a contradiction and thus cannot exist. We as a part of God therefore volunteered to come here and experience limitation and pain for the existence of *everything*, including ourselves. This choice is the meaning of free will (a statement I would not feel I understood until later, but which I now believe has to do with that choice coming from a nature of love, *free* of any restraint or limitation).

“This *disturbed* me for a long time because it reminded me of teachings about *samsara* in like Hinduism and Buddhism; you know, *life is suffering*. Whereas I have always felt like, well, sure, suffering is *a part* of life, but why focus on the very worst part of it? Like, isn’t everything else worth it?” I go on to explain a bad experience I had on a certain substance where I thought I was having a bad drug interaction; I was freaking out because I thought I might really be in trouble, “But lying there on the bathroom floor it suddenly hit me: *that’s it! Everything else is worth it!*” I punctuate my realization leaning toward the camera so my face is in close-up; I hold both hands in front of my chest and pump them at every word.

I note that I am moving into my own interpretation, as opposed to what Sandi_T actually said about it. “I realized something: experience of just one thing without any contrast loses all sense of itself. It’s like how you go nose blind to a room you’ve been in for a long time, or how heat doesn’t make any sense without cold, as either a concept or an experience. Just in practical terms, what does love mean without adversity? What does peace mean without conflict? The experience of pain pinches us out of the deep sleep of unawareness.”

To me, then, this experience suggests something that had always seemed right to me: the goal is *not* a return to perfect unity and virtual non-existence. Perhaps that is one end of a spectrum we experience at times, but neither state of being is a *goal*.

I did make sure to note that I do not believe that this experience suggests that every person must experience pain eventually, as I thought that would bother some people; maybe we “put in our time.” After all, Sandi_T had related God “uploading” her experience. Or perhaps what we are trying to do is to develop a contrast that is *not* pain. “Thinking this way has been super-helpful for me because it brings meaning to hardship that otherwise seems meaningless. It makes me feel like my life has purpose no matter what happens or what I do. I *do* think there’s a risk with this kind of thinking that people will think it means you should seek out pain, or prolongate it, but I really don’t think that’s the point.” I point out that in a previous video, I had said that one of the benefits of pain is that it drives us forward, it pushes us to create *change* in our lives. “And I think pain’s gonna happen *regardless* of whether we seek it out... All we really gotta do is be here and live!”

This video took only a few hours to rack up thousands of views; I knew right away that it was going to outstrip all my other videos by a large margin. I do not think I realized exactly *how* big a margin, though: I posted the video on September 06th, and by the 11th I had 280,000+ views. Before this video I had been struggling to hit 1,000 followers, to the extent that I wondered whether the app itself did not suppress you once you approached that number. After this video, I quickly surpassed 4,000, then 6,000 followers.

How did I feel? Certainly not any way I expected. Mostly I felt nervous at the responsibility of having that many people listen to my thought; if I had known that *this* video would be the one to blow up, I would have been more careful about how I framed what I was

saying. Had I made it sound like *the truth*? Although of course I could not deny that it just made *logical* sense to me, regardless of whether the near-death experience was “real.”

A lot of people agreed, but to me it seemed like kind of an uncritical agreement based on what else they had heard, referring to other spiritual traditions or speaking about a “spiritual awakening” (which concept I think there is perhaps something *to*, but which too often people use to position themselves and like-minded people above everyone else). One encouraging perspective that I did not make much note of before now says, “Even as an atheist, I find this perspective incredibly comforting.” That is kind of what I was going for: even if it turned out not to be *factual*, I have struggled less with the painful experiences of my life since I started thinking that way. Some said they felt so touched by it that they cried.

One said they had a panic attack over it, which I certainly did not feel good about. Some thought that pain was not worth it, including those who live with chronic pain; one person said, “I live with chronic severe pain and nothing changes it. The other is not worth it. I’d rather my sentence end.” Some further thought that the whole thing was nonsense: “saying ‘we chose pain to exist’ isn’t as based in reality as much as u would like it to be. acting as if there was some sort of decision made pre-life... has no basis in reality and making the point that contrast exists is all you really have to go off of, which really doesn’t lead us anywhere.” (Some of this response made me a bit anxious even though I had assumed I would receive such comments.)

Others thought there was nothing at all profound about it, that it was obvious. Some were concerned that I did not blink in the video, including one that said I had “crazy eyes.” I had not even noticed I was doing that, but, thinking about it, I thought I knew exactly what had happened: I wanted to make sure I kept my eyes on the camera, thinking it would look weird if my gaze shifted. Sometimes when I do many takes I become self-conscious and “forget” how to

direct my gaze naturally. While I certainly have no interest in looking like a cult leader, I have to admit that I laughed.

Many people wanted to know the name of the person who had the experience, which I had not actually included. This exclusion was because I had tried to contact Sandi_T about whether she was all right with me talking about her experience on my channel, but she never got back to me. While I had had brief exchanges with her on forums, this time was not the first that she did not respond to my direct message. The experience was so important to my spirituality, though, that I could not exclude it from my channel without losing something. In the end, I settled for removing personal details.

In retrospect, these worries do not make a whole lot of sense: Sandi_T had publicly published her experience many places online (and further shared links to the places where she shared it); although of course I cannot assume to *know*, she seemed to want people to hear her story. And had I not been sharing insights from others' blogs and videos on my channel? What sense did it make that I did not feel right about it here? If anything, I had done Sandi_T a disservice by not crediting her. I made sure to use her name in subsequent videos on the subject (including an explanation of why I had not named her) and eventually got to answering everyone who asked who it was.

I had had a couple more videos prepared for after this post, but the next video I *made* (09/08) was a reintroduction of philosophospirituality for my new followers: one drawback I had noticed early on in my channel is that new followers might not ever see my earlier content, much of which provided important context.

Next, I made a video called "The purpose of pain pt. 2: What if it's not worth it?" (09/08) I had been concerned about the comments that said it was not, and I *certainly* did not want to

give anyone panic attacks. I say that the name of the woman in question was Sandi_T, and that I was glad I finally felt comfortable getting more into the details, because parts of it actually *do* address arguments like these. She is someone who (at least claims) to have experienced horrific physical and emotional pain; she said that she was *angry* about the answer she got about pain, but that she saw that she chose this extremely difficult life; following from there, I argued that “worth it” is subjective, and as such can change over time, even for a single person. That is, a choice made based on what is “worth it” may no longer seem worth it once that choice is in action.

I still was not satisfied with this video; it still sounded to me like I was assuming too much. One notable video was another I had been planning: a depiction of my big mystic experience (09/09). I shot some gray-ish-white cloud cover one day, serving to make a gray background that still looked bright like I had seen in my dream (how lucky, that it was something so easy to depict!). Then, I simply copy and pasted the best 15 seconds of the clip in CapCut so it would be long enough to include the minute-long clip of “Kindle My Heart” (Doyle, 1995). The description reads, “This may be weird, but I wanted to try recreating my big mystic experience! Not very dramatic, but... Explanation forthcoming!”

The video did not receive much attention, but then, I had not expected it to. Fortunately, some comments did ask for an explanation, which I already had planned. I posted what remains my most popular in my Anemoi Cycle videos (09/11), a dance to the song “New River” (The Oh Hellos, 2017). My dancing had become more sophisticated over time, and I had decided to include more interpretive elements. At first, I had thought it might be too juvenile to, for example, put my hands on my stomach on the word “stomach.” But the music just *kept* suggesting these things to me, and I liked how they looked in my imagination, the way that *felt*.

My dress here is light blue with small triangles in red, yellow, and darker blue; it reveals my thighs in the front but comes down to my ankles in back. I had chosen it for the video because the shape and color of it reminded me of a river. I have on a red belt to give the look more definition and structure. The setting is a small fountain on campus, and if I have any complaints about the look of the video, it is that it is too dim. As I commented in the description, however, perhaps the dimness calls to mind stormy skies like those in the song.

One comment here reads, “I love all of this so much, your movements and embodiment of this is so lovely and grounding and fills me with joy and hope and... yeah! [smiley with hearts emoji]

I returned to the subject of pain some time later following a compelling comment I had received: “What are your thoughts about those who have experienced only suffering? I’m genuinely curious, no hate!! This theory is fascinating” “Oh, not at all,” I begin in the video, titled, “If... Then...” (09/20) “You don’t ever have to apologize to me” (here I press my hand to my chest), “for questioning. In fact, I love to see it! I don’t want *anyone* taking what I say for granted as *the truth*. That’s way too much responsibility!” I note that I have felt somewhat apprehensive about returning to the topic because, “Pain is *such* a fraught topic. Like, I cannot speak for other people about what their pain means to them. But I’ve realized that what I *can* do is look at it from the perspective of, if we’re *assuming* that what Sandi_T said... if I look at it assuming her experience is true, then this is *also* true. And also just what I think,” I say, uncrossing my arms, “based on my experience and reasoning.”

I focus on the idea that Sandi_T’s experience suggests that there is so much more to existence than just this life. Not that we should value “over there” more than here, but that, on this scale, all pain is temporary and just a small part of what we experience. I say also that I do

not know how *literally* I take her experience; some elements are more fantastic than others, and I think it entirely possible that it (and other experiences like it) are some sort of contact with the divine (by which I mean a collective sentience that has access to the experience of all simpler, limited entities) *and* metaphorical *and* affected by our own subjective mindsets.

I argue that I think there are no answers but the ones we create here, and maybe even pain and selfishness were necessary for us to evolve to the point where we could develop cognitive thought. Again, assuming that we survive death, “It seems to me there must be some kind of purpose like that, because otherwise, why be here at all? Why not just stay in the place where we’re perfectly happy and peaceful? But yeah, while this makes sense to me, and it’s my best guess, I don’t *know*. ”

This *if/then* way of framing things had been a crucial element to philosophospirituality; why did I not think to talk about it that way before? My guess is that the previous topics had not felt as fraught to me; here, I was dealing with actual people who objected to what I was saying on the basis of their own pain, and I did not want to disrespect that. I believe I developed this *if/then* approach on Reddit speaking to people on r/griefsupport.

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CHAPTER 5

“ANALYSIS”

Did I succeed in my goal of mutual change through intra-action with TikTok (Bytedance, 2019)? Yes, but coming from the perspective of agential realism (Barad, 2007), I took *some* kind of change as a fore-gone conclusion, because the very nature of intra-action *is* change. Perhaps a more helpful question to ask is, were my expectations fulfilled? Was I able to gain an audience? Was I able to help audiences dealing with existential issues a different way of thinking? Did my content change over time, and were these changes shaped by TikTok’s features and my audiences? Did *I* become more confident and relaxed in front of the camera? Did my video-making skills improve over time?

The answer to all these questions is yes: by the cut-off point for inclusion in my thesis, I had over 4,000 followers. I received many comments from audience members who said that I was helping them deal with their own existential anxiety, that I was speaking to ideas they had long held, and that I had shown them a way of looking at the world that had not occurred to them before. I must admit that it is a bit hard for me to separate my audience from the TikTok app, because the app is programmed to push content that initial audiences engage with through watching, liking, sharing, favoriting, and commenting.

That having been said, audiences play a big role here, and I dropped filming styles that did not receive much attention. I found that videos that exceeded four or five minutes tended not to do well: at the time I started my channel, TikTok had only recently allowed for videos over three minutes (the new limit was 10 minutes). This limit seems to have shaped audience

expectations: audiences tend to expect short videos from TikTok, and they can easily swipe past videos they become bored with. Audiences replies also helped show me where I was perhaps not making my point clearly enough and gave me new material to research. I used the *Reply with video* feature many times.

I expected that I would make much use of the *Duet* and *Stitch* features, which allow TikTokers to include each others' videos in their own by placing them side by side (Duet) or by beginning one's own video with a clip from someone else's (Stitch). But while I *did* experiment with both these features, in the end neither suited my content very well. My videos were focused on talking, and I did not want to talk over others' videos. The Stitch feature, therefore, held more potential for me than Duet, but it required me to film from the app, which I do not usually do. Further, longer Stitches seem to create a problem with audio synchronization, and I could not "split" and delete footage while using the feature.

While I was unexpectedly nervous in front of the camera for my first two or three filming sessions, I quickly got over this issue and became more confident. I gradually learned how to frame my shots to be visually appealing, and, most important to me, I felt like I was doing something meaningful, something that really was making a difference to people.

The ways in which TikTok changed my content and me were not always according to my "expectations" as I have written about them, but in fact they were not outside my actual expectations. What I mean by this statement is that I thought my content *might* change dramatically; I *might* end up making extensive use of *Duet* and *Stitch*. Was not showing how TikTok molded me and my content one of the major points of my project? My expectations as I presented them were shaped by what I felt I was "supposed" to expect.

However, I have found that I usually do not get very far when all I have driving me is what I feel I am “supposed” to do; if I did, I probably would not be writing these words, I probably would have majored in Biochemistry and become a psychiatrist like I intended when I entered college. What I mean is, I had a strong interest in Psychology and a subject I was deeply invested in developing research on (i.e., obsessive fixation on *shipping*, or fictional romantic pairings). I had initially wanted to become a psychiatrist because I was not thinking in terms of research positions, and I thought that therapy that included medication was most effective for psychological disorders. But I struggled with my Chemistry classes because I was not very invested. (Attempting to major in Psychology to pursue a research career is exactly what triggered my biggest existential crisis)

With TikTok, I thought it very possible that a lot of the new things I tried would not take because they were not really my “style,” that I would continue to make the content that *I* wanted to make, and that the changes I saw would be subtle and more spread out over time.

That hunch proved true for the most part. While I have found a way to at least mimic the Stitch feature, I relied much more heavily upon video-responses to textual comments, which has more in common with what I am used to doing on sites like Reddit. What was different here was that my face was visible, I was speaking rather than writing, and I had a persona. That is, unlike Reddit where my profile name and image do not stand out among the thousands of other commenters’, on TikTok, audiences who saw my face would eventually come to recognize me, even if they were not following me. Further, while I comment on all sorts of posts on Reddit, here, my focus was on creating my own “posts” (in this case, videos), which centered on a certain theme.

Neither my channel nor I changed as quickly and dramatically as I thought perhaps we should; while I tried to imitate the content of other TikTokers, I tended not to like the resulting video, and these videos usually did not receive much attention. I quickly dropped these attempts and went back to doing what felt “natural” to me. Does that failure to mold myself to (what I saw as) more typical TikTok content equal a failure to live up to my agential realist framework? At first glance it might seem so: after all, agential realism, like the postmodernism it draws from, is so focused on *difference* and *newness*.

But do they not also deconstruct the notion of the *individual* as a free, rational agent? Did the conscious *attempt* to change according to what I thought I *should do* not depend on that notion? In other words, that way of thinking carried the implicit assumption that *I* was in control; *I* decided what changes occurred. I *do* believe that conscious thought is an agential force, as it makes no sense to think of agential forces intra-acting to create a passive phenomenon. It likewise follows, however, that conscious thought is only as agential as the forces constituting it.

I understand *should*, or *obligation*, as coming out of phenomena like my social relationships with theory and professors, others who have expectations of me (although I also have expectations of myself, these expectations also come out of social relationships); words I associate with it are *responsibility*, *expectations*. It suddenly occurs to me that *should* is a very *future-oriented* word: grammatically, it is in the *subjunctive mood*, which means it is a condition (at least currently) contrary to fact; it refers to *future* fulfillment, the *not yet*.

Obligation is about getting myself to do things that I do not necessarily want to do. Of course it is more complicated than that: achieving the goals I *do* want for myself involves work that is not always fun, and it turns out that, if *obligation* is not exactly inspiring, it does carry quite a lot of weight for me: if I have ever felt like giving up, it was never really an option

because I would feel so ashamed of disappointing the people who believed in me and who put time and effort into helping me. In other words, *obligation* goes quite a long way toward keeping me on track when *passion* lulls.

On the other hand, *passion* is a far greater... *Drive? Motivation? Will?* None of these words suffice, but I will do my best to communicate what it is for me. For me, passion is a joy that excites every cell in my body, which makes my body sing and my mouth dance.

If *obligation* is a goal I tie myself to that pulls me forward, *passion* is the energy by which I get up and *run*. See there, how *obligation* makes *me* an object, where by *passion* *I* move. If I could have phrased it differently, I did not, because *this* way feels closer to my experience. I think it says quite a lot about where I locate the *I*: *I* am not a conscious mind that must control my *passions* lest I be dominated by them, but *I* am the *passion* that finds a guiding hand in conscious thought. In fact, this division ceases to make sense at a certain point, because *passion* is the most effective *fuel* for conscious thought for me. After all, is fire really a distinct, independent entity from the wood and oxygen that constitute it? No: it is constituted by the same material stuff in process with itself. While the difference between unburned wood and fire is dramatic from our perspective, we might feel differently if we could observe it in terms of subatomic particles. Likewise, while we can think of passion and conscious thought as two separate things, the former is part of what constitutes the latter.

Is my *passion* what Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987/2016) meant by *desire*? I have largely disagreed with them on the point that it does not involve a “lack,” (that is, something the subject needs or wants that it does not already contain within its own boundaries) as my understanding of *desire* has been something akin to *longing*, which word goes some way toward describing how I can feel like part of me is stretching *out* toward something beyond my

boundaries, wanting to make it a part of myself, like a hunger or a thirst. To deny that understanding would be insincere on my part. In fact, there is still something akin to that kind of *desire* in my understanding of *passion*: if *passion* is the drive to *become something different*, then that *something different* is still *not yet*. Even if there is no specific shape I want to become, there is still *restlessness, agitation*, the need to move past the status quo. That is not to say there is no difference to these experiences, however. In fact, I might call *passion* the opposite of *longing*; that is, if longing is a wanting, *passion* happens when there is too much for me to contain, **when I am bursting with energy and am driven to talk or get up and dance.**

As such, that “too much” is the concept’s defining aspect. *Passion* is inherently intra-active; I understand it as an agential move in which “out there” becomes “in here” and moves back out again. **For example, a work of media I love starts “out there,” but becomes “in here” through my intra-action with it. My excitement over a beloved work drives me to tell others about it, put it back “out there.”** It is the *intensity* of that movement, the way it excites the mind-body and pushes against its boundaries, demanding to be *expressed*, that differentiates it from other agential phenomena.

The best way I know to talk about *passion* is through the experience of *dance*, because, to begin with, music is inherently intra-active. Sound needs a physical medium to travel through, and, if our most frequent experience with it conditions us to think of its primary medium of air, it moves more efficiently through solid states of matter: the more densely molecules are packed together, the more easily they transfer energy from one to another. What I am getting at here is that *sound*, and thus *music*, does not recognize physical boundaries.

But, as previously implied by noting its inherently intra-active nature, music is not *just* sound waves: if a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear, does it make a sound? My

answer is, no: there is a physical transfer of energy, but without hearing, it is not *sound*. *Sound*, and thus *music*, is an *experience* born from the intra-action of soundwaves and listeners, and therefore it has no independent existence.

What was once a part of someone else's body, their voice, patterns developed in their brain, is now a part of mine (although of course we could debate whether sound created from an electronic *copy* of someone's voice still counts, I might argue that the electronic component becomes a further point of intra-action). But the patterns that emerge from the intra-action of the soundwaves and me are not identical to the pattern that produced those soundwaves; how could they be, when the pattern of *me* is different from the pattern of *the musician*? I am of different brain chemistry and different experiences; down to a physical level, even the same series of notes and the same words logically cannot produce the exact same experience or interpretation.

Although I seem to be focusing on the brain here, for me music is a fully embodied experience. Of course, *all* experience is embodied: the brain does not exist separately from the rest of the body, and neither is the relationship one of unidirectional control. Perhaps it is fair to say, however, that the embodied nature of experience becomes more *obvious* with music. Vibrations can be felt with the whole body if they are "loud" enough, and, more importantly for my purposes, the "emotional" aspect of musical experience has whole body effects ranging from changes in blood-pressure to shedding tears. For me, however, the most profound effect of music is how it energizes me to move my whole body; the climax of this *becoming with* feels like a kind of ego death as I feel myself move beyond my body to merge with my environment. To put it in more poetic terms:

(E)mergence

Then the music hits my frequency,
 ringing through every cell 'til all
 is vibrant joy I
 can no longer contain;
 atoms fly apart,
 a laughing fission,
 foam floating up on sound waves
 melting into clouds.

This becoming *with*, becoming *like* can look like *singing along*, *bobbing my head*, or *sprinting downhill*. Dance, too, is often more about giving into the bodily *urge* to move with the music than it is about *expressing something* to an audience; I often dance alone without thought to structure. But here I am often doing something else; I am moving in ways I find aesthetically pleasing. Even in the first of my Anemoi cycle videos, I wanted to be in time with the music, I wanted to move in the ways “On the Mountain Tall” (The Oh Hellos, 2017) had led me imagine for myself. And my dancing only became more choreographed as I progressed through the series.

But what is the difference between choreographed and unchoreographed dance? Surely, the latter is not completely random, but I tend to move in ways I am used to, which, as I mentioned before, are (in part, at least) culturally constructed. In other words, it is not as if there is *no* planning. But I have never thought of this distinction as a hard-and-fast binary. For me, the difference is how far I plan in advance: am I following steps I planned in advance, or am I making it up as I go?

I am reminded of Nietzsche's (1872/1994) distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian artistic impulse, which I was introduced to through Contrapoints' (2021) video *Envy*: here, she discusses the concepts through the cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Hillenburg et al., 1999-). The eponymous SpongeBob is a free spirit, and any art he creates comes out of *joy*: creating is like play to him, he does it because it is fun. Opposite SpongeBob is his neighbor and co-worker Squidward who considers himself a great (if unappreciated) artist. Squidward scoffs at SpongeBob's artistic endeavors, but, as Contrapoints argues, he is secretly *envious*. He is an art snob who creates art and makes judgments based on what he has learned great art is. In other words, Squidward creates art according to what he thinks it *should* be. SpongeBob and Squidward's relationship represents how the Dionysian and Apollonian impulses are at odds with each other: the former wants total freedom and chaos, while the latter wants order, restraint, and hard work.

As Contrapoints notes, the depiction on *SpongeBob SquarePants* is not realistic (not that it was ever intended to be): someone with pure Dionysian impulse would not have the discipline to create a great work of art, and someone with a pure Apollonian impulse would lack inspiration and drive: the two competing impulses must find a way to work together. For me, however, this binary is another that deconstructs: **what I seem to be saying here is that, in my experience, at least, the Dionysian impulse drives the Apollonian.** I feel this description better suits my relationship with the dances I have been doing for TikTok: I had an image that I want to fulfill, I *wanted* to keep working until I have a version I am satisfied with. While I did not enjoy exhausting myself, I felt *driven* to keep shooting until I liked what I am seeing; I hated having to stop before I reached that point. **And can I really be unique here?**

The drive for me there was that I wanted to bring to life a self-image that I loved, I wanted to *share* that self-image with others; I wanted to show the way I *felt* the music, the *exuberance* and *bittersweetness*. In this way, I was moved by both a *lack* (the self-image I wanted to embody) and a *too much* (the intensity of my experience of the music). As I write these words, it occurs to me that these two aspects were entangled, as the latter followed from the former, and the former was still an element of the latter. That is, the *too much*, the *intensity* of my experience of the music drove me to imagine ways I might dance to it, but I was never able to fulfill that image *perfectly* to my satisfaction.

Understood this way, it is not so much that *obligation* restrains *passion* but that *obligation without passion* has little fuel to run on, little to move it. On the other hand, *passion* is *not* necessarily an impulse to formless expression. It can be that, but as previously mentioned, it can also desire to develop form and bring it to life. I am getting an image of *obligation* as an empty container, where *passion* is water: water flows just as easily from container to container as it does spilling onto the floor (if the latter seems more chaotic to *us*, I think that is largely a matter of our perception, what *we* are capable of predicting). And without *passion* to fill it, *obligation* often feels hollow and uninspired, an empty container. When water spills into it, however, it is in motion, it has weight (it suddenly occurs to me that the terms *form* and *substance* probably came out of the same metaphorical impulse). If containment seems restrictive, form that stifles the direction substance might take, do not forget the *power* of water to overflow, to destroy structure, to change course. In fact, water takes on shapes through destroying structure that it could not have taken otherwise, such as when an artist *purposefully* breaks the “rules:” that “violation” is shaped by those rules.

I wanted to communicate *myself* to my audience, and I *do* mean “myself” and not “something about myself;” that was how it felt to me. As previously mentioned, I locate the *I* more in affectual experience than in cognitive thought, more in *passion* than in *intellect*. To me, at least, it felt like what I was trying to do was to show myself as I feel myself to be. That was not the *only* thing I was trying to show, however: remember, much of the point for me was to show others how great the music is (in fact, this desire was the impetus that finally led me to *create* these videos). But what, really, is the difference between myself and the music I love so much? Do we not constitute each other?

As previously mentioned, although the music certainly *influences* how I dance, it is far from the only force at play. I find that I tend to dance with my hips, make a lot of circular movements with my hands and arms, *lead with* my arms. Some of this tendency is cultural, I think, but I think it also has to do with my shape and center of gravity. What I am wearing also influences my movements; I twirl a lot, anyway, but *especially* when I am wearing a skirt that spins out. Music does not perfectly mold me into its pattern, but I also change what it becomes.

There is of course another intra-active element here, which is the audience: the reason I started creating TikTok videos in the first place was that I wanted to connect with others, there were things I wanted to *share* with them. What I am getting at is that passion involves a *sincere* attempt to communicate what it feels like to be ourselves and to love the things we love, driven by a desire to be seen and heard.

One idea that I keep coming back to is this idea of the *new sincerity* (den Dulk, 2020) that I learned about studying metamodernism, because I think the term describes something integral to my philosophospirituality, including this concept of passion that I am still in the process of developing. As I believe is already lurking between the lines here, *passion* is related to *love*,

perhaps it could even be considered a form of love. In fact, thinking about it, is it not necessarily so if I am equating *intra-action* and *love*?

If part of passion is the drive to make an “internal” experience *external* for others to experience, then it is a drive toward the *sincerity* that den Dulk writes about: have I not been proposing it in opposition to *obligation* this entire time? As previously mentioned, my attempts on TikTok to be what I thought I should be like, what I thought others might like me to be like, usually fell flat. Where I found success was when I was trying to *show* something *meaningful* to me: showing those things *animates me* down to the way I move and speak and write. If it is impossible to be truly, finally naked, then *passion* is a sincere attempt to communicate truth: not *objective truth* in the sense of fact, but *personal truth* in the sense of what brings us joy (or sorrow or anger), what we believe in, even if it seems silly or naïve to others.

If passion is sincere, then it is also vulnerable and intimate: it is the attempt to present who you feel yourself to be. I believe this vulnerability is one reason I disagree that metamodern art should purposefully fall short of what it aspires to be (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010): I feel a touch of pretense there, an element of what art *should be* that is at odds with the *desire* for perfect expression, to be perfectly understood. To create with sincerity is to follow that desire *in earnest*, even if we consciously believe we will always fall short of our goal.

Also, is there not a bit of dissimulation with failing on purpose? *If it's no good, that's because I didn't really try*. I think of the fanfiction I wrote in high school, how I labored over every word (again, *substance driving form*), wanting my audience to see how deeply I cared about these characters and how strongly I felt those relationships. Looking back those fanfictions were not all that well-written, but I *do* believe they succeeded in communicating something: I was quite a popular author.

There was a leap of faith on my audience there, and now with my TikTok audience: that they will receive me in good faith and not mock me for what I am sharing with them. This faith is no blind naivety: I know there is a chance that they will not understand and laugh. Perhaps it takes faith in self to have faith in others; that is, I accept my own weird, flawed self enough that I can handle being laughed at a bit. Then again, the self/other boundary deconstructs, because whence do I have that faith in myself? It comes from past experience of being accepted. Obviously, if my goal here is to *communicate myself* to others, the audience is a consideration that shapes my content: I am constantly thinking about what will help them understand, what metaphors I can use to communicate the eccentricities of my experience, how I can facilitate sympathy to my narrative.

Sympathy. If others' experience of my expression is not equal to the experience of being myself, then perhaps it is fair to say there is enough similarity to *resonate*. It suddenly strikes me that one thing that motivates the exploration of *difference* is *similarity*: *I relate to you because we have common ground; now I want to hear about how your experience is different from mine because I am invested in you.* In other words, *sameness* becomes the basis for exploring *differences*. As I mentioned, I *have* found success speaking on passions that I share with many others, and listening in that context has led me to think all kinds of new things.

Perhaps it is precisely *because* vulnerability is risky that audiences often respond to it; perhaps they sense the attempt at sincerity and the faith placed in them. **Further, this sincerity shows them that they are not alone in their eccentricities and flaws, and may make them more comfortable being open about them in turn.** The attention and positive feedback I received from my TikTok audience led me to become more confident, to explore philosophy I was not familiar with, to push and develop my own ideas (which was especially helpful in helping me address blind spots); I became a more confident person all around and began to feel more of a sense of *purpose*

in my life; that I was doing something I was *meant for*, if not in cosmic terms, then certainly because I was taking action on something that *felt right for me*.

Passion's *sincerity, vulnerability, and intimacy* make it *Queer* in my understanding. While I do agree with Butler's understanding of gender as *performative* (1993a) and of *Queer* as being that which is *othered* by society (1993b), my own understanding is that the move being made is *not* to deny the role of affective experience in gendered performance but to define gender by *performance* rather than *affect*. The metaphor I like to use is dance: someone who might make a good dancer but does not actually dance would *not* be considered a dancer; meanwhile, someone who takes dance lessons and dances on stage *would* be considered a dancer, even if they are not particularly good at it. There is no denial here of the role of the experience of music, it is simply not the focus.

I believe what I was intuiting about musicals can be summed up in a statement made in interview by Broadway performer Laura Benanti: "When you don't have the words to speak anymore, then you sing." (Lefkowitz, 1999) In other words, singing is what happens when affectual experiences are too big to be expressed in words, too big to be contained by *structure*. Of course, the music of Broadway is still *structure*, but perhaps it is fair to say that it is a more *dramatic* form of expression (which, in live Broadway performance, incorporates facial expression and bodily movement) to create resonance of affective experience beyond the kind of logical understanding words may provide.

I admit here that words can themselves have powerful affectual influence, but perhaps we might consider singing an exaggerated form of the tones and varying volumes of speech (which many of us hear in our heads even as we read text on a screen). I do sing when music moves me to, but other kinds of experience drive me to shout in joy or cry; these vocalizations are easiest to

let out when there is no one around to communicate to. It is not even that I am talking to myself, but I would describe the feeling as letting out affect that feels too big for my body to contain: it is a *release* and an *overflowing*.

That *intensity* of passion, the way it overflows structure, the moment of letting out what wants to be free without regard to what others think, *that* is what Queerness means to me. In other words, Queerness is the opposite of repression. This statement is not meant to deny the role repression plays in Queer experience; musicals, too, often depict protagonists who try to live up to social standards in the first act despite their feelings of being different.

But the point I want to make is that *repression makes no sense as a concept without Queerness*. That is, it makes no sense unless there is something being pushed down, held back, unless there is some sense of *wrongness* in trying to live up to expectations. In other words, the role repression plays in Queer experience is one of bringing attention to difference that persists *despite all attempts to erase it*. To me, then, Queerness has to do with affective experience that society may deem inappropriate for its content and/or intensity; Queer *expression* is the attempt to sincerity about that experience and a celebration of it despite what others might think.

Butler (1993b) speaks of how those who are Queered into society are more likely to see the arbitrary nature of gender roles: their very existence shows that people do not fit into the neat categories normative society would have us believe in, and they are more likely to see the restrictive nature of it because they have been harmed by it. I further say that it is *passion* that *drives* the creation of different performance: *it drives us to performances we know may be mocked because repression is more painful*. And when our passions are not suited to any pre-existing structure, we are driven to invent ones that it *will* be suited to.

Of course, this difference is not totally free of the influence of social structure: how can it be, when we are constituted in part by that social structure? That structure is not determinate, though, because it is not all there is: learning about different gender roles (within our own culture and others') shows us that there are other possibilities, and we might also take inspiration from non-social elements like other animal species. The factors that constitute a person are not neatly divided up but *flow together, influencing each other*. *Diffraction means that the new comes from the intra-action of difference*.

But as previously mentioned, the same/different binary has deconstructed for me: to become *different* from what I have been means to become *more like* the world around me, integrating its patterns into mine, and vice-versa. *Sameness* is also different from *difference*, like the woman I heard about on the Hawaiian island of Molokai: she had never left the small, rural island; her life is different from mine and that of the people around me precisely *because* she has spent her whole life in the *same* place.

It is all well and good to me if postmodernism encourages difference: despite my return to the same media over and over, I *am* constantly intra-acting with media I have never seen before, too. But I want to ask, what kind of difference should we be pursuing? I see the risk that the pursuit of difference for difference' sake can exhaust itself as something we *should* do. And, after all, does not postmodern thought resist *universals* and *prescription*? It is for this reason I believe it is better to lead with *passion* than conscious intent toward difference, because if passion is inherently intra-active, then difference will inevitably follow. Remember, I have defined passion as a movement from "out there" to "in here" and back out again, so it is *not* a simple, one-way intra-action between creator and audience: it is an intra-action that turns *audiences* into *creators* in an expanding web.

I find that passion *circulates*: most of the works I am passionate about were *created with passion* by people who were deeply invested in their work: singers, animators, voice actors, writers. There are those who argue that reading, watching TV and movies alone, are solitary activities, but I strongly disagree: these are intra-actions with the creators, even if that intra-action comes at a physical and temporal distance. Neither do original works (as opposed to fan works) come to creators like a lightning bolt from the sky, but these are also inspired by a number of intra-active factors *including* the works they love.

The Oh Hellos obviously put a lot of work into the Anemoi Cycle; I do not believe that that level of lyrical and melodic complexity often *happen* right away, and they speak on how deeply personal the work is to them: it came out of their own discomfort with the evangelical church they'd grown up in, and they also drew from experience in their childhood (The Oh Hellos, 2015). Not to mention, they took two years off to work out their philosophospiritual standing following deconstruction, as they found the reconstruction they had planned no longer felt right (Margolis, 2020). I think their refusal to provide simple answers shows that they *care* about what they put into the world: there is a sense of artistic integrity there and a responsibility toward their audience and themselves.

Hey Arnold! (Bartlett & Harrington, 1996-2004) is one of many works I love that took great inspiration from Charles Schultz's (1950-2000) *Peanuts* (Jordan Fringe, 2023). Again, the creators of this show seem to have been passionate about their work; the original creator, Craig Bartlett, still frequently talks about the show, its music, and its characters, in interviews with fans (Jordan Fringe, 2023).

As evidenced by the many, many videos and articles where critics gush over how much they love the show (the video I have been referencing is almost seven and a half hours long and

goes through every episode and both movies), how it influenced them to develop a strong sense of empathy in childhood, they seem to have been moved in turn.

Likewise, this fan content means a lot to me; even if I have never met these people, I feel a connection with them through that shared love. If I think of original works as the source of a soundwave that spreads out amongst fans, then not only are we *sharing* passion for that work, we *amplify each other*, and not simply in regard to how we feel: even if we are talking about the same work, we all have different perspectives on it. For example, *Sideways* (2019) with their background in music theory gave me a perspective on *Spider-man: Into the Spider-Verse* (Perischetti et al., 2018) that I could not have developed as I was; my understanding of the *leap of faith* as a *social* phenomenon was inspired not only by the movie but by *Sideways*' commentary on how the music in that pivotal scene references Miles' relationships with his family and friends.

Academic philosophy is certainly in the mix here; reading theory is more exciting for me when it reminds me of works that I love, and I am always thrilled when I can identify philosophy working in the subtext of my favorite media. Sometimes I am almost *certain* that an author has read theory; by the time I made my second attempt at *Infinite Jest* (Wallace, 1996/2006), for example, I was in postmodern theory and thought I saw specific thinkers being referenced: could it really be coincidence that a character states, "I have no stomach," (p. 264) the same idiosyncratic phrase Deleuze and Guattari used to talk about their concept of the *body without organs*? In a work that is already so thoroughly postmodern? Even authors who are not reading academic philosophy themselves have likely intra-acted with works from creators who *are*.

Likewise, I believe one reason audiences have responded to my explanations of academic concepts is that I often bring in works they are familiar with; if they are invested in that work, then they will want to understand it; if they can understand the work, and the work draws from theory,

then they can understand that theory. Moreover, I believe that excitement is contagious, and that my audience is excited by *my* excitement over a subject.

As I keep emphasizing, *passion* is key here because it includes a *will* to understand. In my own experience, at least, understanding a concept through something I already love does not feel like work at all; I am excited about learning, I *want* to figure out what is going on there. One of my first impulses whenever I watch or read something that captivates me is to go look up criticism on the work, especially if there were elements where I felt I was missing something on a subtextual level: maybe someone else knows something about the creator and their influences that I do not. If that sounds like laziness, I often begin picking up where they left off, figuring out implications they did not mention.

I feel myself coming back to my original point about how change on my channel happened slowly and according to what suited me. Deleuze and Guattari had their *lines of flight*, which I take to mean explorations of possibilities created by *ruptures* in “logical” frameworks of thought; these lines of flight involve giving deep consideration to “fanciful ideas” and connections between seemingly unrelated things. *But where do these ruptures come from? What drives us to follow them?*

For me, ruptures often occur because I am so invested in a topic and have spent so much time thinking about it that I begin to pick up on details that seem small but that end up having profound implications. For example: *Fight Club* (Palahniuk, 1996/2018) is not a book I read quickly to begin with; my copy was full of notes about its commentary on gender. At that point, I thought that those who zeroed in on Tyler Durden’s critique of capitalism were not wrong, exactly, but that they were missing the *main* point about toxic masculinity.

I continued (and continue) to think about the work and intra-act with others' commentary on it, and one day, watching a video-essay on it, I suddenly realized, *Oh my God, it's not more focused on toxic masculinity than capitalism! It's saying that they're the same thing! Or that they're products of each other! Capitalism is based in competition and domination, toxic masculinity is marketed toward men as an identity they can buy!* Now I saw this idea in the text, as a major character loses his testicles and grows breasts after taking testosterone to bulk up; he has been emasculated by consumption in quite a literal way. And still later I had my revelation about its deconstruction of unified, independent identity.

These moments feel like a dam bursting to me: I am flooded with ideas, find myself jumping all over the place mentally, like I am thinking too quickly for my brain to keep up. I am also brought back to my point that *reflection* is not a thing that exists: I think it fair to say that *most* of my most profound revelations, the ones that have most shaped my philosophospiritual positions, have come not from first contact with media but from *ongoing relationships* with them, from *obsessing* over my favorite works, going back to them over and over, thinking about them throughout my day. Of course, some sort of "first contact" is necessary to develop that relationship, and my interpretations are always changing as they diffract with the new works (including philosophy) that I experience.

If I seem to be repeating myself here, talking in circles, I think the reason is that I am trying to take each consideration (myself, my inspirations, my audience, the TikTok app itself) separately, but, because we all constitute *each other*, I have found it impossible to talk about each in isolation. Trying to write about them separately feels like trying to divide the ocean by square feet: I can draw lines, but what do those lines really mean? The water is always intra-acting with itself, flowing, swirling. Likewise, as I believe I have shown, *passion circulates*. When a creator puts

passion into their work, that passion bleeds into me, it *moves me* to talk (and dance) about it, not only so others will maybe check out these works but because I love that part of myself and want to share it with others. I am inspired to *diffract* with other knowledge and think new things. If other content creators have had that effect on me, might I also have that effect on *my* audience?

I would seem to have, at least enough to get them to express themselves in comments: audiences expressed desire to check out the media I talked about; they said I seemed free and joyful in my dance videos, that it made them feel encouraged to get out and try dancing like that.

Many found that I explained things in a way that they could understand, were helped by what I had to say, and/or felt that I voiced thoughts they had that they had been unable to find support for. I think I was right to think that my struggles were not only *my* struggles, but were shared by many, and that what helped me might help others. As I have mentioned, it has not been just a top-down teaching experience, but I have developed in significant ways from exploring suggestions made by fans.

Audiences and the app itself led me to become more confident, to explore philosophy I was not familiar with, to push and develop my own ideas (which was especially helpful in helping me address blind spots); I became a more confident person all around and began to feel more of a sense of *purpose* in my life; that I was doing something I was *meant for*, if not in cosmic terms, then certainly because I was taking action on something that *felt right for me*.

I learned to *dance*, which before I thought I had little aptitude for. I suddenly remember something I meant to discuss much earlier: I notice that my description of my videos follows a similar pattern to my videos themselves. That is, early on, I am concerned with every little detail; every video is of great importance. As more time goes by and I post more videos, however, the little details become less important, and, while I cared about what I was saying in each one, not all

of them felt monumental like at the beginning. On the other hand, I return to that attention to detail when I hit a video that *did* feel monumental, just as I returned to planning the outfits and locations for those videos. I must admit that this “analysis” has not gone in the direction I expected; I *expected* to be analyzing my description, and when I began developing this concept of *passion*, I thought it would be a brief tangent, not the center of the whole chapter.

But so, good! Because what is a tangent but if not a *line of flight*? If I am developing a praxis here, then following tangents, the points so engaging as to completely derail the plans we had made, is part of it. I also feel that I *finally* grasp why I prefer clarity of writing in my philosophy. Deleuze and Guattari may have made their writing purposefully obtuse so that their readers might think differently even from them; that makes *sense* to me, but it does not *work* for me. Instead of feeling inspired to think differently, I feel frustrated and start counting pages, wondering how much longer it will take to get through. Perhaps this writing style works for some people, but it has been my own experience that *obtuse writing frustrates passion*, like a dam that stops the flow of a river. On the other hand I am *excited* when I feel I understand what a work is saying; when I *do* hit passages that are more difficult, I feel moved to work toward understanding because *I feel like I can*, and that it will get easier again once I untangle this knot (such has been my experience with Barad).

That is not to say that confusing writing is *never* effective for me: I quite enjoy Wallace’s writing in *Infinite Jest*. But the difference to me is that Wallace, with his incredible run-on sentences and triple (quadruple?) agent characters is confusing in a way that is *cartoonishly* absurd. I suspect that many people who hate the novel because it is confusing think that they are supposed to understand every detail. My take, however, is that feeling confused is part of the point: the plot is so convoluted and disjointed that even the *characters* are confused (ironically, I have spent time

trying to work everything out because I am *invested*). The point is that I believe the writing in *Infinite Jest* is communicating something, even if it does not do so through textual explanation.

Of course, by using this example, I have run into a conundrum: what one person finds clear communication might confound another. I believe part of what helps me understand *Infinite Jest* is that, where our culture leads many to expect storytelling to happen on the level of text, I have a background that helps me understand literary techniques and subtextual elements. Should Wallace have “dumbed down” his work to make it more accessible? I do not think there is a right answer to this question: if I think *Infinite Jest* is great and enjoy it the way it is, we do not know what else it might have been. Even if we had access to other versions, what does “best” even mean?

But if I must decide how *I* am going to write, I believe that different kinds of writing call for different styles, and that it usually comes down to *balance*. Literal meaning sometimes takes a backseat when I am writing poetry, and I like to bring artistry into whatever I am writing (or talking) about. When I am writing/talking philosophy, however, the main point for me is clarity of specific ideas: artistry that gets in the way of that clarity defeats the whole point to me. Likewise, there is no point in “dumbing down” my content, in simplifying to the point of losing meaning in my concepts. I *do* use “big words” like “implicit” and “inherent” on my channel, partly for the sake of being concise, but also because I respect my audience: I *do* think they will understand these words, and, in my experience, being spoken to as if the other party expects that I will understand, being spoken to *as a peer*, is incredibly validating.

I feel that my agreement with my audience is as follows: *Stay with me, and I will do my best to make my subject matter accessible to you.* And it *is* an agreement. As mentioned in the previous chapter, I have had audience members say that they did not understand what I was talking about or that they did not see how what I was talking about mattered. I *want* to make myself

understood, so these comments were helpful for me; they *pushed me* to develop my stances where I had taken for granted that others would get what I meant. If I am taking the lead here, then the development of my channel, my philosophy, and *myself* has still been a collaborative effort with audiences. Social media facilitates this “meeting audiences halfway” approach so well; why should I not take advantage of it?

Most of us do not have access to production studios and high-tech equipment; even those who do often struggle to gain attention for their original creations. Social media, then, is a veritable intra-action machine where creators are also audience to their audiences’ creations; we are constantly learning from each other, which entails *thinking differently*.

I now return to my central question, *What can a social media app do?* If we still do not know *everything* TikTok can do, at least we have learned some of the ways it drives people to create and learn from one another. One very specific thing it can do is *this*: *this* thesis, these concepts, these words that you are reading right now.

True, I also had to *write* myself here, but social media makes no sense as an isolated phenomenon; I could not have written myself here without my intra-action with the app and its other denizens. Of course, I *might have* reached similar conclusions in other ways; I have been thinking along these lines for *quite* some time now. For example, I have been unable to *not think* in some terms of “in here” and “out there,” in part because my experience from early childhood through adolescence was one of *hiding* my “true self” from others; this hiding was because I could not *know* if others would understand and accept me the way I understood and accepted myself. Much of where I am now, including both my philosophospiritual views and my writing style, have been *deeply* influenced by that experience.

But if, as I have argued, *passion* is specific by fact of intra-action being specific, I could not have come to *the same* conclusions without TikTok. Furthermore, I *did not* reach conclusions in other ways: the reason I have expanded through social media is that I am *passionate* about it. No, I am not constantly brimming with energy over every single video I make: that would be exhausting. But the knowledge that I *have* felt passionate about the content I am making suggests that I will feel that way again, and that expectation is enough to drive me to keep making videos even when I am feeling uninspired. *Obligation* does play a part in pulling me forward here, as the restraints and expectations of TikTok mean that I must keep posting regularly if I want to maintain my audience.

There is so much more that needs to be developed here; I could write on the driving force of *anxiety*, which I understand to be passion's equal opposite. I could write on how they do not necessarily need to be thought of as two separate forces and could be understood as a *single* shifting current. I could probably keep writing forever, but I must stop somewhere. I feel the overarching point my work has brought me to is that we should let go of what we believe we *should do*; *obligation* can play an important role in shaping our course, but it alone does not have the force to push boundaries and sustain itself. If obligation can shape passion, it can also restrict it.

On the other hand, we should allow ourselves to be carried by the currents of passion; we should allow *ourselves* to focus on what we love, that which moves us to put something back out into the world. We should allow our thought and writing to follow passion where it leads us, *when* it leads us: passion is fleeting, and sometimes when I wait to engage with it, it is gone by the time I am ready. Of course, the need to finish what we have started, especially in regard to academic and professional demands, limit our ability to respond. But as I am constantly saying, I believe it

is about balance: if we must work within limits, then let us push those limits where we can; let us find creative ways to express our passions within them.

I do see the contradiction where I have written, “We should let go of what we believe we *should do*.” But if I seem to be *prescribing* following passion here, it is born out *describing* my experience, what works to move me. Learning to communicate my passions in a way that is engaging to others has taken learning, but it has also taken *unlearning* the “proper” ways of doing things. Rather than following a prescription, I like to think of it as an *unleashing*, a *permission* to pursue the things we want to chase. In the words of a song I know from an old fan-made anime music video I love, *go do, you’ll know how to just let yourself, fall into landslide* (Jónsi, 2010). Nothing is too silly or obscure: we do not get to consciously decide what moves us. And how terribly predictable and constrained the world might be if we did! We must take passion where we find it. Weird and obscure passions, those that many would deem “silly” or “pointless,” produce different thought precisely because they are, well, *different*. Those passions we have in common with many make it easier to connect and become with others. If we want to move others, to move the world, first we must be *moved*.

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