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## Ordinary Writing: Theorizing the Affective Structures of the Present in Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart's *The Hundreds*

Escritura ordinaria: teorizando la afectividad del presente en *The Hundreds* de Lauren Berlant y Kathleen Stewart

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**ABSTRACT:** The present work explores how affect is conceptualized throughout *The Hundreds* (2019), a collaborative project between Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart composed of one hundred poems of one hundred words each (or multiples of one hundred). Throughout these poems, the authors affectively reflect on and theorize about everyday life through experimental ethnographic and writing practices, self-imposing a word restraint to their writing with the objective of exploring the creative and theoretical possibilities behind alternative ways of writing affect theory. Focusing on the unique fusion of poetry, ethnography and theory present in their work, this text explores the formal qualities of the poems and how the distinctions between criticism and fiction are blurred through a series of creative and experimental tactics that point towards radical ethical pedagogies and resist neoliberal values in academia. Some of these tactics specifically subvert academic conventions regarding citation, authorship and enunciation, and point towards innovative ways of inhabiting the place of the scholar and understanding academia itself. One of the central questions this investigation seeks to answer is how form is used by Berlant and Stewart in *The Hundreds* to theorize affect, with a special focus on how their efforts amount to what could speculatively be called «ordinary writing», a method to creatively describe and conceptualize the ordinary.

**Keywords:** Affect theory, worldings, fictocriticism, weak theory, ordinary affects

RESUMEN: El presente artículo estudia cómo los afectos son conceptualizados en *The Hundreds* (2019), el proyecto colaborativo entre Lauren Berlant y Kathleen Stewart compuesto por cien poemas de cien palabras (o múltiplos de cien palabras). Con ellos, las autoras reflexionan crítica y afectivamente sobre la vida diaria y la teorizan a través de prácticas de escritura etnográfica y teórico-experimentales, autoimponiéndose una restricción de palabras en el momento de la escritura para explorar las posibilidades detrás de formas alternativas de escribir y teorizar los afectos. Centrándose en la fusión de poesía, etnografía y teoría presente en *The Hundreds*, este trabajo explora las cualidades formales de los poemas del libro y cómo las fronteras entre la ficción y la crítica se difuminan a través de una serie de tácticas experimentales y creativas que sugieren pedagogías éticas radicales y resisten los valores neoliberales presentes en la academia. Algunas de estas tácticas subvierten convenciones académicas referidas a prácticas enunciativas, de citación y de autoría, sugiriendo formas innovadoras de habitar el lugar del académico y nuevas formas de entender la propia academia. Una de las preguntas centrales que esta investigación intenta responder es cómo la forma es utilizada por Berlant y Stewart en su texto para teorizar los afectos, prestando especial atención al modo en que sus prácticas constituyen lo que se podría denominar «escritura ordinaria», un método creativo para teorizar y describir lo ordinario y las condiciones afectivas del presente.

*Palabras clave:* Teoría de los afectos, *worldings*, *fictocriticism*, teoría débil, afectos ordinarios

## 1. INTRODUCTION

By the time this article was written, *The Hundreds* had unexpectedly become one of Lauren Berlant's final published books after their sudden departure in June 2021.<sup>1</sup> Co-authored with long-time friend and colleague Kathleen Stewart, the book constitutes an innovative and collaborative project in which both authors continue thinking about affect, albeit in more experimental fashion than in their previous work.<sup>2</sup> In *The Hundreds*, they meticulously compose one hundred poems/*ordinaries*/compositions,<sup>3</sup> in which ordinary life is explored in one hundred-word units, or multiples of one hundred, through a series of formal and stylistic choices that propose alternative ways of theorizing it. In some

<sup>1</sup> The use of the third person plural «they/them» responds to the author's preferred pronouns.

<sup>2</sup> Both authors have been studying affect throughout their prolific careers from their respective disciplines. In the case of Stewart, she has written several papers about the use of affect theory in anthropological and ethnographic research and has employed it in her fictional ethnographies of the United States *A Space on the Side of The Road* (1996) and *Ordinary Affects* (2007). Likewise, Berlant theorized affect throughout most of their career, studying its complicated articulations within public and national discourses in their influential books *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997) and *The Female Complaint* (2008), as well as its political instrumentalization under neoliberalism in their book *Cruel Optimism* (2011). *The Hundreds* is their first collaborative project published by a major publishing house that explicitly and extensively experiments with textual form.

<sup>3</sup> While Berlant also referred to the compositions as «theoretical poems» in a conversation with scholar Katarzyna Bojarska (Berlant, 2019b), these terms will be used indistinctly throughout this paper with the intention of keeping true to the nature of Berlant and Stewart's project, especially considering how in the book these terms are also used interchangeably.

respects, *The Hundreds* takes further the project that Stewart began in her book *Ordinary Affects* (2007), in which she theorized affect through a fictional ethnography of the United States. As defined in said book, ordinary affects are «the varied surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences», constituting «public feelings» that simultaneously «begin and end in broad circulation, but they're also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of» (Stewart, 2007: 1–2). In this sense, the affinity between both authors becomes evident considering Berlant's efforts to theorize the affective structures of the present in much of their previous work (2011, 2008, 1997).

Accordingly, *The Hundreds* constitutes an attempt to theorize these ordinary affects through a collaborative and experimental approach that merges the writing voices of Berlant and Stewart and explores the possibilities of generating knowledge through writing constraints and genre-defying textual forms. The motivation behind their project is explicitly laid out in the third poem of the collection, in which they state that «*The Hundreds* is an experiment in keeping up with what's going on» (2019: 5) and, on a latter poem, that «*The Hundreds* is not just “where does the misery come from?” as we sense the felt tip of the world drawing figures, hooks, and asterisks. It's also about what happens when we stop saying ‘affect is in the world’ as though the phrase resolves the writing of impact, spring, and relation» (2019: 124). Thus, the book raises important questions related to their own work as scholars and the ethical implications behind their writing practices, which I find particularly relevant as an aspiring scholar myself. Although notably different in style and form, I find that *The Hundreds* prompts us to rethink the politics behind scholarly work much in the same vein as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons* (2013), who also perform an innovative critique of the present through a revalorization of communal work and the multiple potentialities behind everyday practices.

It will be argued then that *The Hundreds* is a collaborative project that suggests innovative ways of conceptualizing affect, through a series of formal tactics that performatively reflect and affectively transmit its main arguments, subverting key concepts at the core of academic production and amounting to a theory of writing about the ordinary, or «ordinary writing», as the authors put it in a passage of their text.

## **2. THE HUNDREDS THROUGH THE LENS OF FICTOCRITICISM**

As mentioned previously, one of the thematic intentions of *The Hundreds* is specifically addressed when both authors state that the book is an «experiment in keeping up with what is going on» (2019: 5). The vastness and ambiguity of «what is going on» is an apt way of englobing the ambitious scope of the project: the convergence of intensities,<sup>4</sup> affects, objects, and people that permeate different scenes, and what they can tell us about everyday life, affect, and politics. In *The Hundreds*, the knowledge being produced is processual; it emerges through textual practice and performance, as opposed to standard academic conventions, which often apply indistinctly the same textual layout to articulate previously conceived ideas and corroborate pre-established hypotheses. In other words, knowledge emerges in one hundred-word units. All the poems of the book are either one hundred words long, or their length is a multiple of this number, for no apparent reason other than the self-imposition of an arbitrary rule and the curiosity to see what can emerge when writing so constrained. This is explicitly explained in the prelude

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<sup>4</sup> Employed throughout this article in its Deleuzian sense, interpreted and equated by Brian Massumi (1995) to that of affect, to designate the immaterial forces that impact the body and cannot be captured.

of the book, aptly called «Preludic», which anticipates the playful and experimental tone of the poems:

We made individual hundreds, series of hundreds, and very long hundreds but held to the exact. Some separate pieces became joined and reframed, and the theoretical reflections were shaped as hundreds and folded into the analytic, observational, and transferential ways we move. We wrote through the edit.

(2019: X)

As the above passage suggests, *The Hundreds* is not only an experiment in writing but also in editing, which can be interpreted as an exercise in fictocriticism. Though often neglected in contemporary academic writing, fictocriticism emerged in the late eighties as a textual form that was significantly present in Canadian and Australian academic and artistic scenes, and which gained notoriety when it was mentioned by Stephen Muecke—who is prominent in *The Hundreds* as one of the contributors invited to create a personal index of the text—and Noel King on their paper «On Ficto-Criticism» (1991). The term also gained popularity in academic circles a few years later when Muecke published his seminal essay «The Fall: Fictocritical Writing» (2002), in which he defined fictocriticism performatively through its own structure and form, reclaiming it as a response to Derrida’s famous comment about the need to find a new name «for those “critical” inventions which belong to literature while deforming its limits» (qtd. in Muecke, 2002: 108). Such name, Muecke argued, would be fictocriticism. Yet, as Helen Flavell (2009) points out, the term had in fact already been in circulation in the Canadian artistic scene for quite some time prior to Muecke and King’s intervention in 1991. In her investigation on the genealogy of the term, Flavell discusses how the concept began to gain traction in Australian academic circles after the publication of Muecke and King’s «On Ficto-Criticism», where they cite an interview from 1987 with Frederic Jameson in which the latter recognizes a recent trend of writing that intertwines theory and criticism, which King and Muecke refer to as «ficto-criticism». However, Flavell points out that the term was actually already present in the original interview with Jameson that the authors cite in their paper, and was employed by interviewer Andrea Ward, who explicitly asks Jameson about it, signalling that the term was already in circulation in Canada prior to this interview (Flavell, 2009). Her research leads Flavell to track the origin of the term to Jeanne Randolph, a Canadian artist and cultural critic who taught at the Ontario Centre for Arts where Ward attended, which could explain her familiarity with the term and why she employed it in her interview with Jameson. Hence, Flavell argues that the often omission of Randolph’s name in articles about fictocriticism paradoxically work against the feminist origins of the term, illustrating that «whilst ficto-criticism has been represented as a radical practice that challenges the power of academic writing to represent and interpret the world it is not automatically antithetical to the power relations established in traditional academic writing» (2009: 21).<sup>5</sup>

Despite its intricate origins, fictocriticism emerges as a genre-defying textual form that problematizes what it considers to be an arbitrary separation between fiction and criticism, while at the same time examines the political implications and the ethics behind any textual form. As Gerrit Haas explains, «the nucleus of ficto-critical writing practices can be marked as a form of textual resistance—in theory and practice—to common

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<sup>5</sup> Flavell tracks the emergence of fictocritical practices (throughout her work spelled as «ficto-criticism») to Australian feminist groups and writers during the late 70s, who wrote in fictocritical fashion without naming it as such. The subsequent history of the term and popularization by its use by male authors instead of the unnamed women who preceded them leads Flavell to affirm that fictocriticism, while feminist in origin, is not an intrinsically feminist textual practice, though can be valuable for feminist scholars (2004: 168-170).

generic distinctions in combination with an ethical motivation against linguistic-discursive practices of marginalization and domination» (2014: 12, emphasis in the original).<sup>6</sup> The emergence of fictocriticism then, is not only tied to a questioning of the use and value of generic academic forms when writing about the world but also to an ethical consideration about the place writing takes up and its ideological implications. As Katrina Schlunke and Anne Brewster explain: «fictocriticism reveals the textual performance of other scholarly work and suggests that choices are always being made about how we write and what we write» (2005: 393). Consequently, fictocriticism is defined as a textual practice that emerges both within contemporary academic production and against it, bending generic conventions and shaking its epistemological foundations to the ground, which renders it a politically charged textual mode, not only because of its genre-defying qualities but also due to its marginal place among scholarly production. Thus, the experimentality of the form of *The Hundreds* can be interpreted as one of the many fictocritical tactics that aim to subvert and resignify its academic credentials. The use of «fictocritical tactic» instead of strategy alludes to Michel de Certeau's conceptualization of the «tactic» as a calculated action that may yet lead to unexpected outcomes, as opposed to strategies, which are calculations and manipulations of power relations that have become institutionalized and dominant (de Certeau, 1988: 38). In this light, fictocritical tactics would be the ones employed to undermine the generic restrictions and conventions of literature and criticism, exercising a critique through form while simultaneously using the language they seek to problematize, effectively deterritorializing it.

One of the central fictocritical tactics employed in *The Hundreds* is the self-imposed restriction the authors follow when writing—the one-hundred-word unit structure would be the experimental expression favored by them to explore the potentials of experimenting in fictocritical texts, and can also be interpreted as a playful and parodic reference to the rigidity and restrictiveness of academic production that frequently establishes word limitations in order for texts to be considered for publication. This is a crucial tactic that finds in the formal aspects of the text a fertile ground to generate new knowledge and to re-think the relation between text and form within academic production, which, as Haas notes, often «dictate *one* proper form for all cases» (2014: 33) instead of letting content determine form.

Another fictocritical tactic at play in *The Hundreds* is the paradoxical relation between the mastery displayed by the authors when it comes to the form of the text and the indeterminacy of the theoretical themes they explore with it. As they themselves admit, *The Hundreds* is just as much an exercise in writing as it is in editing, and the necessary edits required to adjust an initial text to the experiment's restrictions certainly denote a masterful command of language. However, it is precisely this contingency which grants *The Hundreds* both its uncertainty and indeterminateness; words fit and concepts emerge, effectively taking off but unsure of where they will land, as the authors put it in the poem «Slide»: «Writing allows for anything to be a concept's matter or a matter's concept. Nothing guarantees it, but everything initiates» (Berlant and Stewart, 2019: 51). This excerpt highlights another operation against standard academic conventions, which

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<sup>6</sup> The use of the hyphen to refer to «fictocriticism» responds to the author's conceptualization of the potential of the term according to the different ways of writing it. He links the term «ficto-criticism» —hyphenated—to the work of Helen Flavell and her conceptualization of the textual form as a «feminine space between in writing» (Haas, 2014: 16; emphasis in the original). Alternatively, Haas favors the use of «ficto/critical strategies» in his work, using a slash instead of a hyphen because it «illustrates both the separation and conjoining of the constituent parts and perspectives of ficto/criticism» (2014: 45). Throughout this article the term will be spelled as «fictocriticism».

generally reject text riddles with this level of uncertainty since they are deemed as not rigorous enough in academic terms, given that they destabilize the notion of the scholar as an expert in their field of study, which is at the core of academic writing. This refusal of mastery becomes evident in the deployment of other fictocritical tactics aimed at problematizing academic textual forms and their foundations, such as the reluctance to be held accountable to standards of rigor even in that which refers to the premise of the experiment itself present in the book or, to put it differently, the poststructuralist gesture of acknowledging the limitations of the technologies and tactics employed in writing. In the prelude of *The Hundreds*, both authors briefly cast doubt on the accuracy of their ordinaries when it comes to the specific wordcount they are abiding to, warning the reader that if they «count more or fewer [words], you're not coming onto an Easter Egg or a secret door leading to a world for the special people or prisoners but just seeing what the counters we used said we had (600)» (2019: X). The inclusion of the number at the end of the fragment indicating its length is also interesting as it exposes, in the playful tone that characterizes much of the ordinaries, its own self-reflexivity and how the choice of words by the authors responds primarily to a numeric criteria, suggesting that they had to include the number «600» as a way to compensate the missing word.

Another fictocritical tactic is the peculiar way references appear throughout the text: at the bottom of each poem but without pointing to a specific page or passage, sometimes not even referencing an author or text but a phrase or an idea. These references are intentionally open and parodically diverse; the authors cite from renowned academic to objects, celebrities and whatever was accompanying them while writing. In a very fictocritical fashion, the citation system employed in *The Hundreds* is in-between modes, as it does not refute the importance of acknowledging the references that appear in the text—a golden rule in academic writing—, while at the same time it employs a method of citation that makes explicit the rhizomatic intertextuality of the poems, bringing together the textual modes of criticism and literature by acknowledging the value of references while also rejecting the restrictions and rigidness of standard academic citational practices. Consequently, the text performatively enacts a new citational approach that it self-reflexively conceptualizes through the use of identifiable markers of conventional citational practices—the use of brackets and the standard practice of including the author's last name and the date of the text—, while at the same time it refuses its restrictiveness by remaining unspecific as to the location within the source (no page numbers are provided), and expands its scope by including objects and situations.

Consequently, the discussed writing and reading practices articulate a critique of academic conventions and their textual tradition, embracing the potential of speculation and refusing hierarchies of knowledge and legitimacy, through a constant undermining of the authors' control over their subject. In this sense, the fictocritical tactics employed throughout *The Hundreds* may argue for the need to re-think and update our textual practices within academia and advocate for a more ethical approach that favors speculation, surprise, and failure, instead of fixating on capitalist qualities such as value, dominancy, impact and mastery. However, it is also worth noting that in its challenge of standard academic conventions *The Hundreds* also illustrates the restrictiveness of academic publishing, where a work with such characteristics would normally not be encouraged nor published if it were not attached to renowned names within academia such as Berlant and Stewart. Hence, some of their contributions in the book when it comes to textual form and experimental writing, while necessary, are not attainable to all scholars, especially those just starting their careers.

### 3. TRACING AFFECT AND ITS HUNDREDS

As mentioned, *The Hundreds* is a collaborative experiment that theorizes affect through form. Its collaborative quality is manifested in the different positions the narrator takes, alternating between the first-person plural and third-person voice, depending on the poem, producing a decentered narrator that occasionally blurs the distinctions between the fictional narrator and the academic author. Considering the critique of academia that *The Hundreds* enacts, these narrational shifts can be interpreted as fictocritical tactics that contribute to destabilizing the authorial legitimacy that characterizes conventional academic texts. This is especially relevant considering the text's focus on the ordinary and the everyday, and the voyeuristic nature of the experiment; by introducing different narrative figures, the text largely avoids a totalizing narration from the point of view of two academics, favoring instead the emergence of different voices. On the other hand, this operation can also be interpreted as a gesture towards a dehumanist practice that unthinks mastery and fosters a «vulnerable readership», in the sense that Julietta Singh confers to the concept when she defines it as an «open, continuous practice that resists foreclosures by remaining unremittingly susceptible to new world configurations that reading texts—literary, artistic, philosophical, and political—can begin to produce» (2018: 22).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, *The Hundreds* aligns with Singh's dehumanist politics against mastery as it is concerned with recuperating the value of the ordinary and the everyday through a displaced and decentered subjectivity that implies that the authors are just two participants in the project but not its sole legitimate voice. Furthermore, the decentered subjectivities present in *The Hundreds* ascribes the text within a poststructuralist tradition which, as Simon Robb explains, is also linked to fictocriticism, as it is a textual form that «is largely drawing upon postmodern models of subjectivity, which maintain that the contemporary subject is a temporal configuration of textual fragments. Hence “writing” the postmodern text is a form of self-composition, and the text [...] is read as an artefact of subjectivity which reads (and writes) subjectivity» (1996: 97).<sup>8</sup>

The nature of the project inevitably poses questions about the role of description in the experiment. Observation and description are the first steps in the writing process the authors follow; they are not tools to validate knowledge but to kick it off, to set speculation in motion. As the authors themselves put it: «we write to what's becoming palpable in sidelong looks or a consistency of rhythm or tone. Not to drag things back to the land of the little judges but to push the slow-mo button, to wait for what's starting up, to listen up for what's wearing out» (2019: 4). In some aspects, this exercise by Berlant and Stewart is reminiscent of Donna J. Haraway's concept of «speculative fabulation», or its abbreviation SF, which designates «a mode of attention, a theory of history and a practice of worlding» (2016: 230).<sup>9</sup> Purposedly indeterminate and loosely defined,

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<sup>7</sup> With this concept, Singh (2018: 119) draws on the works of Judith Butler on vulnerability to point towards a politics of what she calls «dehumanism», a critical operation that seeks to subvert and conscientize about the colonial origins and violence behind any display of mastery, even in academic writing, through a vulnerable readership that «resist[s] disciplinary enclosure, refusing to restrict in advance how and where one might wander through textual engagement» (22).

<sup>8</sup> This poststructuralist influence is also present in *The Hundreds* in the way the text produces its reader; the collaborative approach of the project is also linked to the reading practices it fosters in its readership, by explicitly asking the reader to actively interpret the potential knowledge that the poems may generate. See poem «On Editing» for an example of this (Berlant and Stewart, 2019: 85).

<sup>9</sup> While Haraway explicitly discusses the notion behind «speculative fabulations» in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, she favors the abbreviation «SF», which encompasses not

Haraway's concept refers to emerging *worldings* rooted in storytelling practices and everyday life that are the product of close observations intertwined with fictions and fables, which allow her to connect seemingly unrelated elements and speculate on different ways of inhabiting the world. In this regard she illustrates them with the picture of the string figures, that are «about giving and receiving patterns, dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works, something consequential and maybe even beautiful, that wasn't there before» (2016: 10). Indeed, Berlant and Stewart's experiment seems to bind Haraway's SF writing to Eve Sedgwick's method of «amplifying attention», which Berlant explains in their preface to *Reading Sedgwick*: «Sedgwick herself exemplified how all situational writing from specific historical moments [...] insisted on a slowed-down and amplifying attention» (2019a: 1).<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, this method allows the authors to link a series of seemingly unrelated elements which, once they are mapped into a composition, carry within it the potential for the emergence of new meaning. Through the semantic and compositional operation at stake in *The Hundreds*, where a variety of elements «throw themselves together» and produce a conceptual «something», Berlant and Stewart's fictocritical exercise experiments with the limits of their chosen method: if meaning and affect emerge from the description and mapping of different elements onto new compositions, what happens when form itself forces you to ditch a word or a sentence, to link new elements as a result of heavy editing and shortening or, in contrast, amplification? The fictocritical qualities of the ordinaries come to view again and put knowledge at the center, which emerges through writing and not just observation «Ordinaries appear through encounters with the world, but encounters are not events of knowing, units of anything, revelations of realness, or facts» (Berlant and Stewart, 2019: 5). Thus, for both authors affect and knowledge interwind and emerge through form, and a composition does not just refer to their written poems but also to the composition of elements that initiate their writing. Indeed, the authors employ this word throughout many of the ordinaries that comprise the collection and use it to refer to both the act of writing and that of observing and describing, effectively linking in semantic terms the material and the immaterial, the fictional and the non-fictional, the speculative and the situated, through the use of shared words.

Therefore, compositions link the world to its representation, account for the disparaging elements, intensities, and bodies that converge daily in ordinary scenes of unpredictable consequences, but also for the operation by which they are registered and mapped through writing. Yet, compositions are not simple noetic operations but actual material assemblages of affect that manifest as texturized feeling, as Sedgwick argues in *Touching Feeling*, when she states that «if texture and affect, touching and feeling seem to belong together then, it is not because they share a particular delicacy of scale [...] What they have in common is that at whatever scale they are attended to, both are irreducibly phenomenological» (2003: 21, emphasis in the original). In this sense, texture matters when mapping and tracing affect as it is the point of contact between the body and the affect, between intensities and objects, the material and the immaterial, the personal and the collective. As Chris Nealon explains in *Reading Sedgwick*: «the significance of texture lies in how it mixes sensations, or media, or genres, and this

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only speculative fabulations but also «science fiction, speculative feminism, science fantasy (...) science fact, and also, string figures» (2016: 10).

<sup>10</sup> With this concept, Berlant points to the description Sedgwick makes, in a chapter of *Touching Feeling*, of a political protest she was taking part in, where she started to become aware of the many intensities and affects that were converging into that scene, which exceeded her subjectivity and created an assemblage of affect sustained collectively by the people who were attending but also by the place where it was being held, the weather, the time of the day and other elements, covering the protest with «vast unbridgeable gaps of meaning» (Sedgwick, 2003: 30).



mixedness produces a modulation, or “middle range”, of experience and subjectivity» (2019: 167). This tactile quality of affect, that which makes it present and felt even when it cannot be captured nor comprehended is what many of the poems in *The Hundreds* convey: their fictocritical indeterminacy and openness sets off a series of affective and noetic responses in the reader that cannot be pinned down in totalizing terms. In this sense, affect emerges through the text in the same way it inspires it, and the experiment the authors perform favors a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations. However, while the self-imposed word restriction fosters creativity and takes the text to new directions, sometimes results in compositions that are excessively cryptic due to this contingency which could have benefited from greater flexibility when writing.

Much in the same way as the one hundred-word poems from the book, the concept of «the ordinary» emerges in *The Hundreds* as a composite itself, from disparaging and seemingly unrelated elements. This generativity identified by Berlant and Stewart relates to the concept of *worlding*, introduced in one of the poems: «A worlding is an imperial promise of a form barely roughed out and still charged with its own retractability. Hedging grandiose gestures at truth with the kinds of legibilities that lives in contact yield, it self-maps a potentiality out of an ecology of energetic precisions» (2019: 22). The passage enigmatically introduces the concept of «worlding» to describe the generative capacity of things and how ordinariness takes shape when objects, intensities, and bodies collide, and the title of the poem — «Weight of the World» — suggests that these generative moments in which a certain «thing» acquires a «rough» and incipient shape are what mark our affective relationship with it. But while the concept is never further explained in *The Hundreds*, Stewart expands its scope in another of her articles: «A thing throws a worlding together out of objects and attunements, practices and incipient tendencies. The ricocheting between subjects and objects settles for a minute on matter already configured. An attunement to a thing not quite named, and yet singular and precise, produces an opening» (2014: 126). A worlding, then, can be interpreted as a phenomenological process in which human and non-human forces, objects and bodies come into contact and generate forms that become legible and can be felt by the subject, constituting a particular «world» that mediates affectively between the person and that which makes up their ordinary life. This concept then not only points to the tactility and texture of affect that is manifested in everyday life but also to its generativity; if affect signals the capacity to affect and be affected, then *worldings* signal how this process is mediated by emergent forms and figures that assemble, re-arrange, and ultimately impact a person and their experience. Hence, the ordinary is constantly being worked and shaped by these intensities, these «ordinary affects», as Stewart calls them, that «work not through “meanings” per se, but rather in the way that they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds. Their significance lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible» (2007: 3).

In this sense, the restrictive but experimental form of *The Hundreds* can be interpreted as the representational and textual correspondent of the worlding processes that the authors identify in everyday life: just as different intensities converge and start to form something, the writing performance by the authors also generates new meaning by constructing and deconstructing sentences and putting words together in order to meet the one-hundred-word criterion.

#### 4. TOWARDS AN ORDINARY WRITING

The conception of affect articulated by the authors and of the ordinary as a composite of varied meaning and impact is not only self-reflexively explored in *The Hundreds* but also transmitted through each poem's account of an ordinary moment or affect, hence building an affective archive of the ordinary. Notably, the authors only specifically address the concept of the ordinary in two passages, where they proclaim that «[t]he new ordinary is a collective search engine, not a grammar» (Berlant and Stewart, 2019: 17) and that «[t]he revolutionary ordinary is contact and action inducing the speculative present» (2019: 18). Both passages exemplify the relevance of the ordinary as articulated throughout *The Hundreds*; the quality of a «collective search engine» they imprint on it signals its key role when studying contemporary affectivity and modes of living; and the refusal by the authors to reduce it to a «grammar» suggest a vision of the ordinary as a complex site of intensities that cannot be easily institutionalized nor have fixed, reductive meanings. Instead, «the ordinary» is the «contact sheet» where the potentialities of the present, as well as its effects, are negotiated; it is the place where people speculate about their present conditions of existence, whether consciously or not, and where the scholar must engage in order to reflect on a fast-developing, precarious and complex present that is constantly changing and re-configuring itself.

Berlant and Stewart's reconfiguration of the ordinary as a key notion for intellectual work is in line with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's broad conception of the word «study» and the role of the scholar. In their stark critique of university and contemporary life *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013), the authors frame intellectual work as a kind of sociality that is both communal and ordinary, present in everyday practices and not the exclusive work of academics or intellectuals: «we are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice» (2013: 117). Consequently, for these authors the notion of the ordinary is not simply something to think about but the very basis of intellectual work; they do not simply interpret everyday practices but recuperate their underlying intellectuality, refusing to separate theory from practice and academic work from ordinary life.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the revalorization of the ordinary in *The Hundreds* is in line with Berlant's idea about the shortcomings of thinking about the present through the logic of «the event» (Berlant, 2010: 229); that is, to avoid forcibly linking it to irruptions and emergencies in contemporary societies which mark a «before and after» in economic, cultural, political, and epistemological ways. As Berlant explains in *Cruel Optimism*: «the present moment increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with one happening piling on another» (2011: 7). This permanent presence of crisis is what Berlant calls *crisis ordinariness*, which produces the affective state of *impasse* they identify in ordinary life. Hence, the ordinary allows us to affectively track these generalized feelings of crisis and *impasse*, which produce «a rhythm that people can enter into while they're dithering, tottering, bargaining, testing, or otherwise being worn out by the promises that they have attached to in this world» (2011: 26). Attending to these ordinary affects, then, requires a method that allows the scholar to «push the slow-mo button» (Berlant and Stewart, 2010: 4) in order to concentrate on the emergent worlds

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<sup>11</sup> The affinity between Moten's project and *The Hundreds* is further reinforced by his presence in the book as one of the six collaborators invited to create their own index of it, included in its last pages. The other authors invited are Susan Lepselter, Andrew Causey and C. Thresher, Stephen Muecke and the reader themselves.

constantly being produced and negotiated in everyday life, what Stewart calls «the cultural poesis of everyday». This poesis is defined as «the creativity or generativity of things culturally» (Denzin et al, 2005: 1015), produced when: «an emergent assemblage made up of a wild mix of things [...] has become actively generative, producing wide-ranging impacts, effects, and forms of knowledge with a life of their own» (2005: 1016).

Consequently, the formal and stylistic choices at play in *The Hundreds* point towards new ways to study the ordinary that could speculatively be called «ordinary writing». In typical fictocritical fashion, the concept of ordinary writing is never explicitly detailed in *The Hundreds*, but instead seems to be manifested performatively via its form, though it is referenced in «The Things We Think With», a poem that articulates the fictocritical quality of their writing:

the performance called format takes another route here, windup parentheses holding the things we think with: encounters, a word, a world, a wrinkle in the neighborhood of what happened, and reading we wouldn't shake if we could. Even if some cites look like direct sources, all things are indirect sources, in truth. Our ekphrasis is brash, approximate, edited, and feeling its way around. It's *ordinary writing*.

(Berlant and Stewart, 2019: 20; emphasis added)

The above passage hints at what ordinary writing could be, especially when it comes to its relationship with academic writing. On the one hand, «the performance called format» —those generic conventions the scholar adheres to— seems to refer to the experimentality of *The Hundreds*, drawing attention to the speculative and creative approach favored by the authors. On the other hand, the poem hints at what this writing should be like in political and theoretical terms: the attention to and recuperation of «words, worlds, a wrinkle in the neighborhood of what happened», along with the acknowledgement that their «ekphrasis is brash, approximate, edited and feeling it's way around», both point to a conception of academic writing and criticism in line with Eve Sedgwick's concept of «weak theory». By this concept, Sedgwick understood a theoretical approach that did not follow a «hermeneutics of suspicion» and instead favored reparative practices, becoming that which «comes unstuck from its own line of thought to follow the objects it encounters or becomes undone by its attention to things that don't just add up but take on a life of their own as problems for thought» (Stewart, 2008: 72). While the concept of «hermeneutics of suspicion» was coined by Paul Ricoeur to designate the political operation behind the writing of authors such as Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, that attempted to «unmask» deeper and less evident truths through an interpretative framework that privileged distrust and skepticism, Sedgwick criticizes how these hermeneutics have pervasively conquered much of academic thinking and writing. In Sedgwick's view, the reliance of the scholar in these hermeneutics has effectively rendered them paranoid and actively deny them alternative modes of knowing within academia: «[paranoia] refuses to be only either a way of knowing or a thing known, but is characterized by an insistent tropism toward occupying both positions» (Sedgwick, 1997: 10). Through the refusal of mimicry and of the reproduction of suspicion as scholarly mode of interpretation, a weak theory emerges that embraces the incompleteness and unexpectedness of the world by studying it without presuming to understand nor explain it in categorical, totalizing ways, through a «minoritarian» textual form that refuses mastery and accounts for error, contingency, and surprise.

Consequently, ordinary writing would designate the type of writing that attends to ordinary affects and the *poiesis* of the everyday, registering intensities, impacts, and points of contact between bodies, things, and worlds, from a theoretical perspective that refuses mastery over its subject and privileges surprise and affect as a way of explaining

and transmitting the complexity of everyday life and its dense and texturized affective charge. It also hints a type of writing that responds to the moment of impasse and precarity that permeates every aspect of contemporary living, and to the inadequacy of current, outdated genres to render it legible and comprehensible.<sup>12</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In her exploration of depression and affect published in 2012, Ann Cvetkovich concurs that «[t]he ordinary requires new genres of ethnography or storytelling» (2012: 157). This article has tried to reflect on *The Hundreds* as an ambitious project that integrates both, introducing certain ethnographic qualities —the observations that kick off the author’s speculations and creative writing— while at the same time using storytelling and narrative devices to transmit the affective charge and the ordinary affects that they perceive.

Through the many fictocritical tactics present in the book, the concept of «ordinary writing» emerges as a methodological response to our times of *crisis ordinariness*, as conceptualized by Berlant in their previous work. In this sense, *The Hundreds*’ rhizomatic structure hints at the rhizomatic nature of our times and its academic form points to the need of developing new radical pedagogies that allow us to historicize the affective conditions of the present avoiding the reproduction of hierarchies of oppression and dominancy through our writing.

In this sense, Berlant and Stewart’s proposal advocates for new ways of theorizing affect while rejecting the forced institutionalization and any genre-binding definition of their method because, as Berlant explains in a previous article: «the affective event is an effect in a process, not a thing delivered in its genre as such» (Berlant, 2010: 229). Consequently, attending to these affective attunements demands the articulation of a weak theory that provides insights and kicks off trajectories without presuming to know their end destination. As Stewart explains on a previous text, «the point of theory now is not to judge the value of analytic objects or to somehow get their representation ‘right’ but to wonder where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them as a potential or resonance» (Stewart, 2008: 73). This political stance is also present in *The Hundreds* and manifests itself through its fictocritical and hybrid form, which is not concerned with representing anything in totalizing terms but in transmitting and registering the affectivity of ordinary life.

Hence, *The Hundreds* critically employs a hybrid form that offers innovative textual tactics to study ordinary life that distance themselves from Cartesian modes of knowledge and instead privilege affect and its manifestation. Because they work both within and against academic production, the textual form present in the book can be interpreted as an expression of «minor literature» within academia, in the original sense Deleuze and Guattari gave to the term, because of its deterritorialization of the languages of theory and fiction through its fictocritical tactics.<sup>13</sup> However, while the form of the poems grants them their novelty and theoretical relevance, it paradoxically also counteracts against some of the presumed intentions of the authors; the contingency resulting of the word restriction sometimes results in poems that are excessively cryptic, and the ethnographic activity that kicks them off, while transcended through the act of writing

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<sup>12</sup> For Berlant «a genre is an aesthetic structure of affective expectation, an institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected» (Berlant, 2008: 4).

<sup>13</sup> See Flavell (2004) for a better understanding of fictocriticism as minor literature.

and editing, becomes manifest in somewhat problematic ways in certain ordinaries, especially those in which the authors describe people who are in much more precarious positions than themselves.

Nevertheless, *The Hundreds* is a riveting project that defies academic conventions and offers alternative and innovative modes of theorizing affect. Its experimental setup fosters an alignment between content and form that affectively transmits the state of *impasse* of the world and how it is daily negotiated, emphasizing through form the contingency and unexpectedness that shapes everyday life. Moreover, the authors' choice of restricting the poems to a hundred words (or its multiples) can be read as a veiled critique to the neurosis that is also a part of the affective experience of living in neoliberal societies, and of producing knowledge and «impact» in an increasingly neoliberal academia. Their fictocritical exercise, then, provides these and many more insights to understanding how capitalism feels, refusing to provide totalizing answers, and opening instead new trajectories to understand the ordinary and how to approach it theoretically. Their ordinary writing reminds us that as a place where public feelings begin and end, emerge and disappear, the ordinary is a productive site for understanding the affective quality of the present and its complex articulation, which *The Hundreds* tackles throughout a series of formally strange and unconventional decisions for these strange, unconventional times.

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