

Reveries of a Solitary Biker

by

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Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in the

Graduate Liberal Studies Program
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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2017 SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Spring 2017

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Abstract

“Reveries of a Solitary Biker” is a two-part response to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, in the form of poems printed on a deck of cards and set to music, with an accompanying essay. Both essay and poems consider the difficulties of living an anti-capitalist life, the continued invisibility of much of women’s labour, the paradoxes of daily life, the nature and implications of calculations of value, and the difficulties of sustainability. The piece is intended for performance: audience members will be asked to draw cards from the deck, and the cards drawn will be performed. Each performance will thus be unique, incomplete, and inconclusive.

Keywords: Rousseau; Poetry; Feminism; Biking; Poetics; Reverie

Dedication

For Nina, Félix, and François Houle

Acknowledgements

Grateful thanks to Stephen Duguid, Kelly Haydon, François Houle, Jacqueline Leggatt, my GLS 2013 cohort, and to Carol Reid for permission to reprint “Where to Find Grace”.

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Where to Find Grace

Under the kitchen table with the flour and the cat dish, in the kitchen sink with the supper dishes and the bubbles of soap.

Behind half-closed eyelids in the sunlight.

Round About Midnight in the moonlit garden.

Two steps down into the Qu'Appelle Valley in April sunshine.

Called by one's own name in the street, an unfamiliar voice on any uncertain gray day.

Where women are talking and laughing, watching their children at play.

The water that falls from the sky always a grace.

Equally a grace, evaporation in sunlight.

The very same water always falling again somewhere else taken up again, and again condensing and falling, & again taken up.

Only to know about this and to be able to think about it. Impossible grace.

Inescapably surrounded. Like the rain of any ordinary day.

Jamie Reid

The Paradoxes of Reverie

In 1776, at the age of 64, an embittered Jean-Jacques Rousseau took to rambling. Feeling rejected, neglected, and condemned, he turned his back on the society in which he had never managed to feel at ease, and found peace wandering the fields outside Paris, noting interesting flora and fauna, and ruminating on his life and career. Rousseau jotted down his philosophical musings on playing cards he carried in his pocket; these notes would form the basis for his last book, *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, translated as *Reveries of the Solitary Walker (or a Solitary Walker)*. Unfinished at his death and published posthumously in 1782, the *Reveries* reiterate and meditate upon many of Rousseau's central themes: the joys of solitude, the corrupting influence of society, the fragility of happiness and of human relations, and the great, healing solace of nature (not to mention his obsession with enemies and persecution).

Like Rousseau, I too have taken to wandering, although I do so on my bicycle. I find cycling particularly conducive to a slow, non-deliberate thinking, an almost sub-conscious contemplation. Biking around Vancouver, my mind often returns to several issues I have long struggled with, my own version of Rousseau's obsessions. I wonder about whether it's really possible or useful to live counter to capitalism's omnipotence in our hyper-capitalist society, about how to live a sustainable life, about how nurturing can truly be valued, and indeed about what value is, and how it gets defined, and to what end. (I also often wonder about more mundane things, like what we might make for supper.) In my reveries I wonder about our options, about where my kids will live, and about what has happened to our imaginations. What is to be done, I often wonder?

“Reveries of a Solitary Biker”

“Reveries of a Solitary Biker” is a series of linked poems set to music and performed live. The poems use my GLS 800 and 801 journals, as well as notes from subsequent GLS readings, as source material, and are rooted in the thoughts and musings that occur to me as I bike around the city and through my life. The poems reflect upon our movement through time and generations, and the multiplicity of our meanings and our selves; they propose the necessity for the heresy of non-productivity, of idleness, and of the ordinary, the heresy of daily life.

In homage to Rousseau’s playing card origins, my *Reveries* are divided into four suites and printed as a deck of cards, designed by artist Kelly Haydon. The cards have been set to music by my frequent collaborator, clarinetist François Houle; one suite is electro-acoustic, one is improvisation accompanying text, one is text only, and one is through-composed music accompanying text. We perform the piece by asking audience members to draw some of the cards from the deck; the cards are then performed in the order drawn. Each performance will thus be unique, incomplete, and inconclusive.

Although “Reveries of a Solitary Biker” has marked differences from Rousseau’s *Reveries*, which I use more as a starting point than as a defining model, the two projects do share common threads. In each of his *Reveries*’ ten walks Rousseau takes particular moments in his life as catalysts for extended philosophical musings. That is, he extrapolates from the specific and the particular, moving outward from the personal to what he seems to imagine as the universal, or at least the more general. While so doing, he often also seeks to validate his past behaviour, or at least to comprehend it. My “Reveries” share a similar movement outwards from the personal into a wider pondering, although I make no claim to universality. They are also an attempt at least in part to defend my life choices, in particular my decision not to pursue a traditional “career”, but

instead to spend a good twenty years mainly devoted to raising my children, thinking of myself as a stay-at-home feminist while making choices some feminists would deride (and did). So that considering the world through the lens of the self, while at the same time trying to decipher how that self is constructed, is something my project inherits from Rousseau's.

In addition, Rousseau's *Reveries* are rife with paradox and indeterminacy, like so much of his work, making his method especially suited for adaptation to a consideration of caring labour and the female experience, sites similarly infused with contradiction and uncertainty. Obviously, my *Reveries'* card format emphasizes the role of chance, by which Rousseau so often let his life be determined, and which is fundamental to the modernity whose articulation he pioneered. But if as playing cards my "Reveries" highlight contingency, precariousness, and incompleteness, as collaborations they also emphasize communication, love, peaceful contradiction, and a multiplicity of voices, elements vital for the successful negotiation of our current condition. That is, I hope my "Reveries" gesture towards optimistic possibilities at the same time as they consider seriously our dire reality.

Composition Notes

I ride my bike almost daily; during the course of my rides through the city, my mind wanders, sometimes working through particular aspects of whatever I've been reading, sometimes fixing on more mundane matters. "But the record of these aimless thoughts is not the same as the aimless thoughts themselves," points out Michael Davis of Rousseau's *Reveries* (Davis 1999, 93); the same is true of my own, which I composed by repeating particular lines or phrases over and over under my breath to the rhythm of my riding until they sounded right. Sometimes I would stop to jot down a few pertinent phrases, or what struck me as an interesting combination of words, just enough for me

later to reconstruct what I was thinking. Sometimes I didn't write enough down, or I couldn't read my writing; in those cases I guessed or tried purposeful misreading. I combined these "riding notes" with notes I took while reading, so that my final poems use my wandering biking thoughts and my readings as source material, just as Rousseau's *Reveries* use his walking meditations as a basis for his ten beautifully constructed "Walks". Rousseau's insistence that movement stimulates thought – "my body has to be on the move to set my mind going" (Rousseau 1973, 158) – applies as well to biking as it does to walking. Often during a bike ride something I've not even known I was thinking about will suddenly become clear to me, or a connection I've been struggling to understand in more "focused" thought will seem obvious. As Paul Fournel writes, "the bike is a good place to work for a writer. First, he (sic) can sit down; then he's surrounded by windy silence, which airs out the brain and is favorable to meditation; finally he produces with his legs a fair number of different rhythms, which are so much music to verse and prose" (Fournel 2003, 127). Conversely, sometimes a connection will become clear to me only to be lost before I have time to jot it down, so fully do I inhabit the present moment while riding. Such are the pleasures, benefits, and risks available to the rêveur/rêveuse.

First Paradox: Reverie

Reverie amuses and distracts me, thought wearies and depresses me; thinking has always been for me a disagreeable and thankless occupation. Sometimes my reveries end in meditation, but more often my meditations end in reverie, and during these wanderings my soul roams and soars through the universe on the wings of imagination, in ecstasies which surpass all other pleasures.

Rousseau, *Seventh Walk*

For Rousseau reverie is at once a source of intense pleasure and a means of escape, both from the social world and from his troubled self: "My meditations and

reveries are never more delightful than when I can forget myself” (Rousseau 2004, 111). But much as it constitutes a removal, reverie is also simultaneously and paradoxically an intensification of presence, a means of being wholly in the present, without worries and plans for the future or regrets about the past. In reverie Rousseau inhabits what Gertrude Stein, over a century later, would call the continuous present. In the *Reveries’* Fifth Walk he claims in “my solitary reveries” to experience an internal calm, “a sufficient, complete and perfect happiness which leaves no emptiness to be filled in the soul,” a serenity far richer than the “poor, incomplete and relative happiness such as we find in the pleasures of life” (88). “What is the source of our happiness in such a state?” he asks. “Nothing external to us,” is his answer, “nothing apart from ourselves and our own existence” (89). Here reverie is the (temporary) source not only of happiness and peace, but of wholeness and completion, a genuine contentment that generally eluded Rousseau, as it eludes most of us, most of the time.

Thus reverie, arising in Rousseau’s case from extended walking, can be an altered state, as Jean Starobinski argues:

walking eventually produces something like a hypnotic state; his body forgets itself. An ‘inexplicable void’ develops; the mind loses its grip on reality and abandons itself to its own exuberance. Reveries unfold inwardly without involving the will...conscious reflection is curtailed or eliminated, allowing the images of the reverie to appear, as it were, spontaneously, gratuitously, effortlessly (Starobinski 1988, 233).

And rather than, or as well as, being a retreat inward, away from the world, reverie also provides a reorientation outwards, an engagement with the world in all its multiple possibilities, and even a radical broadening of the notion of the self. This broadening has been described as “conceiv[ing] of the world so broadly that we see ourselves as part of everything” (Lane and Clark 2006, 77). Reverie “does not create an inner private space of fantasy, of subjective images and feelings apart from the world, but rather provides a truthful opening to meaning, making it possible for the self to be beside itself,” Eli Friedlander contends (Friedlander 2004, 24). Considered in this light, reverie becomes

less of a withdrawal from the world and more of a shedding of our habitual social boundaries, a venue for thinking about the self and society in the broadest possible sense, and *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* becomes a radical opening, an enactment of the process of thinking instead of a representation of completed thought: “writing is opening thought rather than attempting to adequately represent it” (Friedlander 2004, 27).

Or at least *sometimes* reverie functions as a radical opening. For when Rousseau obsessively reiterates his feelings of persecution, his *Reveries* collapse into a specific and very particular fury. The First Walk, for example, famously opens with a near-hysterical assertion of alienation and victimization:

So now I am alone in the world, with no brother, neighbour, or friend, nor any company left me but my own. The most sociable and loving of men has with one accord been cast out by all the rest. With all the ingenuity of hate they have sought out the cruelest torture for my sensitive soul, and have violently broken all the threads that bound me to them (Rousseau 2004, 27).

Passages such as this draw on reverie’s etymological roots in rage and delusion (the word’s Latin root, *rabere*, means “to be furiously angry”, while the related Middle French *rever*, to dream, has a derivative meaning delirium), roots tapped every time Rousseau refers to “my enemies”. So that the *Reveries* perform a radical engagement *and* negate it with a visceral disengagement, as Starobinski notes:

Against a dark background of anguish and hostility, reverie simultaneously produces and deploys a series of arguments, images, and feelings, but only in order to exhaust and nullify them all, save one: the feeling of an unalterable and limpid presence (Starobinski 1988, 363 - 364).

Paradoxically, then, it is in reverie’s distancing that Rousseau is most present in his life; indeed his life *becomes* a reverie: “My whole life has been little else than a long reverie

divided into chapters by my daily walks”¹, he writes, echoing Prospero’s “We are such stuff/As dreams are made on,” and, like Prospero, making of his entire life a book, one which simultaneously embraces the world and recoils from it. In writing his *Reveries* Rousseau reads his own life.

But for all its tide-like embracing and recoiling, reverie is always embedded in a physical body; no unrooted, floating dream, it requires a physical space and physical activity. Without a landscape to walk in and a body to do the walking or biking, reverie cannot be achieved. In Vancouver, for instance, I move through unceded Musqueam, Squamish, Sto:lo, and Tsleil-Waututh territories; the landscape here attests to a history of colonization and imperialism and of resistance to them, and bears now faint traces of another, very different way of being in the world. That landscape and its particular history seep into the reverie experience, as Fournel attests: “To be in the landscape, in its heat, its rain, its wind, is to see it with different eyes; it’s to impregnate oneself with it in an instinctive and profound way” (Fournel 2003, 89)². Furthermore, reverie’s fluctuations are mirrored not only in the rhythm of the walk or bike ride, but in the ebb and flow of the landscape being moved through, as suggested by Walter Benjamin in his famous discussion of the “flâneur”, the nineteenth century urban walker: “Landscape – this is what the city becomes for the flâneur. Or, more precisely, the city splits into its dialectical poles. It becomes a landscape that opens up to him and a parlor that encloses him” (Benjamin). The walker, the landscape, and the *Reveries* all participate in this shifting, fluid, cyclical and contradictory motion³.

¹ Quoted in the Introduction to Rousseau 2004, 12.

² Fournel is attuned to yet another paradox: the threat of physical danger lurking within reverie’s tranquility, for injury is always possible whenever a body moves through a landscape: “every cyclist, even a beginner, knows that at any moment in his (sic) life he could have a rendezvous with a door” (8). Case in point: I began my GLS journey with a broken arm, having hit a pothole on a Vancouver bike path.

³ This motion also mirrors what Marx describes as “the ebb and flow of the industrial cycle,” in which workers are “continually repelled and attracted, slung backwards and forwards” (Marx 1977, 583).

Constructed as they are of fluctuating, conjoined contradictions (removal/presence, alienation/opening, self/society, nature/society, self/nature, book/life, presence/retrospective), Rousseau's *Reveries* present a further paradoxical layer, one hinted at above. For despite their title these are far from dreamy, rambling notes; each skillfully articulated Walk presents a cogent argument in beautiful, complex prose far removed from the rambling digressions the title *Reveries* might lead us to expect (in keeping with reverie's contradictions, Rousseau celebrates an unsophisticated existence free from the degradations of society in highly sophisticated, and highly social, writing skills). As Peter France, the translator of the English Penguin Classics edition, remarks: "the language of the *Reveries*, far from being the natural jottings of a dreamer, is the result of careful and elaborate construction" (France 2004, 14). In other words, the *Reveries* are well-constructed essays in the guise of insubstantial meanderings. And it is this very layered, contradictory condition that makes reverie such a fertile form for me; like Rousseau, I wander geographically so as to wander mentally, unafraid to change my mind and unconcerned with inconsistency. Reverie is a venue for experimentation, a means of working through thought. Not an arrival but an attempt, an "essai".

Second Paradox: Walking & Biking

I have never been able to do anything with my pen in my hand, and my desk and paper before me; it is on my walks, among the rocks and trees, it is at night in my bed when I lie awake, that I compose in my head.

Rousseau, *Confessions*

Rousseau's *Reveries* partake in a long tradition of walking in European literature and philosophy, from the Peripatetic Philosophers of Ancient Greece, the Anglo-Saxon Wanderer and Chaucer's pilgrims, to Schubert's Winterreise, Jane Austen's characters, Walter Benjamin's urban flâneur, noted above, and the Situationists with their psychogeographical dérives, to say nothing of the famous producers of art and philosophy – the Goliards, Hume, Kant, Beethoven, Wordsworth, the Brontës, Dickens, Woolf, Walser, etc. – for whom walking was essential to creativity and indeed to their

way of being. Cycling's history being so much shorter than walking's, its literary influence is less well established; still, even a partial list of literary cycling enthusiasts would have to include Achebe, Beckett, Camus, de Beauvoir, Hardy, Lindgren, Mahfouz, Nabokov, Narayan, Flann O'Brien, Robbe-Grillet, Sartre, Tolstoy, and Wells. Apart from being a means of moving through landscapes, and sometimes also of getting from one place to another, walking and biking can be meditative, a way of knowing or coming to know, and of participation, a fusing of mind and body – “the body forgets itself”– at once an experience and a processing of experience. Indeed, Rousseau claimed walking was vital to his writing, even to his thinking: “I can only meditate when I am walking. When I stop I cease to think; my mind only works with my legs” (Rousseau 1973, 382).

And the simple act of walking can constitute a social critique as well as being a very ordinary, daily activity, as the Situationists realized. “From now on the analysts are in the streets,” Raoul Vaneigem declares (Vaneigem 1983, 12), “my psychogeographic *dérives* with Guy Debord ... were exceptional moments, combining theoretical speculation, sentient intelligence, the critical analysis of beings and places, and the pleasure of cheerful drinking” (Obrist 2009). Similarly, if less flamboyantly, bike commuting is touted as a healthy alternative to our deadly dependence on non-renewable oil. This location of critique in ordinariness is vitally important; both walking and biking are quotidian activities, simple and cheap, if not entirely free from consumer capitalism's insidious infiltration, widely (although not universally) available: unremarkable, daily activities, akin to those usually deemed unimportant –doing laundry, or getting groceries, or talking to a neighbour – the overlooked, often disparaged, activities that form much of the fabric of our social relations.

Third Paradox, “That which any old dog carries away”: The Everyday

I understood that all these materials for a work of literature were simply my past life; I understood that they had come to me, in frivolous pleasures, in indolence,

in tenderness, in unhappiness, and that I had stored them up without divining the purpose for which they were destined.

Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*

Now often denigrated as a hindrance to rigorous, meaningful thought and creativity (Proust is particularly vehement on this score), daily life was for much of human history not separated from work and creativity, as Henri Lefebvre notices: “What distinguishes peasant life so profoundly from the life of industrial workers, even today, is precisely [the] inherence of productive activity all around the house; work is not separated from the everyday life of the family” (Lefebvre 1992, 30). The groundbreaking historian Ivy Pinchbeck made a similar observation nearly a century ago in her discussion of female work⁴: “where the workshop was attached to the home it was customary for the whole family to work together in the craft...marriage was...a business partnership” (Pinchbeck 1969, 282). Indeed for many historians, feminists, artists, and other commentators, the distinction between the quotidian and the valuable is a distinctly capitalist development:

The system of exploitation of nature and man, starting in the Middle Neolithic with intensive farming, caused an involution in which creativity—a quality specific to humans—was supplanted by work, by the production of a covetous power. Creative life, as had begun to unfold during the Paleolithic, declined and gave way to a brutish struggle for subsistence (Obrist 2009).

⁴ Pinchbeck finds evidence of women working in nearly every trade, skilled and unskilled alike: farming, chandling, weaving, spinning, mining, valuing, cooping, gilding, surgery, plumbing, soap and button making, dentistry, trading, printing, auctioneering, goldsmithing, shop keeping, and so on. And Jennie Kitteringham describes women and children working at apple picking, bird watching, singling turnips, stone picking, pea-picking, gleaning, acorn gathering and selling, fruit picking, haymaking, musselling and cockling, planting, straw plaiting, lace-making, braiding and repairing fishing nets, tending cattle, sheep, & pigs, bark peeling, threshing, tenting (bird scaring), weeding, turf-stacking, brick making, shrimp picking, and rag cutting (Kitteringham 1973).

And while it has become cliché to note that women often perform much of the routine daily life that capitalism has relegated to the realm of the unworthy, uncreative, and uninteresting, it remains worth pointing out. Childrearing, for example, still often relegated to the female domain, is a prime example of work “not separated from the everyday life of the family” (although it may or may not be the kind of “productive activity” Lefebvre has in mind). Despite feminism’s huge gains, it continues to be true that to rehabilitate daily life is at least partly to find value in what has been disparaged, and continues to be dismissed, as “women’s work”. As Rose Lichter-Marck comments in her discussion of photographer Vivian Maier, who supported herself for over 40 years by working as a nanny, “‘women’s work’ is diminished and ignored while the (historically male) artist’s pursuit is valorized as a creative gift” (Lichter-Marck, 2014).

But as Maier’s work demonstrates, by virtue of the very mundaneness for which they are so often denigrated, moments of lived, ordinary life can provide insights unavailable to more traditionally exalted pursuits. The everyday approaches from a different angle, shedding light on the overlooked. In the words of Walter Benjamin:

the great reminiscences, the historical frissons - these are all so much junk to the flâneur, who is happy to leave them to the tourist. And he would be happy to trade all his knowledge of artists’ quarters, birthplaces, and princely palaces for the scent of a single weathered threshold or the touch of a single tile — that which any old dog carries away...(Benjamin).

My own experience of raising and educating my two kids while continuing to write books is that daily life can be a source of great insight and creativity, and that it can also be confining and exhausting. Asking “where are we to situate the poverty and wealth of this everyday life which we know to be both infinitely rich (potentially at least) and infinitely poor, bare, alienated?” (Lefebvre 1992, 31), Lefebvre describes daily life as “fertile soil,” rather than the “mountain peaks” creativity is more often compared to (87). That is, daily life serves him as a source rather than a destination. My answer to the question he poses is that perhaps daily life can be situated right within its contractions, in that generative space so akin to the one found in reverie, with its ebb and flow of opening

and repulsion; this shared paradox makes reverie a form especially well suited to considerations arising out of the everyday.

If locating creativity in the mundane seems paradoxical, a further complication is that reuniting daily life and creativity entails understanding nurturing as labour⁵, and productive labour at that, while at the same time rejecting the traditional focus on labour as productivity. For much of daily life, and working class life in particular, has long revolved around caring, as David Graeber points out in a recent interview: “the bulk of working class people have always been engaged in caring labor of one sort or another” (Frank 2014). Indeed, “from the viewpoint of the working class,” Silvia Federici argues, “being productive simply means being exploited” (Federici 2012, 32). Rousseau himself recognized the value of “non-productive” caring labour (he felt the paucity of the maternal care he received, his mother having died nine days after his birth). “When our life begins our needs begin too”, he writes in *Émile* (23), a book devoted to outlining his controversial method for the proper meeting of those endless needs.

To give care is to do something of great value and yet to produce nothing concretely measurable; in this it constitutes a challenge to consumer capitalism’s relentless focus on product and productivity. As has been much remarked, reproductive labour exists outside the realm of exchange: “the intention and goal of mothering is to give of one’s care without obtaining a return of a self-interested kind... The motive behind the activity of mothering is thus entirely different from that behind a market transaction” (Held 1987, 3). It is thus a very different kind of labour, conducive to a radically different perspective on what constitutes work and what is of value, just as a walker or cyclist’s perspective, and even purpose⁶, differs from that of a car driver or

⁵ I understand “nurturing” to include all forms of caregiving and reproductive labour, not just parenting, and follow Silvia Federici in defining this work as “the complex of activities and relations by which our life and labour are daily reconstituted” (Federici 2012, 5).

⁶ Thanks to Stephen Collis for this point.

train passenger. However, because of its focus on satisfying needs and on what Maria Mies calls the “production of life”⁷, rather than on the production of a measurable, saleable commodity, reproductive labour has been omitted from most calculations or definitions of value – and not only from capitalist ones. It is, for example, notoriously excluded from Marx’s assertion that “the labour of the private individual manifests itself as an element of the total labour of society only through the relations which the act of exchange establishes between the products, and, through their mediation, between the producers” (Marx 1977, 165). Reproductive labour has quite simply been invisible, and to a large extent continues to be so. “*Where women are concerned,*” writes Silvia Federici, “*their labour appears to be a personal service outside of capital*” (2012, 28, italics in original)⁸.

In making this point it is important to emphasize that to valorize non-productive labour, and to find within it the possibility of creativity, is in no way to constrict women’s possibilities. It is, rather, to recognize the importance of female knowledge and experience, and to acknowledge their importance as acts of resistance; in Federici’s words, it is to refuse “to obliterate the collective experiences, knowledge, and struggles that women have accumulated concerning reproductive work, whose history has been an essential part of our resistance to capitalism” (Federici 2012, 148). Far from limiting women’s options, this acknowledgement of female experiences helps repair the rift between life and work, restoring value to the mundane and expanding all our potential for creativity. Of course, the re-valuing of care is not limited to marxist feminism; it is a central theme in much current thought, including other branches of feminism, care ethics, psychoanalysis, much ecological thinking, and the slow movement, to name but a few. Proponents of caring view it as the means to a better life, even a better world, and argue for the importance of caring over achievement. Martha Nussbaum, for example, stresses the importance of nurturing for healthy infant development, arguing that the

⁷ “A feminist concept of labour has to be oriented toward the *production of life* as the goal of work and not *the production of things and wealth*” (Mies 1986, 217).

⁸ Mies, Federici and others argue that caring labour is most insidiously invisible when carried out by lower-income women, particularly those from developing countries.

psychological effect of holding babies “makes a world worth living in” (Nussbaum 2001, 187). But there’s a catch. If the everyday in all its constituent elements, including caring, can be conducive to deep contemplation and creativity, a pathway to happiness and even to an improved world, in order to be so it requires something in critically short supply in modern consumer capitalist life: time.

Fourth Paradox: Time

Moments of time no longer radiate, as they did in the cyclical time of earlier societies; time is a thread stretching from birth to death...The feeling of living in symbiosis with cosmic forces – the sense of the simultaneous – revealed joys to our forefathers which our passing presence in the world is hard put to provide. What remains of such a joy?

Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*

Time has become objectified, something to sell or to save; we are expected to work longer, using “time-saving” devices to help us squeeze ever more productivity out of less and less time. “The social manipulation of time and temporality,” David Harvey notes, “is a fundamental feature of capitalism” (Harvey 2010, 140). But as Zygmunt Bauman argues:

speed...is not conducive to thinking...Thought calls for pause and rest, for ‘taking one’s time,’ recapitulating the steps already taken, looking closely at the place reached and the wisdom (or imprudence, as the case may be) of reaching it (Bauman 2000, 209 – 210).

“Time,” Melissa Lane observes, “has been transmuted into convenience” (Lane 2012, 148). Which is where reverie comes in, for in moving away from productivity and objectified time, in taking our time, lies a strain of possible resistance. Lane insists that “a society organized around efficiency is a society which has forgotten to ask about its ends in its obsession with means” (Lane 2012, 147), calling for the restoration of “honour

and value to mundane time” (Lane 2012, 146). Such a restoration sounds nearly heretical to our global capitalist ears, but in fact a new heresy has been taking shape in recent years. It is the heresy⁹ of non-productivity, of idleness, of the small and ordinary, of the slow and repetitive, the heresy of the mundane. Rooted in the meanderings of the flâneur and the Situationists’ *dérives*, the heresy of non-productivity flourishes in the handcraft, mending, and DIY revivals, in the Slow Food and Occupy movements, and in various versions of feminism and environmentalism, as well as in more narrowly political movements like the Work Less Party.

This heretical move away from commodity production toward locating value in caring and in reproductive labour has clear links to Rousseau, and to his *Reveries* in particular. For are not reverie and walking both prime examples not only of non-productivity, but of non-participation? As Frédéric Gros has recently argued, “The stroller does not consume and is not consumed” (180):

Walking is setting oneself apart: at the edge of those who work, at the edges of high-speed roads, at the edge of the producers of profit and poverty, exploiters, labourers, and at the edge of those serious people who always have something better to do than receive the pale gentleness of a winter sun or the freshness of a spring breeze (Gros 2015, 94).

Rousseau himself consistently disparages what he identifies in the *Reveries* 7th walk as “this attitude which always brings everything back to our material interests, causing us to seek in all things either profits or remedies” (111), and in the same walk derides the botanists’ of his day’s “distasteful prejudice” for “use value” over aesthetics, or even simple pleasure and curiosity:

⁹ “It is needless to observe, I presume, that both rebels and heretics are those unlucky persons, who, when things have come to a certain degree of violence, have the misfortune to be of the weaker party,” remarks Adam Smith, of all people (Smith 1966, 155).

All the charming and gracious details of the structure of plants hold little interest for anyone whose sole aim is to pound them all up in a mortar, and it is no good seeking garlands for shepherdesses among the ingredients of an enema (110).

Indeed, the 6th Walk concludes with a call to idleness: “I have never believed that man’s (sic) freedom consists in doing what he wants, but rather in never doing what he does not want to do” (104). In the 5th walk Rousseau proposes a passionate detachment, at once apart from the world and fully engaged with it; I propose that this kind of engaged detachment is exactly what writing requires, and what reverie provides: an engagement intense enough to observe and detached enough to record. As Michael Davis puts it, “Rousseau suggests the possibility of an activity that combines purposiveness and aimlessness – a reflection that cannot finally be understood to have an aim apart from itself” (Davis, 213).

From this perspective, non-productivity looks less like sheer idleness and more like the time required for reflection, engagement, and creativity, in other words, the time required for an engaged, fulfilling life. The focus on production has been deeply detrimental to all kinds of creativity, and indeed to life in general, as many have argued; indeed, this is one of the Situationists’ central points. As Vaneigem states with his customary aplomb, “the exploitation of labour power is submerged by the exploitation of everyday creativity” (Vaneigem 1983, 15), calling for the liberation of “daily life from the control and stranglehold of an economy based on the profitable exploitation of man (sic)” (Obriest 2009). Such a liberation would necessitate the repudiation of productivity as the measure of value, and a reevaluation of the mundane. Only a shift away from our relentless focus on production will make caring fully visible, enabling its inclusion in our definition of labour, and the recognition of the creative possibilities daily life presents.

Which is not to say that locating creativity within caring and the everyday is a simple or obvious proposition. Reproductive labour can be brutally time-consuming labour that subsumes the self, as I was reminded when my teenager badly broke his

arm, requiring surgery, while I was revising this essay. For two weeks after his accident my life was entirely consumed by the most basic caring labour – preparing food, doling out and tracking medication, washing and dressing him, getting up in the night, fetching and carrying, keeping him entertained and relatively happy – and I had neither the time nor the capacity even to think about any more “productive” work; caregivers always run the risk of having their identities subsumed by the caring they provide. I have consistently had to struggle to extract “work time” out of the daily; caring labour sometimes envelopes months of my life, depending on my kids’ needs (and lately, on those of my aged parents). It’s complex, demanding, physical labour, as Federici recognizes:

Unlike other forms of production, the production of human beings is to a great extent irreducible to mechanization, requiring a high degree of human interaction and the satisfaction of complex needs in which physical and affective elements are inextricably combined. That reproductive work is a labour-intensive process is most evident in the care of children and the elderly that, even in its most physical components, involves providing a sense of security, consoling, anticipating fears and desires (Federici 2012, 107).

But if this labour were visible and valued, recognized and remunerated as time-consuming work, rather than as something to be carried out in the snippets of time not occupied by “real” work, that is, if Lane’s “honour and value” were truly restored to mundane time, the time required for reflection and reverie would be more readily available to caregivers, the majority of whom are still women. As Federici succinctly puts it in arguing for wages for housework, “what we need is more time, more money, not more work” (Federici 2012, 57). All of which hinges on replacing productivity as our ultimate goal and measure of value.

And although reverie seems like the ultimate non-productive activity (what could be less “productive” than walking around ruminating?), it can also be a site of great creativity, as Rousseau’s *Reveries* attest. Indeed, reverie is a prime example of Lefebvre’s “fertile soil”, creativity arising out of the commonplace. Once again we

encounter the paradox reverie is so striated with: the mental space of the non-productive moment can foster great creativity, which of course is a form of production¹⁰, as noted above. Rousseau's celebration of non-productivity is, after all, issued in a book, the product of focused labour and a commodified object. Vaneigem is attuned to this paradox: "there is an ambiguity in the very idea of 'making a work of art,' for it embraces both the lived experience of the artist and the sacrifice of this experience to the abstraction of a creative substance, i.e. to the aesthetic form" (Vaneigem 1983, 84).

But here again I am forced to consider my gender, for specifically female creativity has long been demonized, something poet Dorothy Trujillo Lusk notes in a recent interview:

The ogress was always a figure of the anguished mother, desexualized and ostracized, relegated to a reproductive role of surplus labour, who has to fight for their kid, for territory on the street, to maintain their place on the street, because we don't get to be flâneurs (LaFrance 2015, 28).

(Just note the dearth of women in my lists of notable walkers, bikers, and creators above, for example.) In writing my own "Reveries" I insert myself in Rousseau's place; I insist on my right also to be a flâneuse, a rêveuse. So in arguing for a new understanding of value, encompassing caring and non-productivity, I'm insisting on the value of what has traditionally been understood as female creativity, but also asserting women's right and ability to take on other roles, ones from which we have historically been excluded. That is, I am paradoxically locating creativity in "female" work, while at the same time claiming our right to find creativity elsewhere. As Rousseau knew so well, there is value to be found in transgression, just as there is value in the unresolved, in paradox, in uncertainty, and even in inefficiency. Reading his *Reveries* and writing my own has offered me a conduit towards these values, as well as a way of thinking through

¹⁰ Another of reverie's paradoxes is the commodification of both creativity and the continuous present. I note with chagrin Lululemon marketing its up-scale yoga wear with the slogan "creativity is maximized when you're living in the moment", for example.

time and of exploring the questions that plague me. With Rousseau, I have found that ideas and concerns can feed one another in unexpected, fruitful ways, and perhaps even be brought together and mutually transformed, in the paradoxes of reverie.

**Reveries of a Solitary Biker
(The Deck of Cards)**



Clubs

Ace of Clubs

Nov. 11, 2013

“nothing can give us security”

a breach once

made, extrapolate

with certainty

Must we all be improved

by industry's justice, by affable

charity, by Monday mornings

(for are we not *FANATICS*)

sufficient

to blast

her character

(David Hume)

2 of Clubs

Sept. 2, 2013

I've frankly never

geared more

incredible permutations of

here I have found

(do we all have

our bodies?)

oh tentative shift

what sort of

hope is

this

we, not I,

have not found?

also we

must discuss

land use

3 of Clubs

we need

not marvel

at knot-

weed

4 of Clubs

extremely intricate

conditions will

degenerate extremely

5 of Clubs

scarcely two wheeling years

sheers whole legions

cheering (*inside which*

room?) for the overhead

projector; no invites no

fracking, but if freed

I'll assume adjacent

hustles; as I bellow

my manifesto, I stagger

over negotiating cables

6 of Clubs

avert or avoid, articles

may have

shifted, and

there's still no sacrifice

for substitution

but come on

and bilk my

ride, I'm dressed

in leaves, I chafe

at my constraints, I've been

much stuck

7 of Clubs

Sept. 16, 2013

nor much possibility, either

like truly proscribed and

identifiable

to stave

off

unclear on

Nor do I understand

that a moral tablet

does not consist

regular practices involved

8 of Clubs

but more in the way of

how did this phrase turn

“innovative”?, my point has

been automated, kindled

double clients balk

and now allow small

notes, a micro-targeted

realism, which we hail

as a has-been, a retro-

refutation, a saddled

subject

9 of Clubs

Who is to say who we are? Despite the brandishment of intricate harmonies, my head has been tuned to the pitch of a strange instrument, and all the difficulties which perplex us are beyond rectification, if I do not deceive myself – but what am I saying here? I ought to proceed with order & method, but such an undertaking is beyond me. I am bewildered by those who behave as though, having drunk from the modern cup, they now can and must sell all, and simple pleasures must vanish. Perhaps it would be best here to avert your gaze; like the snail with its shell, I appal myself.

10 of Clubs

“d’you want Chinese, or chicken and beer?”

Jack of Clubs

at least our displeasure has been made apparent

Queen of Clubs

I can perceive neither profits nor remedies. What remains is a fragile chapter, composed of trauma, addiction, and consumption, but only in a sardonic sense. Despite the soft soul of compassion, who among us has not been compelled by necessity? But that is already in our distant past; the reveries of my stormy youth have long since been sold. What a host of intricate, fragile problems fills the modern cup; perhaps all its resolutions are mere folly, but they cruise decisive significance. And yet ours is at most a delegated originality.

King of Clubs

at least our displeasure has been made known

Diamonds

Ace of Diamonds

March 14, 2014

"Imagine us"

in the absence

of her voices

exactly how much

entrancing exactitude

can be expected

2 of Diamonds

March 4, 2014

two great

hostiles I can't

help: naked, shameless,

direct, brutal

suckered

we find new wants

and our shorts

are timed

3 of Diamonds

Jan. 21, 2014

discord, disruption, and

despair, what a

strange delusion

discussion could be

a vessel

or derisive vessel

visibly risable

at nearly every turn

such murky marvels

4 of Diamonds

Sept. 10, 2013

damage taken up

the ultimate act of

joyous unexpected

comes from their now (the

joy of her, the

spangled head)

So that activities are social forces

like a woman using

a staircase

5 of Diamonds

January 24, 2014: the cracked kettle

we have been mercied

our troubles converted

we feel no liking

who might

scuff at anyone

6 of Diamonds

January 6, 2014

come closer kindling

a kinder closure

righteously complicated

composure

same scaffolding

different times

I'm rarely

on the job

rarely kitted

kinder

don't

come

close

7 of Diamonds

Feb. 26, 2014

how variegated discrepancies

implode, rather than

dispose (*“we cannot dispense
with palliative measures”*)

intoxicating satisfaction

more than a consolation

8 of Diamonds

at least we have voiced our displeasure

9 of Diamonds

dare I say ought

I dare say we might

thinking of a strategic

cycle, I've not been

a subject as much as

anyway, anymore

striving

to underachieve

10 of Diamonds

Oct. 8, 2013

to admit

interest primarily

our labour acknowledged

we insist

it's no man's world

virtue in the smell

of grass, water seeks

or seeps low

"desired I never none"

Of course it's

not allowed

Jack of Diamonds

It was a beautiful misshap. Who could have imagined that I would be anything but receptive? From now on, we will express value in numbers of floors swept. As the foregoing analysis should already have demonstrated, I have long been mystified by the multitude of signs advertising “self storage”: I dare you to bike my ride. Nor is this all; having yet to rust, we bid farewell to the deadly ideologue, as once we bid farewell to our taste for subsumation. It’s a dark matter, and I reserve the right to chain my mind. Yet again, we are all collateral damage.

Queen of Diamonds

Jan. 14, 2014

"No transcendence, no deliverance, no novel"

of another ilk all

together, a partial

extinction, a cultural

bell

I might, if I could

manage to bilk myself

(astride which

anxious gear?)

of course there lurks

our own ill-

hulked constitution

(Roland Barthes)

King of Diamonds

April 2, 2014

might we collide

or do I collude?

Hearts

Ace of Hearts

Nov. 20, 2013, Of Overkill

“What a long time it requires to know ourselves”

will sup all

(a great pleasure)

introducing no less

sop than the pleasure it

diffused: a sensibility

wounded

(a fine example

of overkill) note before

and early:

although astride

she might

be right

(Mary Wollstonecraft)

2 of Hearts

February 4, 2014

“shrewdly relapsing into repose”

sounds like

co-option, sounds like Miss

representation, sounds

like handbooks

for everyone

multiplication sounds

like a mountainous

abstraction, sounds

like cascading

monstrous monstrous

(Søren Kierkegaard)

3 of Hearts

Oct. 21, 2013

Because the world is such

our tempestuous fragility

a mobbish jolt

(see how we're moving along)

a sustained interest in

constriction

at least it's a structured hell

4 of Hearts

Sept. 20, 2013

giving voice to

all this grief

I know that I am

nerving up

my work

5 of Hearts

January 28, 2014

“Joking with Clenched Teeth”

reproach me

cornered

or maybe it was

yesterday we had

an agreeable walk

(Fyodor Dostoyevsky)

6 of Hearts

Nov. 26, 2013

some tactically

astute revelation

a social

fact, oh rigid

imperfect fervor

I'm nearly

unconvinced, little

specifics genuinely

forgotten, *talk*

about a rat

trap scrutiny

only by

appeals to

body parts

7 of Hearts

how can

we liken

our most entwined

entanglements

(every moss, every

lichen) so mulch-loose

linked; your looping's

merely loped

8 of Hearts

A document of possibilities

And here it becomes apparent that common intentions are as apples dropped by habit, and by patient accumulation also. Even a wild parent will at times determine how far new wants shall be entertained. I will here only allude to the successive variations bursting forth from the tree of industry; such facts are of plain signification. I am thoroughly convinced, and yet by some monstrosity still I presume to doubt. We have witnessed considerable deviation, but so many causes tend to obscure this result. In the spectre of great hostile camps, ensconced on disputed land, we continue to replace old wants. Whose habits must at all times be accounted for? How entirely vague are the considerable deviations we find through the opening of that wide door labeled "Conjecture". Not for the first time, I was much struck.

9 of Hearts

In which we are immoderately involved in hopeless difficulties

by patient accumulation

absolutely inappreciable

And here I become

evident as interest

let us now endure

long isolation

the exploitation of

nothing is easier

impossible to enter here

I believe this simile largely speaks the truth

I cannot doubt

nature's common interest

I cannot but doubt
so many natural and slightly favourable

causes constantly to bear
by some craft, or cycle

a conclusion in whose mind?
as if by some murderous pestilence

I wonder whose turn
will generate which conditions

10 of Hearts

Sept. 27, 2013

that joy

can form

all unreconciled

there might even

be bread

insatiable, ephemeral

and worthy of

intense rides

Jack of Hearts

March 26, 2014

in spite of our disparate roots

prescriptions have been made

operations, extensions,

a persistence of

pedalling high, as usual

and perception improbable

Queen of Hearts

Oct. 29, 2013: *"I do not choose to listen"*

scathing timing in the middle

mine's a mid-rational sub-zero

subjection: it's a complicated game

but I am still in

"hatred, cruelty, ambition, greed, slander"

(here am I still furious)

there is no matter clear

enough, not even

our outsized selves

in the scathing middle

feel long ahead or

might we coast

readily enough

King of Hearts

How can we feel much confidence? One remark here is worth a passing notice: we need not marvel – I have given my reasons. Let us now look to our mutual affinities; we cannot hope to explain any “facts”, as is so commonly and notoriously the case. But to return to the question of outerwear: if I do not greatly deceive myself, *multiple* values reappear in their intricate weave. Of course this can only be stated in a relative sense, but nothing could be more foolish than to overlook the labour and matter they enfold, or to maintain that a skein of yarn is merely a skein of yarn. Such resemblances will not be revealed (think only of water, for example). Must I explain my meaning more fully?

Spades

Ace of Spades (Lemium)

So here I am alone

all along I was

alighting, nor is

this all, I've mistaken

our negative ease

(for I am never alone)

for some nebulous tease

2 of Spades

April 9, 2014:

in our mutuality

might we finally

impede our monstrosities

3 of Spades

March 11, 2014

but in a sideways manner

and shadow-bound

[unclear]

louche lineage

logically

(thus importance

begins)

undenied, underfunded, like every other

unstretched, untested subject

lurching by

4 of Spades

frieze no longer

nor focus on

fact's impressions

imprint fragments

fast, in digression's

extremis

dear mantle

whose motley extant sighs

alas, conclusion foregone

5 of Spades

I'd like a kick

starter camp

pain to get me

out of

bedding base

war-addicted

systems

I have my unknown

technical reasons

6 of Spades

“Such plans are sheer folly”

verses might be

avowed, or

versioned, perhaps they

always vary, saddled with

secret, unsold wants

and vowels

(Jean-Jacques Rousseau)

7 of Spades

Feb. 19, 2014

“Going nowhere in particular”

and yet

we bespoke

unconvinced, who could seat

uncease, or assess

(Charles Darwin)

8 of Spades

at least our displeasure has been voiced

9 of Spades

Senior's last day draws near; let us listen for a moment. We have been involved in the most gratuitous mystery, and can by no means shirk responsibility. Nor can we assign due proportional weight to the following considerations: a thick fossiliferous formation rides here, but to this subject we shall have to return, bearing coats of transformational power (our labour has long been measured in yarn). Let us examine the matter more closely: we have no right to expect fine transitional forms, and once again I can route no satisfactory answer. In addition, I believe in no fixed laws, but this does not now matter. We should not let ourselves be misted by circumstance, or by yarn appearing to have changed its form (and now we grow defiant, for value is mediated through our labour, as has repeatedly been explained). It all shows the absurdity and triviality of such solid views, as if old cotton had never been spun, or berries neither picked nor weighed.

10 of Spades

Nov. 5, 2013

without work

without speech

without home

but in "Nature" which never

is more nearly possible

I am now am I now

What a

mean light

men, it is no

light enterprise, nothing

could be as

miserable as

(can this really

be said)

war within

a state

which can

no longer

compost the

needs of

others

Jack of Spades

Oct. 26, 2013

the return of breakfast

I have tried to mine

my conduct

are we determined to

(my existence

is *what* kind

of a defect ?)

I have tried

to conduct

I could not obtain

ersatz masters and

possessors, visions

even read

a painful seat decline

He's insufferably pretty

there was but one course left

vigorous extinguished proponent

(THE REST WAS NOT PERFECTED)

Queen of Spades

Sedition

“Souls are dyed by thoughts”

plants, nut-hatch, ants, spiders, bees

pirates, parricides, tyrants

blood, bones, the mere fabric of

familiar visits in a strange land

although exhortations were repeated

returns have not been made

wonder seems

seamlessly down-drift

nerves, veins, arteries

do I ever have

(my proximity to impermanence

ineligible here)

an aim in mind

(but from different maps)

exhortation become

a kind of sedition

(Marcus Aurelius)

King of Spades

at least we've made known our displeasure

Afterword: On Not Looking Into Chapman's Homer (gleanings for Louis Cabri)

I went out to work when I was 9

marrows and parsnips

in the road

a seed grower looping

leaf litter

and, very precious,

a full stomach.

With a little black stick.

I ate them.

Stripping wild and

nothing doing,

only twitching, every little bit

wurzel trim more or less similar.

Some in sacks.

Mother died.

Summer months some of the happiest.

Long Hours for Very Little Money

Out of puddings, aching limbs.

In the road.

Who did not have symptoms?

Spuds in sacks, who did not

in the shade of

children and girls as well.

A great deal of wheat and barley,

the more hands the better.

All day long sometimes.

The whole steaming

all full of staying

away to mind

the baby.

Go Back to Singing and Eating

Me on a roll.

The hiring comparatively

scarce, hard work invariably

involved. Cockles,

small fish, weeds.

Means test. Invisible

labour also suitable for

women and

Children in the shade of

so rigid that they

were not able.

Too dark to see even

when the weather

is good.

Peel bundle.

Quite ready

for any

meal.

Very pleasant work for women

Even the growing of
onions. The sight
did not warp
her nature. Even
the children, especially.

Rollmops, this excellent
method, I am extremely partial
to this method. Now let us examine
pale skin, soft clothes, and
flimsy hands.

No one can make
such a claim.

Sour does not
mean bad.

A very pregnant social mischief

Vacuum pump. A supreme

gourmet's delight, girls

at a variety

of jobs few regard

as edible; beer

was consumed.

Posset possessed of

an evil reputation.

They who upload

corn. Salted

turtle eggs, melons,

baskets of pomegranates,

figs, will you

boil that egg?

A vicious aide

indeed.

It's smart to be careful

Blood apricot.

Is she eating?

Well skilled.

Apt to weaken

water texture.

Unweaned, but

tweaked. A fondness

bordering. Usually of

tepid quality, but garnished

so handsomely. The more hands

the better.

Mother and children near

the gate, slight

adjustments may occasionally

be necessary.

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