



## Making Mountains into Molehills: A Lexicon-in-Process

Kerry Downey

To cite this article: Kerry Downey (2023) Making Mountains into Molehills: A Lexicon-in-Process, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 24:1, 53-57, DOI: [10.1080/15240657.2022.2159707](https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2022.2159707)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2022.2159707>



Published online: 15 Mar 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## Making Mountains into Molehills: A Lexicon-in-Process

Kerry Downey, MFA

### ABSTRACT

To *make a mountain out of a molehill* is to wrestle with the scale and form of a feeling. It's a loaded, gendered idiom, referring to behaviors deemed over-reactive (read: histrionic, hysterical). This lexicon lays out the most generative metaphors that have emerged from the intersections between my art making and nearly a decade of psychoanalysis. These metaphors come from both inside and outside of me—they are synonyms for how figure and ground are co-constitutive. Much like my experiences of being trans, a lexicon is always fruitfully in-process, its language both containing and slippery. This lexicon is also a list of apparitions. As soon as I grab an idea by its name or phrase, it disappears.

*This is a reenactment but this time it will be different.*

Every artwork is a reenactment, a time machine, a fantasy, something terribly true and spectacularly fictional. *This time* I will make something awesome. I'll find healing, or at the very least I'll spit-shine that career, get legit. Banal hopes of being useful square impossible dreams of alchemy. I desire nothing short of a miracle every time I make a thing. No pressure.

The fantasies that drive me have yet to make themselves known. Their murky depths are filled with the bioluminescent fish that I fall asleep watching on TV, hoping for glow-in-the-dark dreams. Making an artwork is best when it's like deep sleep, and psychoanalysis—if it's got the right stuff, is like dreaming. Off we go, to and fro, trying to make headway by daylight. What I have inherited I cannot fully see and what I have been through I cannot remember. Through therapy or art, the feeling-shapes of my unconscious can become image-stories. What we discover is not all radiant fish, there's a lot down there that's quite disturbing. Those of us invested in this work feel that without it, we will be cut off from ourselves and thus, the world. This art-therapy-dream work reconnects my hand to my eye, as-above to its so-below, unconscious to its consciousness, and the many violent and colonial mind-body splits needing re-integration.

*POW! A flashback to vomiting in school, the nurse calling my parents to get me.*

**reenactment**, doing the same thing over and over, trying to shake loose a neural pathway, compulsively swarm and ruminate like a fly to shit, a lousy reenactment of a battle scene, a troubling catharsis, bad dramaturgy, almanac of a spiral, turning and turning in the stupid gyre, iterating vs. reiterating

When I first began therapy, I hoped that we could cure my extreme blushing. My therapist said “blushing is a kind of contact.” As a gender/queer artist, my anxieties of reading and getting read/read can feel paranoid and defensive. At any moment, something internal and private might be externalized, made public against my will. And yet, is this not precisely what I am reenacting writing this? Is this a way of managing my shame, exposing myself again and again? I remain compelled by the fantasy that *this time* I will exert control over my body and its edges; that by describing or defining the terms of my existence, I will shore up something that otherwise feels precarious. The truth is that my audience will scan me, read me. My transness will be not enough or will it be too much, my smarty pants too dorky, too tight or too much sag in the ass. I will bleed out. Oversharing will be curative, no?

**the container and un-containability** (Downey, 2019), blushing, bleeding, puking, pissing, leaking, frothing, throbbing hormonal, affect contagion, shifting shoreline, where I end and you begin, me and not me, not mine (Kristeva, 1982), gendered excess, shame on you, tragically “female” nature, pre/menstrual dysphoric disorder, digestive distress, the smell of being spoiled rotten, verbal diarrhea, TMI

When my internal space has all but collapsed and annihilation is nigh, nothing is more containing, more grounding, than drawing. Gripping a thick pencil and improvising marks with immediacy and abandon opens pathways between my disparate or disconnected parts. I find spaciousness and fluidity. These haptic tools become transitional objects between me and the world (Winnicott, 1971).

**transitional objects**, materials that mediate inside and outside, between one body and another, conduits, handles, get a grip, what’s within reach (graspability! possibility!), let go, go limp, go soft, inter/co/dependencies, use valuations, good and bad objects, part-objects, working with what you got

My mind can easily crowd with bad internal objects—bro blowhards, successful art world queers, ex-girlfriends and their cute dogs. My intuition has been carved up by academicization, a white supremacy culture that privileges rationality over all other ways of knowing. One of my first therapeutic breakthroughs was reawakening my love of automatic drawing. I needed permission to make art spontaneously and unconsciously. Since then, I’ve shared almost every artwork with my therapist, who is also a queer artist. It’s been helpful to get her perspective but also exhilarating and fun to free associate with half-formed ideas, dream scraps, and residues. Translations are possibilities, never certitudes. As a gender/queer person, the other side of feeling fractured is feeling multiple.

**trans**, translate, move through, across, beyond, to hold the positions of being and not being trans at the same time, too much/not enough gender, not cis, transdisciplinary, transgressive, trans-objects open trans-space, supernatural, speculative, potentiating possibilities, “queer and trans lives as endlessly improvisational” (Shearn Coan, 2019), a team of theys and thems, my multiple selves can kick your multiple selves’ asses

My childhood experiences of being gender/queer were riddled with nausea. Unnamable dysphorias became traumatic when I grew heaping breasts and got my period. My form felt overdetermined yet unbounded. While discussing one of my early videos, my therapist shared the concept of the autistic-contiguous position, a “sensory-dominated, pre-symbolic mode of experience which provides a good measure of the boundedness of human experience” (Ogden, 2015). This reading of my work was revelatory. For much of my life, I didn’t have language that linked my identity to body-as-sensorium. When language fails, I feel invisibilized and dejected. This is the tension between “form and formlessness” (Bataille, 1985).

**boob/lessness** and form/lessness, make mountains into molehills, make monsters into meatloaf, uni-boob encased in its yellow-gray sports bra, bye-bye boobies party, top surgery, phantom bounce, nightmares that my breasts grow back, hyper-presence and nameless absence, the unspeakable, molten and molting, landfills of excised flesh emit fluorescence, nipple wads like chewed up bubble gum, boobs like tears in heaven

After an initial bout of exuberance, I reread the first draft of this lexicon and feel empty. This piece is full of holes. I’m dumbstruck by this repetition—does this happen every time I make something? I thought that this lexicon would be the form, the net that would hold my ideas.

**a net and its holes**, “the only important thing visible to us is a lot of holes which are collected together in a net” (Bion, 1990), what it held and what slips through, porosity, skin ego (Anzieu, 2016; Miller, 2021), warp and weft, paper, screen or film (Marks, 2000), bodily thresholds and their border crossings, belongings and exclusions, transcutaneous, epidermalization (Fanon, 1967), “surfaces, rims, holes, cavities, contours, cues of balance, weight, sound and touch, facial reactivity in gazing and smiling all become invested in meaning and social registration through the interactive matrix of touching, holding, looking at, talking to, loving, and hating others” (Harris, 1998)

In search of the hole, I become it. With an insatiable appetite for whatever is still missing, I take a lot in and I shit a lot out. Pages pile upon pages of writing and research. Prolificacy is the solution to emptiness, or holiness. I’m an earthworm, faith-noodling underground.

**wormholes**, “eyeless, your appetite aerates. Eating the world, you open it” (McConnell, 2018), processing unconscious material, invisibilized and endless labor (Phillips, 2001), gut feelings, composting, metabolizing, turning over, tunneling, excavating, creating new pathways by breaking down or transforming materials, traversing wormy ways to other selves, dense temporalities (Gentile 2021), quantum leaps, extreme bends in space-time, portals

My breakdown is not yet breakthrough. It’s painful, regressive, and laborious. I can’t find my way *through*. I’m unable to sleep, I’ve become restless. Writing this here and now, a turbulent nausea wells up. I am making myself ill.

*POW! I can hear my kid self singing:*

“Nobody likes me everybody hates me  
Guess I’ll go eat worms  
Long, thin, slimy ones,  
Short, fat, juicy ones,  
Itsy, bitsy, fuzzy wuzzy worms.

Down goes the first one,  
Down goes the second one,  
Oh, how they wiggle and squirm.

Up comes the first one,  
Up comes the second one,  
Oh how they wiggle and squirm.”

Later that night, I have a dream:

*I am leading a tour of strangers through a deep and narrow tunnel. I begin my talk: “This first tunnel used to horrify me. At the bottom was a hole of infinite terror. But now, as you can see, it leads to two more tunnels, the second of which we’re now standing in.” I go to my overhead projector to click the light on, but instead it throws a “penetrating beam of darkness” (Bion, 1990, yes, I quoted in my dream) revealing a densely filled storage space. “This archive,” I explain to my audience, “contains many carefully labeled files. What you are needing is noodling on my way home boo bearing handle a self-fulfilling prophecy . . .” Suddenly, I’m not making much sense. I try to improvise, but language dissolves. I see a family of four white people in the shadows behind me and the father is laughing. I can’t think, I can’t speak, I’m failing to operate my projector. I’m pissing and shitting myself, and it won’t be long before everyone can smell me. I say something stupid like “check out my cool archive,” but people don’t care. I’ve lost them, they want their money back. “There’s one more leg of the tour,” I tell the irritable people. “We are only in the second space, there is a third space.” But we never get there. I’m stuck in the middle place, deep underground.*

*POW! a flash of light. Like a punch in the gut.*

Writing out this dream does something to me. I’m cracking up. Did I just turn a recurring nightmare into a *performative multimedia tour of my unconscious*? I’m reminded of the thousands of hours I’ve spent giving museum tours and performances with projectors in New York City—the “exhaustion and exuberance” of my life (Verwoert, 2008).

*POW!* a flashback, the cartoon sound of being punched, powerful event-ness, past-present-future selves happening at once, the tiniest blip, a glitch, my superhero chest tattoo, my trans power, grand opening of a sublime wormhole

I’m bursting into a million vibrating pieces. Some part of me shatters and breaks. Some *other part of me* coalesces and coheres.

**feminist sublime**, breakdown as breakthrough, “shattering the ego” (Saketopoulou, 2014), the ecstatic reverie of exceeding oneself, jaw-dropping awe, figure becomes ground, slips into her slime and cream, primordial ooze as homecoming, “oceanic feelings” (Wang, 2018), tolerating our dependencies, unbounded oneness, m/otherings, decolonizings, “at the height of the storm she hands me a roadmap to bliss” (Ganesh, 2016)

When I was a kid, I kept everything my friends and girlfriends gave me in labeled folders in a filing cabinet in my bedroom. As a closeted queer, I was protecting my desires. To this day, I keep copious notes, lists, journals and archives. An archive shows us how “form and formlessness” are co-constitutive. “The antonym of ‘waste’ is ‘hoard’ or ‘save,’ but obsession erases that opposition” (referencing Bataille, R. Baum, personal communication, June 13, 2012).

**archive**, container for irrecoverable experiences, dis/ordered fantasies, caring for fragments and ephemera, rescue the rejects, marginalia and margins, lesbian camp and queer sentimentality (Cvetovich, 2019), keep it like a secret, fears of forgetting, a defense against loss, refuse as refusal, intimate materiality, entropic, always already abject

This lexicon is like an archive, an attempt to organize my most important ideas. Inchoate mess needs a story; my dream shows me a way forward: what if I were to write the story of writing *this*, like giving a tour of my unconscious? My dream-tour ends abruptly, we never get to the last tunnel, the third space.

**third space**, that which is neither me nor you but the space in between or beyond, translocation, transitional space, liminality, interstitial space, bathrooms and hallways, dis/orientated spatial relations, queer phenomenology (Ahmed, 2006), how to make space spacious, margins as sites of resistance and radical openness (hooks, 1989)

This lexicon is me and not me. Its third space is produced by the way others enter it, share it, and co-produce it. When it leaves my clutches, it remains a fantasy, inaugurating my anxieties of being rejected, being forgotten, or erased. My boob monsters will return to haunt future selves who’ll make wormholes to a feminist sublime, whose ecstatic reveries yield new revelations more mundane than ever: a mountain is no different from a molehill, a hole is just a hole, the shape of a third space, an invitation for others to come play.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributor

*Kerry Downey, MFA* (b. 1979, Ft. Lauderdale), is a gender/queer artist and educator based in New York. Downey’s interdisciplinary practice explores embodied forms of resistance and transformation. They use experimental strategies to draw connections between interior worlds and sociopolitical landscapes. Downey’s first major publication, *We collect together in a net*, was published by Wendy’s Subway in 2019. Downey holds a B.A. from Bard College and an MFA from Hunter College. Downey spent more than a decade teaching community-based arts programs through the Museum of Modern Art. They have recently taught at the Rhode Island School of Design, Parsons/The New School, Hunter College, and Williams College.

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer Phenomenology Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Anzieu, D. (2016). *The Skin Ego*. Abingdon, UK & New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bataille, G. (1985). *Vision of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927–1939*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bion, W. R. (1990). *Brazilian Lectures*. London, UK: Karnac.
- Cvetovich, A. (2019). *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Downey, K. (2019). *Creating Good-Enough Containers: Reflections on Queerness in Community-Based Museum Education*. *Art Journal Open*.
- Fanon, F. (1967). *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Ganesh, C. (2016) Myth. In: *Dictionary of the Possible*, ed. A. Alpert & S. R. Premnath. Shifter.
- Gentile, K. (2021). Kittens in the clinical space: Expanding subjectivity through dense temporalities of interspecies transcorporeal becoming. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 31(2), 135–150. h <https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2021.1889334>

- Harris, A. (1998). Psychic envelopes and sonorous baths. In: *Relational Perspectives on the Body*, ed. L. Aron & F. S. Anderson. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, pp. 39–64.
- hooks, b. (1989). Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness. *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 36, ed. D. Stutesman. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Marks, L. (2000). *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- McConnell, G. (2018). Worm. *PNR Review* 239, 44(3).
- Miller, K. D. (2021). A radically open analysis: Writing as wrapping, video as skin. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 31(5), 528–544.
- Ogden, T. H. (2015). On the concept of an autistic-contiguous position. In: *Frances Tustin Today*, ed. J. Mitrani & T. Mitrani. London, UK & New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 155–173.
- Phillips, A. (2001). *Darwin's Worms*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Saketopoulou, A. (2014). To suffer pleasure: The shattering of the ego as the psychic labor of perverse sexuality. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 15(4), 254–268.
- Shearn Coan, J. (2019). Bound together. In: *We Collect Together in a Net*. Wendy's Subway.
- Verwoert, J. (2008). Exhaustion and exuberance: Ways to defy the pressure to perform. Pamphlet for the exhibition Sheffield 08: Yes No and Other Options.
- Wang, J. (2018). *Oceanic Feeling and Communist Affect*. Camas Books.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1971). *Playing and Reality*. London, UK & New York, NY: Routledge.