

## Comment on the Papers by Abigail Zitin and Sherah Bloor

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It is such a joy to be here with you this morning, and it has been such a pleasure to welcome you to Bloomington and to share this ritual feast of thought with you. It is a privilege not only to introduce the excellent papers of Sherah and Abigail, but to be able to do so in the wake of two days of such kind and generative discussion, from which I have tried to pull for this introduction.

But first: Sherah Bloor is a PhD candidate in Philosophy of Religion at Harvard. She holds degrees from La Trobe University and The University of Melbourne, in Australia. She is one of the editors of the edited volume *Considering Religions, Rights and Bioethics: Memorial Volume for Max Charlesworth*, in 2019, and has work in *Sophia: International Journal for Philosophy and Traditions*, and two other edited volumes. She also serves as editor-in-chief for *Peripheries*, published out of the Harvard Divinity School's Center for the Study of World Religions, and as editorial manager of *Sophia: International Journal of Philosophy and Traditions*.

Abigail S. Zitin is an assistant professor in the Department of English at Rutgers University, and has previously held a position at Trinity University in Texas. She holds a PhD from the University of Chicago. Her book, *Practical Form: Abstraction, Technique, and Beauty in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics*, published in 2020 with Yale University Press, was shortlisted for the Kenshur Prize and a finalist for the Susanne K. Langer Award for Outstanding Scholarship in the Ecology of Symbolic Form, sponsored by the Media Ecology Association. She also has articles with *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, *differences*, *ELH*, and *Eighteenth-Century Studies*.

Sherah's essay deconstructs the way that Kant has been used as a symbolic restraint against which New Materialisms can exercise their autonomy, by grounding deeply in the materialist history and vitalism of Kant's work. Her essay explores the relationship between the body and the subject as it comes through in Kant, and makes a parallel between addiction as a material destruction of the individual, and climate or environmental destruction as a material destruction on a large scale. Abigail offers a reading of Eve Sedgwick's *Epidemics of the Will* based in the friction between compulsion and voluntariness, that asks how the text's utility shifts if recovery, as an ongoing process, is the telos, rather than an ever-unfinished transition toward one, and then uses this conception of autonomy configured through addiction and recovery to read Roxana's desire to not marry as addictive—a damaging obsession with *not* performing an act or consuming a substance, rather than *with* that consumption.

To bring these papers together, and to begin where we left off yesterday, I'm going to start with a joke, published by philosopher Benito Jerónimo Feijoo on 31 August 1733 in a collection of jokes that somewhat jarringly appears volume 6 of his *Teatro Crítico Universal*, an inclusion that got some harsh criticism for being a “rest inappropriate for a serious pen” [descanso improprio de una pluma seria].<sup>1</sup> It goes like this:

I studied the Arts as a boy, at our College of San Salvador de Lerez, only a quarter of a league's distance from Pontevedra. There were some gentlemen living there at the time who were of quite illustrious families without a doubt, but who were known for displaying their nobility with a touch too much ostentation, so they came to be called *The Gentlemen of the*

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Noel Fallows, “‘True Wit’, and Feijoo's ‘Chistes de N.’,” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 70.2 (1993): 249-53, my translation.

*Blood.* Following this, although they had no title on which to base it, they affected the usage of ‘lordship’ (*señoría*) in their treatment. To demonstrate the extremities to which this affectation rose, as can be imagined, the following foolishness circulated through the region: The wife of one of these gentlemen miscarried, and so early that the fetus barely gave any signs of life [a term that we will return to with Sherah]. Once the abortion [or stillbirth] had occurred, one of the assisting servants came from the lady’s chamber and some of the family, who were in the next room, knowing that the birth had been legitimate, asked her if it had been male or female. She responded thus: *Can’t say, because the señoría still doesn’t have a soul.* That is how far the matter can be taken out of its proper order, using a treatment of nobility with an inanimate mass (or one judged to be so) merely for being the product of a gentleman and a lady of the blood.

[Estudié, siendo muchacho, las Artes en nuestro Colegio de San Salvador de Lerez, que dista solo un cuarto de legua de la Villa de Pontevedra. Residían entonces en aquella Villa algunos Caballeros de familias muy ilustres sin duda; pero notados de que ostentaban con alguna demasía su nobleza, por lo cual los llamaban *los Caballeros de la Sangre*. Era consiguiente a esto, que aunque no hubiese título en qué fundarlo, afectasen el tratamiento de Señoría. Para demostración de que esta afectación llegaba al más alto grado, que puede imaginarse, se refirió, como proferida entonces, una necedad graciosísima. Malparió la mujer de uno de aquellos Caballeros con tanta anticipación, que apenas daba señas de animado el feto. Luego que sucedió el aborto, salió del aposento de la Señora una de las criadas asistentes; y algunos de la familia, que estaban en la cuadra inmediata, en la inteligencia que el parto había sido legítimo, le preguntaron si era varón, o hembra, a lo que ella prontamente respondió: *No se sabe, porque aún no tiene alma su Señoría.* Es cuanto se puede apurar la materia, tratar de Señoría a una masa inanimada (o juzgada tal) solo por ser producción de un Caballero, y de una Señora de la Sangre.]<sup>2</sup>

I’ll let you recover from your laughter. The reason that I bring this joke to you is that the first of two directions that I would like to invite as possibilities for discussion this morning deals with *the body as opposed to the will* or the subject or the character, in terms of the limits of autonomy. Where we have discussed the relationships between “actual human beings,” fictional characters, and the body politic, and the push, pull wincing of the separation point of a birthing person and fetus into two autonomous beings, Sherah and Abigail’s papers invite us to look inward at the limits or the fiction of autonomy of the individual when the body acts on its own—without the will, or without intention—or is impacted in its desires and compulsions by an illness of the will or the process of relationality between subject and addiction. The subject, as we see in these papers, is not one autonomous whole, but is perhaps a body—in all its putrefact and autonomic potential—and a subject, like a boat and a canoe moving together. This separation or distinction allows us to look inward in our discussion of autonomy, and to ask several things:

- How to be autonomous in a body that on its own calcifies, erodes, decomposes, or suffers a physiological and emotional responses at the presence or absence of a substance, quite apart from the exercise of reason, will, or the intentional regulation of emotion?

<sup>2</sup> Benito Jerónimo Feijoo, *Chistes de N. Teatro Crítico Universal* (1734) (Madrid, 1778), 330-52; at 348-49, my translation. See Proyecto Filosofía en Español at <https://www.filosofia.org/bjf/bjft610.htm>

- What is the relationship between emotional regulation and the ability to act autonomously: “these affects—sadness, joy, love, hatred—are themselves muscular motions, ‘excited by means of the spirits or the juice of the nerves,’ which are thereon propelled ‘from the brain into the muscles,’ inciting human actions” (according to Sherah’s paper). One potential avenue of thought is the basis in fear.

Where emotions are caused so by the excitation of the spirit or the juice of the nerves, the use of stimulants complicates the derivation of the action: “the very idea of a stimulus is an agent that evokes movement and sensation, the two classical signs of animation (of life). If evoked, both movement and sensation exceed the will, so a stimulus can also be that which ‘gets behind; the will to move the body on its own accord’” (see Sherah’s paper); “[w]hile the action of stimulants on the body can produce pathological movements, as we’ve seen, the fanatic experiences this compulsion as the highest freedom and *freedom as a form of compulsion*” (see Sherah’s paper, my emphasis). This suggests the autonomous body as distinct from the subject. An experience of compulsion as the highest freedom and freedom as a form of compulsion directly echoes the complex relationship of compulsion and voluntariness that Abigail has teased out of Sedgewick. Correlative to the quiasmatic tension between freedom and compulsion, illness of will shows up in both—for example, if Roxana is a test case for the “‘possibility for the assertion of the will itself’ to form an addictive behavior” (see Abigail’s paper). With the interplay of compulsion, illness, and freedom, we return to the question of whose body? and if not whose costume, then whose action? That is my first question: how materiality, substances and their use, and the process-driven function of addiction and recovery impact the “discursive sprawl” of autonomy that we have developed over these last days, when considered as a form of relationality with and within the body.

Another main theme that we have circled and recircled this weekend is the concept of autonomy as fantasy, be that: a separate wonderland that one steps into and out of, or following Johannes, more properly discussed in terms of imagination, a utopian fantasy that contrasts bondage and autonomy, or a fantasy that, when aimed at community, balances between the collaborative and the contractual. These two papers offer us, I think, space to think with this constellation of fantasies to examine the role of harm and community, of the relationship between autonomy and sociability.

To turn to the two papers that are the object of this conversation, just as it forms a contrast between an autonomous body and the body’s own autonomous or autonomic action, to quote Sherah: “Hypochondriacal anxieties have a social reality. These anxieties are fundamentally concerned with the border between the body and the external world, including the social world.” Coming back to the question of autonomy as performance: “the idea of recovery as the *other* ‘otherwise’ proffered... is, among other things, a way of pointing beyond or to the side of the individual, of the will as centered in the individual subject” (see Abigail’s paper). We have been taught to see sobriety, in addiction, as “an ever-incomplete and ongoing action” through which frame “Roxana teaches its reader suspicion about the claims of achieved repentance” (see Abigail’s paper). On the one side, we have community, society, interdependence—the positive and necessary things that are typically damaged by addiction—on the other, constraint, discipline, patriarchal and colonial violences. As a vivid example, consider the man who feared his urine would drown his village: an act that can happen either by the will or without it, that has an outsized impact on the community (see Sherah’s paper). There are, perhaps, questions to be

asked about the relationship between individual autonomy and communal autonomy, or individual or communal wellbeing:

- Where we have largely thought about autonomy as an ideal that is denied or circumscribed, when and where is it a problem? If it is useful to use an addiction model, then how does autonomy cause harm?
- We have questioned in many conversations whether it is only in acting against constraint—whether of state or colonial violence, or of chemical dependence—that autonomy can be enacted. If autonomy is something that exists as it is performed, does that behavior transform into identity as addiction does? And not to be glib, but if addiction is an autonomy problem, is autonomy a dependence problem?

Both disease and addiction have major social elements, as does the exercise of autonomy by the individual in the context of community. And so my question, in simple terms is how the concepts of harm, illness of will, relate to the idea of autonomy as a fantasy and a *byproduct of sociability*.