Preface

I began writing this book over five years ago. It was my "second book," my first opportunity to pursue an idea beyond the bounds of my first major research project, and I was convinced it was a book about attention: about the epistemological and phenomenological conditioning of cognitive and physiological captivation in the face of things, texts, and images. I received an Insight Grant from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council that allowed me to travel to London, Amsterdam, Brussels, and Paris. I went to those cities and spent long days wandering around museums, making note of what caught my attention. I became obsessed with paintings of dead animals – dead birds, in particular. And then images and artifactual remains of sea creatures – the chambered nautilus, in particular. I tried to write about this captivation in the context of eighteenth-century gothic fiction and orientalism. Other people published well-argued books about things, about animals, about collections, about attention. I was missing my opportunity to make an "intervention" in these conversations. What was my argument? What knowledge was I producing? It seemed to me that death was everywhere, and I couldn't stop thinking about it, and I didn't have the words for the way it made me feel: giddy and devastated, excited and exhausted, immersed and overwhelmed.

What a funny way to research a scholarly monograph. And by funny, I mean absurd, ludicrous, and – by every disciplinary measure – just wrong. I tried to compensate by imposing order. I drafted countless tables of contents, taxonomies of aesthetic and affective categories, theoretical architectures to house my observations and readings in ways that might survive the winds of peer review. None of these structures actually made the experience of contemplating life, death, and their relationship to one another any more comprehensible to me.

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It may be worth noting that I embarked on this "second book" in the wake of the birth of my daughter and the death of my father.

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I am finishing the writing of this book in 2021. What began as my "second book" has now become my "pandemic book." I drafted Part 1, "The Anamorphic," at the tail end of Ontario's first wave of COVID-19, in June and July 2020. To complete Part 2, "The Ludic," I revisited my notes and drafts from the very beginning of the project – the "what's so funny about dying?" stage of inquiry, as I've come to think of it – in the midst of Ontario's devastating third wave, in April 2021. I am now compiling the entire manuscript in December 2021, while waiting to become eligible for a booster shot, while anxiously counting the eight weeks until my child can receive her second dose. My mom texted me this morning from just across the border to share a grim report: "As U.S. Nears 800,000 Virus Deaths, 1 of Every 100 Older Americans Has Perished."[1] People are really dying here, at alarming rates, and it's not funny at all. And people are dying and suffering disproportionately along the same fault lines carved out by the colonialist, capitalist, and hetero-patriarchal movements of the long eighteenth century. Racialized communities, disabled communities, queer communities, and impoverished communities have been abandoned by the provincial government as it focuses squarely on preserving the profit-making structures erected on stolen land and reproduced by way of white supremacy and heteronormative privatization of life.

It is not funny, but it is ludicrous to be alive to bear witness to the material horrors of what the "long eighteenth century" has made of this part of the world, and to have to bear that witness in the context of a dominant culture that continues to insist that this isn't so bad, that it could be better but it will get better!, that it is pretty bad but it's "how things are," that the deluge of suffering and death that has washed over parts of the world that never imagined they were vulnerable is an interlude of some kind to the norms of white prosperity.

From this vantage point, the book I am writing is not fundamentally about attention, or epistemology, or forms, or knowledge. It is about survival, and what it feels like to realize you are in the process of surviving.

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[1] "As U.S. Covid Deaths Near 800,000, 1 of Every 100 Older Americans Has Perished." *The New York Times* accessed December 13, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/13/us/covid-deaths-elderly-americans.html.

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It occurs to me that this may be too dour a preface to a book that is about funniness. But what I hope to show is that, for as long as the powers that be have been trying to destroy us, people have devised techniques of refusing to be destroyed. The "funny things" I contemplate in this study are all parts of a sustained, improvisational movement to the edges, outsides, and undercurrents of the violent world taking shape under the disciplinary logics of empire in the eighteenth century.

Can European literatures and cultures of this world, I ask, be used to think in undisciplined ways? Can they be repurposed as vehicles away from centers of power? What might it feel like to pursue these new desire lines, these wayward currents and unanticipated trajectories? What might it feel like simply to know that we can?

These questions reorient the whole aim of the scholarly project: It is no longer my objective to understand "the eighteenth century," but to survive it. My reading practice has become impulsive and scrappy, because eighteenth-century literature is in a state of emergency and so are we. I go to it now looking for unexpected tool kits, escape hatches, and signs of life.

I think I found some.

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