Like a Radio Left On / on the Outskirts of Identical Cities
Living (with) Fradenburg

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We are beings who can neither live nor die
without artful signification.

L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, “The Liberal Arts
of Psychoanalysis”
Like a radio left on, in the poet Ben Lerner’s parlance, on the outskirts of identical cities—and also, like the strains of a Lushlife Project downtempo “Budapest Eskimos” soundtrack emanating from a diamond mine—Aranye Fradenburg’s work has operated as a groovy and “obscure force” in medieval studies, and also in the humanities more broadly, for the past 20 or so years as a powerful and palpably explicit influence, first, upon work in Middle English literary (especially Chaucer) studies, especially those inflected by psychoanalytic, symptomatic, and “discontinuist”/non-alteritist historicist approaches to the Middle Ages. And second, her work has operated as a potent and insistent voice on the arts of living, on eudaimonia (flourishing), on the importance of pleasure/enjoyment (in its lighter and darker valences), on sentience/sensation, the feeling arts, on techniques of living, and care of the self. On the linguistic level, her work has richly explored what she calls the “living on”-ness of the always-traveling, transitive, open-ended, and non-linear signifiers and processes of signification that enable (and sometimes disable) the intersubjective formations between various actors, living and dead, past and present, so crucial to
our desires, to our sufferings and passions, to our ability to affiliate with and relate to others, and thus, to living our shared lives, for better and worse. And it must be noted, too, that one of the “obscure forces” that Lerner speaks of in his “Doppler Elegies” (in addition to death and catastrophe) is love, a subject which has played no small role in Fradenburg’s intellectual, and I would also say, political-humanist concerns. One could go further and say that, like Lerner, Fradenburg has been our scholarly poet of the “obscure forces” at work, not only in our university professions, but in the personal lives that can never be completely disentangled from that thing we call “work.”

Fradenburg has been a hero of mine for a long while now for insisting, over and over again throughout her writings, that in all times and places we misunderstand ourselves, and therefore, unknowing—and the self-fictionalizations (some constructive, some destructive) predicated upon that unknowing—have to be taken into account, whether we are studying the past or just trying to understand ourselves and our own experiences. As she put it so eloquently in her magisterial book Sacrifice Your Love, with regard to medieval studies, we “cannot confine the work of knowing the Middle Ages to replicating, however hopelessly and/or heroically, medieval cultures self-understandings. We also should explore how medieval cultures, like all others, may have mis-
understood themselves.”¹ And with regard to our own self-understandings, and in a way that is resonant with many of the discourses circulating in the university today under the aegis of object-oriented philosophies and various strains of post/humanist thought, Fradenburg wrote in the same book,

... the effect of subjectivity is produced by the interplay of insentience with sentience.

The telescopes that help us see the stars, the buildings that house the shelters that are our bodies, are insentient; and yet we extend sentience through them. But the more we make the machines and products that extend subjectivity into the world, the more insentience is part of us, or we are part of it. Forces are at work within us that do not “mean” anything; parts of ourselves cannot account for themselves. The work cannot account for itself, or disclose anything about itself, or even be questioned.²

This excerpt is part of a much longer and very complex discussion having to do with forms of alienation produced by labor, modes of produc-

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² Fradenburg, Sacrifice Your Love, 13.
tion (scholarly and artistic), aesthetics, courtly love, desire, libidinal economies, the Law, enjoyment, sacrifice/loss, political ethics, and community, and I can’t do justice to all of that here. In any case, Fradenburg’s theoretical project in this book, especially with regard to, say, Chaucer studies and medieval chivalric literature and culture more broadly (in its broadest temporal dimensions, then to now), is well-known and registered across a vast array of scholarship within medieval studies that has been undertaken under this book’s tutelage.

My own continual return(s) to the passages cited above have more to do with my own interest in and use of Fradenburg’s thinking, which, of unconscious necessity or intention, is highly idiosyncratic and personal. Thus, for me, these passages have long operated as watch-phrases for my own work, where I have striven to always keep in mind the unavoidable blind spots and “obscure forces” of everyone’s understanding of everything, including ourselves. Scholarship of medieval literature, or any literature, really, for me, becomes a valuable project of tracing productive errancies and sites of incoherence and crafting creative critical approaches that, in Eve Sedgwick’s memorable formulation, aim to be “additive and accretive,” desiring “to assemble and confer plenitude on an object [such as a text or textual object or author-object] that will then have
resources to offer an inchoate self."  

3 This has something to do as well with what Bryan Reynolds has called a transversal poetics that defy “the authorities that reduce and contain meanings,” and also seek to “understand and empower fugitive elements [in texts and other artifacts, and in particular spaces] insofar as doing so generates positive experiences.”  

4 And this sort of work might be crucial for the future, if we agree with Frandeburg (and I do) that,

To be able to anticipate, plan, project a future or into a future, we have to not know for sure, because we have to suspend judgment even while exercising it, knowing that we don’t know (everything). Ethics—and ultimately psychoanalysis—emerges from a willing of this suspension, a paradoxical knowing of non-knowing.  

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5 Aranye Fradenburg, “(Dis)continuity: A History of Dreaming,” in The Post-Historical Middle Ages, ed. Elizabeth Scala and Sylvia Frederico (New York: Pal-
In relation to my own current work on Foucault’s late writings on “care of the self,” I have been returning (a lot) recently to Fradenburg’s 2002 book Sacrifice Your Love, where I have been struck both by how apropos to our moment and compelling this book still is and also by how Fradenburg’s entire oeuvre seems to continuously circle back (with important renovations of thought) to this earlier book’s project to draw attention to the important inter-relations between embodiment and signification, between pleasure and virtue (where “virtue” is seen to have something to do with world-building), between subjectivity and Otherness, and between art and what she calls, in her essay “Living Chaucer” (and following the biological sciences) the “living process.” It feels timely to me, therefore, to spend some time now thinking about Fradenburg’s trajectory of thought over the past ten years or so, especially as it culminates, or expresses itself, in this important (and moving) essay, which originated as the Biennial Chaucer Lecture at the meeting of the New Chaucer Society in Siena, Italy in July 2010.

I offer one cautionary note here, therefore, to say that I am not attempting in this brief Preface (which is a also a tribute, or call it a love letter) to offer a comprehensive account of Fradenburg’s whole body of work, nor to assess all of its merits.

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grace Macmillan, 2009), 96 [87–115].
(of which there are many) in relation to the larger field of medieval studies. Here I merely celebrate the originality and importance of a scholar who has urged me to think, and also to feel, differently—about my field, yes, but more importantly, about the world in which I live. Over the years, I have come to value and to gather close to me, with a certain intense ardor, the work of scholars who have helped me, not just to think, but to live more creatively and more mindfully, and in this sense, Fradenburg joins Sara Ahmed, Zygmunt Bauman, Lauren Berlant, Jane Bennett, Leo Bersani, Kathleen Biddick, Judith Butler, John Caputo, Thomas Carlson, Jeffrey Cohen, Michel de Certeau, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Carolyn Dinshaw, Michel Foucault, James Earl, Cary Howie, George Kateb, Anna Kłosowska, Jonathan Lear, Emmanuel Levinas, Michael Edward Moore, Martha Nussbaum, Bill Readings, Joan Retallack, Claude Romano, Eve Sedgwick, and Simone Weil as writers who always hover nearby in my study. This list is highly personal, and of course I admire and am influenced by many scholars beyond these, but these authors stand out for providing to me what, for lack of a better term, I will call my spiritual reservoir, comprising my scholar-gypsy companions.

Some of the scholars in this list also stand out even further for their attention to and care for the role of the humanities and the university, and of creative thought more generally, in relation to personal and social life, and thus they have also
been crucial to me and others in relation to the heterotopic and desiring-assemblage projects of the BABEL Working Group.\(^7\) Fradenburg, along with Bennett, Bersani, Nussbaum, and Readings, is particularly noteworthy in this regard.\(^8\) When reading Fradenburg closely, no matter what the specific texts or subjects under close scrutiny (Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, the *Knight's Tale*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, etc.), what she seems to always be talking about is something she says more explicitly in her essay, “Group Time: Catastrophe, Survival, Periodicity”—that “enjoyment is the matrix of knowledge, and knowledge is not diminished thereby.” Further, “Interpretation and explanation are activities central to libidinal structuration and vice versa. . . . We thereby reclaim our technical work [the humanities] as the work of desire, and desire as that which makes the world.”\(^9\)

Fradenburg has become one of our most important advocates for the importance of the “liberal arts” (and of creativity, confabulation, and play, more particularly) to personal and more

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broadly social “thriving” and thus her recent essay, “Living Chaucer” (cited just above) feels like both the consummate culmination of her career’s various theoretical trajectories thus far, while it also offers (within the context of her more recent forays into neuroscience and evolutionary biology) a striking and enlivening departure for a couple of reasons: first, because she moves closer than she has in previous work to embracing the value and necessity of shared minds (and thus, for all of their precariousness and dangers, somatic-affective community-assemblages). And second, because she also articulates more forcefully than she has before that literature/language is not only a signalling system that only-always defers, or devolves, to other signalling systems, which are therefore in a continual Derridean slippage that, perhaps, never admits of a Real, or is always pointing to the ways in which language can only ever be falling away from that Real (blah blah blah, I’m so tired of and bored by these theories of lack/non-coincidence between language and everything else), but rather, that language and the literary arts may actually have the power to change history, and even more so, possesses a presence that is not negligible with regard to how we are affected by the past (or even to how we understand and negotiate our “selves” and our experiences in the present). As Fradenburg herself puts it in “Living Chaucer,”

undead life seems more apt a description
of the signifier’s mode of existence (as Derrida himself thought) than does simple absence or nonexistence. I wrote in *Sacrifice Your Love* about this form of "being-as-signifier": given how susceptible we are to the signifier’s designs, there is more connectedness than we think between living subjects and dead letters. Nature’s signifiers vary in their realizations, but something, a shape, insists.\(^\text{10}\)

There is some resonance here with what Anna Klósowska writes in *Queer Love in the Middle Ages*, that,

all fiction corresponds to an absolute reality—not of existence, but of desire that calls fiction into being, performed by the authors and manuscript makers; and continuing desire for it performed by the readers, a desire that sustains the book’s material presence across the centuries. That desire is incorporated in an existence. It is the backbone of an identity. It is an essential part of the bundle of motives that lie behind all that the body does. A part essential because it is retrievable, but also because it is privileged: art reveals more of life than life does.\(^\text{11}\)

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\(^\text{10}\) Fradenburg, “Living Chaucer,” 44.

I am reminded of when I was at University College Dublin in June of 2009 for a 3-day seminar, organized by Michael O’Rourke and Noreen Giffney, devoted to the oeuvre of Leo Bersani.¹² On the first day, when we were revisiting the span of Bersani’s writings prior to his then-current book *Intimacies*, co-authored with Adam Phillips, at one point, I got extremely excited during the discussion of Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit’s essay on Terence Malik’s film *The Thin Red Line*, an essay I absolutely love and have made use of in my own scholarship numerous times,¹³ and one of the seminar’s participants said something to me that, in my memory of it, went something like this, “But, Eileen, why are you getting so excited about this? After all, we’re talking about a text, and what we do is talk about texts, and we read theory to see what we can do with it in relation to texts, and this is not about life. You’re acting like


we’re supposed to read Bersani for life.” And I thought: we’re NOT supposed to read Bersani—and let’s face it, theory more generally—for LIFE? Fuck: how come no one TOLD me that? It was a funny (and frankly, infuriating) moment, but also one that convinced me more than ever: um, yes, theory is for life: DUH! We read theory—whether Derrida, Foucault, Bersani, Jane Bennett, Graham Harman, Roland Barthes, Fradenburg, and I could go on—for life: for LIFE! So I relate this anecdote to also say that Fradenburg’s scholarship isn’t just about Chaucer or medieval literature or even psychoanalytic and evolutionary approaches to literature more broadly; it’s about life, it’s about how we, in her own words,

need knowledge of how to do things every day in every way in our real environments; and we are not yet very close to eliminating the contingency and changefulness of living. When it comes to talking, listening, courting, negotiating, playing basketball, playing the violin, making peace, leading an organization, the humanities teaches us how to live successfully—how to adapt to, and (re-)create, our circumstances, by seeing more keenly, hearing more polyphonically, interpreting more humbly, richly and carefully, speaking to each other more persuasively, and much, much more.¹⁴

Relationality, intersubjectivity, aliveness, resilience, care of the (confabulated) self and also of others, playfulness, healing, the arts of living, and thriving seem, increasingly, to be the key watchwords and concerns of Fradenburg’s work, and at the same time, the so-called “literary” mode is still central to these concerns, such that,

Interpretation and relationality depend on one another because all relationships are unending processes of interpretation and expression, listening and signifying. In turn, sentience assists relationality: we can’t thrive and probably can’t survive without minds open to possibility, capable of sensing and interpreting the tiniest shifts in, e.g., pitch and tone.\textsuperscript{15}

Although it may seem, that in some of her recent writings, Fradenburg has been turning more toward biological and cognitive studies and away from a concentrated focus on medieval literature, per se, her essay “Living Chaucer” tells a different story about a long and warm companionship with Chaucer in which the “literary friendship” Fradenburg feels for Chaucer “is an attachment his work actively solicits, to a degree and in ways unique to his corpus but consistent both with premodern

\textsuperscript{39.4 (2011): 589–609.}
\textsuperscript{15} Fradenburg, ”The Liberal Arts of Psychoanalysis.”
and contemporary understandings of the signifier and its role in intersubjective, hence also political and social, process.”

Therefore, Chaucer’s poetry is central to Fradenburg’s thinking on something she has written eloquently about before in numerous pieces, and also expressed in her essay “(Dis)Continuity: A History of Dreaming,” where she writes that, “we all live in many different times; different times live on in us and our practices,” and therefore, with regard to literature (Chaucer’s poetry, for example) and its role in personal and social mental life, we might say, following Fradenburg, that it enables a “shared attention,” which is a form of sociality productive of progressive change in history. Literature is also, by its very nature, playful, and thus crucial, as Fradenburg writes, to the sorts of becomings that enable important psychic transformations:

Play values experimentation. When we play, we are more open to the new, from within and without. We become “neophiles” and innovators, making active use of our imaginations. Playing and pretending are crucial to the becomings of living creatures, to adaptation and behavioral flexibility; . . . Play teaches “vital skills”; it is transformative and transforming. We can neither thrive nor survive without it. And it

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is highly contagious, a powerful medium of affect transmission.\textsuperscript{18}

This resonates with Joan Retallack’s argument—with which I am in more than warm agreement—that, “To become adult in our culture (which for most of us means to become compliantly productive) is . . . to be increasingly disabled for the kinds of humorous and dire, purposeful play that creates geometries of attention revelatory of silences in the terrifying tenses that elude official grammars.”\textsuperscript{19}

Perhaps the most important aspect of Fradenburg’s “Living Chaucer” essay is its emphasis on the idea that authors, texts (and the textual objects enclosed and projected therein), and readers form somatic-affective, and thus, inter-subjective assemblages and signifying networks over time, and what this means is that Chaucer’s words “live on” because the patterns they create really do change our minds and bodies. I believe this viewpoint to be a helpful alternative to our perennial question about whether we are representing the past rightly. Whatever representations of the English past we fashion, they are all in part the result of changes wrought in us, consciously and noncon-

\textsuperscript{18} Fradenburg, “Living Chaucer,” 57.
\textsuperscript{19} Joan Retallack, \textit{The Poethical Wager} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 62.
Joy: Like a Radio Left On

...sciously, by living with Chaucer. The signifiers of the past are in us, whether we understand them “rightly” or not; we will never be certain what they mean, but we will certainly have been possessed by them. And our possession by (and of) past signifiers further transforms their range of meanings.  

Further, “symbols enable living process. Or, to put it another way, living is an art,’” and literature forms one very important component of what might be called shared sentience (something I argue for myself in work on reading vis-à-vis various object-oriented philosophies), one that would be woefully impoverished and less able to transform itself in positive, open-ended ways, without poetry, without literature and other fine arts. Those of us who work in the humanities, it seems to me (and urged by Fradenburg’s and others’ thought), must never stop laboring and fighting to stress this point, which might also be put like this: Living is an art; the arts are crucial for living. Our scholarly work, also—and this cannot be stressed enough—is also an art, if we could

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just better grasp and practice this fact. We do not just study and write about the literary arts, but rather, extend and reinvent and multiply them in “our own words,” our own styles, our own idioms. Form matters and plays no little part in how things turn out.

“Living Chaucer,” similar to Fradenburg’s book Staying Alive, is extraordinary for the ways in which it brings together neuroscience (with its concepts of neuroplasticity and mirror neurons), evolutionary and behavioral biology, studies of animal communication, psychoanalysis (Freud on mourning and melancholia, D.W. Winnicott on play), and medieval philosophy, among other subjects, to ultimately argue for literature, and Chaucer’s poetry especially, as a form of therapeutic care and counter-melancholic “working through,” enabled through a shared attention that is always about the process more so than the end, or finish, of anything. Chaucer himself, through his poetry, is a kind of “premodern psychologist” whose continual suspension of so-called final meanings creates what Fradenburg describes as a “friendly” liminal clearing in which so-called self-knowledge can really only be accessed communally, or in the company of good listener-conversationalists with a predisposition to welcome the Other (like Chaucer himself!). Through Chaucer’s art, we undo our isolation and move closer to the sort of fellowship so crucial for living, and for thriving (together). As Fradenburg herself puts it, in what for me is the most moving line of
the essay, and worth bracketing,

What enables us to risk change is the feeling that we are understood and (therefore) accompanied. 23

In the final analysis, as Fradenburg herself avers, play and shared attention are so important to so many species, including humans, that they may even be an end in themselves. We might also call this learning, or the university: the endless (playful, but also at times, sorrowful) processes we must commit ourselves to, with their open-ended (Chaucerian) multiplicity of perspectives, and their cultivation of the non-utilitarian arts of life which may have more to do with personal and social well-being than we have previously imagined. For this, and many other reasons, Fradenburg’s work hails us to this inter-temporal pedagogical-artistic project, and asks us, not just to innovate our scholarship accordingly, but to reclaim the humanities itself as the site of care and healing, and thus, of love itself, especially when we understand love (as I do), in Lauren Berlant’s terms, as a form of “emotional time,” where “it is possible to value floundering around with others whose attention-paying to what’s happening is generous and makes liveness possible as a good, not a threat.” 24 Fradenburg’s work is itself that sort of

23 Fradenburg, “Living Chaucer,” 60.
24 Lauren Berlant, “Starved,” in After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory, eds. Janet Halley and Andrew
generous attention-paying, by which we are enriched, enlivened, and most marvelously of all, accompanied.