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# Peroxide Subjectivity and the Love of (Knowing) The End

Abstract: This essay thinks about the politics of celebrating apocalypse via ambivalent comedy. It offers a theory of "peroxide subjectivity," which riffs off of Lauren Berlant's (2017) work on "combover subjectivity." There, Berlant describes the universal condition of having to present to the world a cleaned-up version of the self, all proverbial baldness covered over: that is, all existential contradiction, such as the knowledge of death, concealed as if resolved. This condition is typically what Berlant calls a "humorless comedy," humorless because our very recognition in the social relies on it, and because we are typically ashamed of what we cover. But this essay considers a version of combover subjectivity which has become funny because the subject in question has dropped her shame in an embrace of existential doom on personal, political, and planetary scales. Taking musician Phoebe Bridgers as a primary example, I dub this version peroxide subjectivity, bleach being corrosive and thus void-exposing, in contrast to the combover. The essay considers peroxide subjectivity chiefly as a mode of relating to apocalypse. I critique it as a mode common to a white millennial feminist suspended between a recognition of her complicity in world-ending structures and a lack of political language that is not premised on the kind of innocence named by the contemporary term "virtue-signaling," and which Wendy Brown captured in her 1993 work on "wounded attachments." I argue that the peroxide subject responds to this problem by exposing her woundedness *alongside* her fault—experienced as a contradiction—and, by extension, welcoming apocalypse as past, present, and future unfoldings denied by her conservative milieu.

Keywords: apocalypse, combover subjectivity, comedy, whiteness, death drive, Phoebe Bridgers

Figure 1. I Know the End (Directed by Alissa Torvinen)

**Hair is *everything*, Anthony.**
**– *Fleabag***

Phoebe Bridgers sparked a little Twitter tizzy when, after playing her apocalyptic song "I Know the End" on *Saturday Night Live* in January 2021, she smashed her guitar. People said it was a waste of gear, an exhibition of white privilege; fans responded that no one would say that to a man, as if this would fatally wound the critique. Nobody seemed to address the real awkwardness of the performance: that Bridgers is not strong enough to really break her instrument. Only minimal sparks fly, and after four or so hits you can see her struggling to drop the guitar hard enough to even dent the plastic monitor she aims at. She starts to look tired and a bit panicked, and when she's done, she hugs her bassist. The viewer guiltily squashes the thought that slight women can't be punk in the right sort of careless way, and grants her instead a response that, whether critical or supportive, reads the gesture as what it sought to be.

An emo auditioning for notoriety, this performance and the reception it invites exemplifies what Lauren Berlant calls "combover subjectivity," a humorless genre of comedy in which existence is a kind of perpetual "Lip Sync for Your Life!" (Berlant 2017, 332).[1] Just as, for Andrea Long Chu, gender itself exists, "if [...] at all, in the structural generosity of strangers" (2019, 38), for Berlant subjectivity in general is dependent on people confirming others' identities, as if they are complete, in a mutual dance away from the disintegration of the self. Berlant takes toupees and the like as the archetype of this phenomenon: a combover mutely asks oth-

**1** Berlant (2017) considers this *RuPaul's Drag Race* feature important as "a sprightly, miserable dedication to humorless existence in comic drag" (332).

ers to see intact heads of hair where there are holes, to see a (particular sort of) whole person where there is none. In this schema, all identity claims are combovers, as are everyday choreographies of clothes and hairstyles. Although this is comedic in a technical sense because of the trips and tricks made by insufficient signifiers—that is, because combovers are always on the edge of failing—we typically feel "pretty solemn" about it (Berlant 2017, 332). BBC comedy *Fleabag*'s insistence that "hair is *everything*" is, in the terms of this theory, quite literally true: without our combovers, we are nothing, no (nameable) thing.

As a sub-category of combover subjectivity—and one whose belonging in that category we will test throughout this article, as it could also be seen as an adjacent or even a contrary phenomenon—I propose "peroxide subjectivity," because Bridgers and the bleached white hair she calls her "chemical cut" ("Moon Song") articulate an increasingly popular kind of tragicomic applause for both personal and worldly apocalypse. Peroxide strips hair of substance rather than augmenting it like a combover, and often seems to be, for the already pale musician, part of an effort to embody a sort of ghost. She complements her bleached hair with a fastidiously flat affect and a kitsch pyjama-style skeleton suit (or other gothic fare), and her hair is fully snow-silver, much more literally white than your standard bottle job. This is a project of some devotion for Bridgers, who styles herself (Kerr, 2021). By calling attention to bleach as both a caustic toxin and a whitening device, I aim to provide a sketch of a subject who has understood something about her own historic culpability in world-ending systems of domination and extraction, but refuses (or fails) to defend her innocence in the face of this knowledge, instead leaning in to an ambivalent comedy that commits to nothing so much as her own finitude.

This essay uses psychoanalytic theory to develop a sense that our proverbial baldness is not just a static fact, but a deeply agitating thing, a thing with a dragging, disintegrating agency. I consider Bridgers's work as an effort to make combovers funny again by revealing, rather than concealing, this corrosive void that no subject can ever close. Bridgers seems to welcome her own disintegration, and, especially in the song "I Know the End," narrates this disintegration as simultaneously intimate, national, and global in scale. Her 'End' is at once an environmental catastrophe, an unbreachable rift in the nation, and a broken heart.

To clarify my definition of the peroxide subject, I consider some writers other than Bridgers. The most prominent of these is another recent apocalyptic pop album from Lorde (Ella Yelich-O'Connor's stage name). *Solar Power* (2021) also addresses a many-layered End, as its narrator—who is

as ambivalent and self-abasing as Bridgers—is "caught in the complex divorce of the seasons" (Yelich-O'Connor 2021, "The Path"): a scandalous dissolution, equally planetary and personal, "of the seasons" like a weather forecast and because it is so pressingly now. My definition of peroxide subjectivity thus accounts for a sentiment increasingly visible in the millennial white feminism popular to the United States and other Anglo settler-colonial contexts such as Yelich-O'Connor's birthplace, Aotearoa/New Zealand. I suggest that peroxide subjectivity is a response to a collision of fates: a reckoning with the idea of end of the world for a subject who, unlike so many, has never been faced with such a thing (has instead been raised with every promise of futurity), and an attempt to reckon with white supremacy for a subject whose politics were likely formed, via 2010s popular feminism, around the idea of themselves as victim rather than perpetrator. This collision is experienced not as a coincidence but as an existential contradiction, even a trap: how do I contribute to climate activism or even social democracy, i.e. projects that might save the world, when I was never innocent, because this land I live on should never have been mine to save, this democracy was designed to protect me at the expense of others, and, regardless of intention, my utterance is likely to contribute to racism?

The peroxide subject responds to this crisis of innocence by calling attention to her own fault, dwelling in her own stuckness, waxing a whole body of words and sounds out of her own seeming inability to be certain of any concept or commit to any action. This would be an apology if she asked forgiveness, and it would be an acknowledgement if it prefaced a statement with any clear meaning, but she would never presume to have enough integrity for either.

My central argument is twofold and somewhat contradictory (the specific terms of contradiction between the two folds will become clear). Firstly, the peroxide subject's insistence on both personal and worldly ruin holds some political promise, especially in terms of the psychoanalytic theory of drive (I will explain this at some length). Secondly, rather than properly denouncing the sociopolitical task of the combover, peroxide functions as a paradoxical and effective version of the combover as Berlant explains it, especially for a white subject. That is, instead of a pretense of wholeness, the property of the self that is presented for recognition in order to ensure the subject's dignity is precisely her indignity, her holeness: but it works. In other words, the peroxide subject is respected by her audience precisely and only because she gives her dignity up.

## Bisexual Post-Irony

> i used to think pain was meaningful
> i no longer think pain is meaningful
> i never learned anything from being unhappy
> i never learned anything from being happy either
> the way i feel about you has nothing to do with learning
> it has nothing to do with anything
> but i feel it down in the corners of my
> sarcophagus
>
> – Hera Lindsay Bird (2018b), *Pyramid Scheme*

*Punisher,* the album that houses the song "I Know the End," was released in June 2020. Bridgers tweeted against the US music industry's move to halt new releases until the Black Lives Matter riots ceased again: "I'm not pushing the record until things go back to 'normal' because I don't think they should. Here it is a little early. Abolish the police. Hope you like it" (@taitorjoe, June 19). On the album, morbid political fantasies such as burying skinheads in the garden collapse into dreams of a future the narrator knows she'll never have (but where she is taller, and has given up some resentment). "I Know the End" folds together a heartbreak with a very American apocalypse: it cites *The Wizard of Oz*, "rap country" radio, lights in the sky that might be UFOs or government drones, and the freeway's kineographic melding of "a slaughterhouse, an outlet mall." Such signifiers of the End are repeated throughout the album, and this repetition creates space for something to happen inside what becomes, as the record spins, a kind of perpetual ending, an ending stuck in a loop. Love is over, the nation is over, life is over (at least as we know it): Bridgers knows this and nothing but this, except that, on a formal level, she can find in the midst of said endings a poetic comedy of pain.

Bridgers learned a humorless poetics of pain from emo, the genre most significant to her 00s Los Angeles youth. Jessica Hopper (2015) describes emo as music from the "armchair comfort of the Clinton era" that swapped punk's "lyrics about the impact of trickle-down economics for ones about elusive kisses" (n.p.). A genre peopled mostly by disaffected suburban white boys, emo, in Karen Tongson's words, "luxuriates in suffering" (2006, 60). Bridgers laughs now about growing up with a "stupid tendency to think that sad people are smarter" (qtd. in Heath 2021), a pose Berlant discusses in relation to a Kevin Spacey-type character whose

Figure 2. Bridgers performing in 2012 with emo band Einstein's Dirty Secret

combover is an "ironic version of the hard truth that life and other people will let you down [...] [.] The disturbance of failed relationality is replaced by an insider knowledge that can be shared with spectator strangers, who in turn [...] enjoy the discomfort of such knowing" (2017, 321). This insider knowledge is emo's key enjoyment, and Tongson considers this centrality of dark feeling to be proof that emo's disavowed but "true contemporary" genres are the equally unfunny dyke punk and what she calls "wounded lesbian balladeering" (the Indigo Girls, etc.). These all "dignif[y] affect and confront structures of repression in a 'home' that functions as a synecdoche for a disaffected nation," and they "opt out of normative time" with their "raw incarnations of arrested development" (2006, 56–62). Bridgers, who was a bassist in the dyke punk band Sloppy Jane as a teenager, reflects a kind of synthesis of these three genres—a blend befitting the mood of late millennials, typically more politicised than the original emos. But having begun in recent years to joke about her younger self's conviction that sadness indexes intelligence (or even is itself a kind of intelligence), Bridgers's emo makes unexpected room for a comedy that emerges at the bleeding edge between sincerity and irony.

The peroxide subject's particular blend of sincerity and irony should be understood as a sequel to emo, the reflexively funny emo 2.0, and, in this mode, Bridgers is not alone. In *Sincerity/Irony,* poet Hera Lindsay Bird critiques the shift from the popular cultural dominance of sarcasm in the 1990s to the early-00s New Sincerity movement's claim that good art is unrelentingly earnest. For Bird, what happens where these modes overlap is more interesting: "I believe it's possible to say 'deep-purple sunset

over the barn and your lover's hand in yours' and mean it, *both ironically and sincerely at once*, in a way that doesn't contradict but instead elevates it, spinning it in a perfect linguistic hyperspace between joke and awe" (2018a).[2] Another popular example is Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* (2016–19), a sitcom whose central misery-comedy strategy is to play with the sensitivity of combover subjectivity: Fleabag, the main character, breaks the fourth wall to send the audience jokes about combover content that nevertheless do not undermine the seriousness of what is happening, such as accidentally removing your shirt in a meeting with a banker, or a sister's terrible haircut. Narrators in these comedies of depression that commit to the not-contradiction of ironic sincerity express detachment in self-deprecating ways that do not hide or lighten the serious feelings also at play. Implicit in this style is a recognition that irony always fails to convey the disinterest it aims for, registering instead wounding in language.

In other words, these comics articulate their pain somewhat obsessively, but by laughing at themselves and their myriad dysfunctions, negating the tendency of many progressive political narratives to dovetail trauma with innocence—or, in Bird's words, quoted above, to "think pain [is] meaningful" (2018b). This muddies the narratives of wounded subjectivity central to identity politics in the West, narratives notably critiqued by Wendy Brown (1993) as binding the subject to her woundedness more than to politics itself, thus inhibiting her aims. Berlant (2000) builds on Brown's work by focusing on how pain is publicly deployed by the "subject of true feeling" to expose "the State's claim of virtuous universality to an acid wash of truth-telling that dissolves its capacity to disavow the comfort of its violence" (34), shifting the weight of virtue to the wounded subject herself. The peroxide subject put bleach to a different use: as acid wash, it reveals as a screen the virtuosity of that very subject. She admits that she "never learned anything from being unhappy," and that she does not care about this failure, because what she cares about now "has nothing to do with learning / but feel[ing] it down in the corners of [her] / sarcophagus," the crypt of deathly desires most ridiculous and most true (Bird 2018b).

Playing with the heaviness of identarian wounds is, partly, a response to a political experience specific to these writers as late millennial white women in Western contexts. Irish novelist Sally Rooney, often considered a figurehead for this group, explains how she became a Marxist:

> I came to politics, as I think a lot of young women do, through feminism, sort of seeing myself at the centre of the political world and believing everything revolved around me and therefore noticing that because I was a woman, gender was a very important political phenom-

2 This line is simultaneously a thesis and an example of the style, making earnest fun of both romance in general and the pose "I believe."

> enon [...] Seeing female independence as being a very important goal of the feminist movement, and just uncritically accepting that idea: the *female individual*, the *independent woman*, as being a sort of political unit that we should strive to emancipate [...] And now I just don't believe that [...] My life is sustained by other people all the time, so to believe in myself as an independent individual is just delusional—I'm not independent. Independent from *what?* (2019)

The disparaging tone and the way that Rooney's story refuses to arrive at a political programme—she has just explained that she is not sure it is possible to write a socialist novel because of how commodified books are, and admitted she is not really trying to—but comes, instead, to a dubious question, typifies the peroxide subject's work. Rooney's specific skepticism about "the female individual" also points to the deeply sexual ambivalence at play in all of this: peroxide comedy's major voices are more likely than not to have depressed accounts of their own queerness, typically as bisexual women much more conflicted about sexual identity than the typical rainbow-bearing LGBTQ subject. You will find no rainbows in this media. As well as Bridgers, Bird, and the titular character of *Fleabag,* this includes various characters in Rooney's novels and their television adaptations, as well as in Hulu show *The Bisexual* (Akhavan 2018) and the recent HBO remake of *High Fidelity* (Kuscerka and West 2020). In these, "bisexuality [is] like climbing out of a burning building..... / into a second identical burning building" (Bird 2016, 48),[3] like being "kind of an omnivore" (Rooney 2017, 36), and can make a person feel like they seem "tacky [...], gauche, [and] disingenuous" (Akhavan 2018, s01e03), one hypervisible foot sadly staid in the straight world with the whole body translucent and wavering in the queer. The peroxide subject's sincere/ironic comedy is suspended in uncertainty, suspended between hard truths (all fires) and soft questions (novel food). Its relationship to identity is compromised at best.

Mixing comedic distance and raw feelings is funny because it reveals—just, as Alenka Zupančič (2008) explains, like classic gags where somebody trips over their own feet—the discontinuity between ego and body, the lag between experience and its signifiers, and the intractable limits of knowing or personal sovereignty. The peroxide subject's sincere irony trips specifically and again and again over knowing that it does not know anything, a not-knowing that it tries to articulate anyway through its dedicated ambivalence. In light of this, one can read Bridgers's *SNL* punk moment as a joke about both the absurdity of the original guitar-smashers and also as a joke about how she sincerely still wanted to try, perhaps already knowing that she would fail.

**3** Note the hesitancy in the ellipsis.

## Driving Out into the Sun

Committing to simultaneously meaning what you say and laughing at your efforts to create meaning poses difficulties for building sure attachments to fantasies like a cohesive political identity, a revolutionary project, or sexual fulfillment. It leaves a person a bit too obviously undetermined, unlike either the stagnant crust of ironic detachment or the flush of earnest passion. In the peroxide subject's work, this undeterminedness finds expression in a kind of dwelling on, with, even in, apocalypse.

Bridgers's "I Know the End" narrates a suspended ending that has been playing on repeat for the whole album (it is the last track). In the first half of the song, the End is the end of a love affair:

> I'm always pushing you away from me
> But you come back with gravity
> And when I call, you come home
> A bird in your teeth.
> But you had to go
> I know I know I know

Returning "with gravity" is a joke because the exchange in this scene takes place on a swing (hence also the "always pushing"), and it speaks also to the serious inevitability of romantic failure, because this is the second time in the album that someone comes to a lover as a dog with a dead bird, a foul offering that still somewhat and somehow endears.[4] In keeping with the bisexual post-ironic's sad and non-rebellious sort of skepticism about coupling, this sad pet is a very different sort of 'third' than the child or the queer figure that, in Lee Edelman's *No Future*, the normative couple produces in a dialectic that negates the would-be shattering negativity at the center of the couple form.[5]

This third is different because the couple wants it but knows it will never feel healed—quite the opposite. In *Fleabag*, similarly, a priest who the protagonist seduces is haunted by a fox. Murderous puppies and following foxes are abject little things, and in both *Fleabag* and *Punisher*, the lovers half-laugh at their canine spectre and concede that they were always ruined.

The "I Know the End" breakup gives way to an apocalyptic dream, as "I know I know I know" repeats so that it collapses the lover's going with the world's end. The repetition also unsettles the phrase "I know" so that one wonders to what extent the narrator really does "Know the End," or whether knowing is even involved:

**4** First in the album it's the singer who has the bird, in "Moon Song": "So I will wait for the next time / You want me / Like a dog with a bird at your door [...] / When you saw the dead little bird / You started crying / But you know the killer doesn't understand."

**5** See Brilmyer et al for a numerological analysis of this dynamic.

So I gotta go
I know I know I know
When the sirens sound you'll hide under the floor
But I'm not gonna go down with my hometown in a tornado
I'm gonna chase it
I know I know I know.

I gotta go now
I know I know I know.

[major lift to the bridge signals departure from the love scene]

Driving out into the sun
Let the ultraviolet cover me up
Went looking for a creation myth
Ended up with a pair of cracked lips

This is a "hero's journey," Bridgers explains in an interview, about a person bravely facing apocalypse when "all [her] friends too scared to leave would be in bunkers" (as cited in Genius Lyrics, 2020). The apocalypse is the sun—the irony of our time, that the genesis star is burning it all up—and driving out to it is "like Icarus shit," she says in the same interview; you're all bold "then you just get scorched." So a suicidal hero maybe, if the 2020 Icarus is a pasty Californian lacking in survival instinct. "I'm super super white," Bridgers continues, "and every time I go into the sun, it's just like, *poison*." She grins as she says this, befitting the long-term devotion to poison her hairstyle represents. That is, her grin befits what is really peroxidal *love* for the End, not a knowledge of it.

In the aftershocks of romantic love, US politics, and environmental security all falling apart, the End comes to Bridgers in the song's bridge as a strange semblance of sociality:

Windows down, scream along
To some America first rap country song
A slaughterhouse, an outlet mall
Slot machines, fear of God

Windows down, heater on
Big bolts of lightning hanging low

Over the coast, everyone's convinced
It's a government drone or an alien spaceship

Either way, we're not alone

This "we're not alone" is a sad person giving a sarcastically hearty wink, albeit one that is a kind of dialectical response to the disastrous contradictions Bridgers describes; in other words, a response that doesn't resolve anything so much as affirm that this is all simultaneously true. Just as the sun rises, the dog will return, and "I Know" repeats, the song approaches its end by chanting "the end is here," a declaration reiterated until it wills the End into being. (On one level it succeeds, by closing the album: joke.) This is a good example of Zupančič's (2008) argument that, because of comedy's penchant for mechanistically repetitive failures from which something like life emerges, comedy is a good introduction to the psychoanalytic concept of the death drive, which is also constitutively repetitive. Neither comedy nor drive is satiated by conclusion or by obtaining any object sought, but finds moments of surplus pleasure with its ceaseless turning. In another book *What Is Sex?*, Zupančič (2017) contradicts a common understanding that the drive is anathema to life, and that we live full lives only with the triumph of at least one other instinct (i.e. Eros). She argues, rather, that the drive is the only thing that ensures that we die (and thus, live) in a way that is not biologically or culturally predetermined. In other words, the drive ensures our measure of freedom; freedom is a kind of side-effect of the drive, ensuring that every person dies in their own way. The drive ensures freedom because it is the impress of what is expelled from the symbolic order, the impress of what the social and political world demands a person bury in the process of becoming a subject; it is that hole underneath the combover, a hole with considerable force. Peroxide, making hair shine by stripping out the substance of all its pigment, is a good representative of drive understood so: both are corrosive, murderous, in/organic agencies that are also—incidentally and paradoxically but nevertheless—generative.

Indeed, Berlant's work on combover subjectivity can be understood as a catalogue of ways in which the drive is hampered in everyday life by the desire to be recognised by other people the way we want to be: a combover as a device that stifles the drive. As Andrea Long Chu (2019) describes in *Females* (a book notably steeped in tragicomic ambivalence), our proverbial hairlessness makes us vessels for the desires of other people, a universal ontological condition Chu calls *femaleness* because, though universal, society ascribes this condition of emptiness with the

designation "female." Understood thus, the combover function could be considered as a device of banal misogyny. This chimes with a range of analytical projects that understand structural violence to be produced wherever a type of person in a society is forced to represent the negativity that everyone tries to deny in themselves, as "females" are in Chu's account of patriarchy, and as happens in a myriad other contemporary and historic ways.[6] The drive's negativity insists on universal brokenness and will always be opposed to normative forms of life, especially all those that deny that the world has (that many worlds have) already ended.

As a peroxide subject, Bridgers thus gives something like a comedy of the drive and, as she loops and lags through each song and each fractal layer of The End, a cataclysm with an unusual temporality. Most ideas of apocalypse are teleologically deferred, as Oxana Timofeeva (2014) argues: we project catastrophe onto the future for essentially the same reason that we construct combovers, i.e. because we cannot accept negativity—or in Timofeeva's words, we cannot accept that "we are all already dead," that "it's not going to get worse, it's already worse." Indeed, at the risk of oversimplifying the difference between the subject and the social, projecting apocalypse onto some vague and often distant future functions like a combover for the world itself, intended to make the present (and past) iterations of 'world' seem whole. And for Timofeeva, deferring apocalypse is bad politics because visions of future disaster preclude recognition of the world-destruction both present and past. Timofeeva advocates for a "catastrophic communism" (2014) that knows and can thus respond to the fact that the End(s) have happened and are right now happening. Catastrophic communism could be seen as a radical politics of the drive, a politics that refuses to see climate change as unique but recognises it as an instance in an imperial apocalyptic series, demands to-death action, and, seeing combovers for what they are on a subjective level also, shirks the popular demand to found itself on identity (thus making innocence or lack thereof irrelevant).

By this logic, Bridgers's looping End could be a good rendering of how to relate to apocalypse in a radical way, if not communist in any clear sense, simply because although Bridgers voices a subject who cannot find a political language not premised on innocence, she makes the End perpetually present. In order to test this idea, I want to turn briefly to another example of peroxide subjectivity in popular music. Lorde's *Solar Power* is also a self-deprecating satire that takes up the sun as the central image of a dying world (Yelich-O'Connor 2021), with the slight but significant difference that its narrator does not consistently embrace her demise or consistently commit to what I have (tongue-in-cheek) dubbed bisexual

**6** For some diverse examples of thinking on this structure, especially as it connects with racism, including but not limited to anti-Blackness and the Afropessimist critique, see: Benedicto 2019; Brilmyer et al 2019; Edelman 2004; Hayward 2014; Stanley 2011.

post-irony. When Lorde sings about sunburn, as Bridgers does ("let the ultraviolet swallow me up"), she says "wearing SPF 3000 for the ultraviolet rays [...] I'm gunna live out my days" (Yelich-O'Connor 2021, "Leader of a New Regime"). Sunscreen here is a kind of inverted twin of peroxide, nominally a shield rather than a poison, but a paste one imagines to be suffocating were it thick enough to score an SPF in the thousands. This befits a public health problem from Yelich-O'Connor's context: some Aotearoa/New Zealand doctors claim that an epidemic of rickets in children has been caused by people overusing sunscreen due to their fear of a hole in the ozone layer over the South Pacific. Here sunscreen is a concealing balm that just harms in a new way.

This sense that the subject is doomed by her own survival efforts, as much as by anything planetary, characterises *Solar Power* as a whole. On face value, the album is typical of Euro-American utopic solar expression—aestheticised in accordance with solarpunk works, for instance, which Rhys Williams (2019) describes as literally glowing visions of future solar-centric worlds imagined to provide a kind of bountiful equality. The first video single, for the title track, is bathed in light: there are acoustic guitars, and people dressed in linen commune on beaches for yogic rituals and skip fully-dressed into the sea (Kefali and Yelich-O'Connor, 2021a). The album's chief influences are 1970s psychedelic folk and the golden-midriff figures of early 00s pop—All Saints, TLC, S Club 7—and thematically it is about "breath[ing] out and tun[ing] in" (Yelich-O'Connor 2021, "Oceanic Feeling"), about throwing one's phone in the sea and connecting with family. But besides all this halcyon nostalgia and lite spirituality, Lorde seems, as reviewer Carl Wilson (2021) writes, to "smell the rot." The album alternates between all its light and a malaise mostly expressed through a parody of contemporary wellness culture:

> Ladies, begin your sun salutations
> Pluto in Scorpio generation (*love and light*)
> You can burn sage, and I'll cleanse the crystals
> We can get high, but only if the wind blows (*...just ri-ri-ri-right*)

In commentary on the record, she calls "love and light" a "psychotic phrase" (as cited in GeniusLyrics 2021). The song "Dominoes" pinions a man for "go[ing] all New Age" with the celebrated burn: "it's strange to see you smoking marijuana / you used to do the most cocaine of anyone I'd ever met." And in the *Solar Power* video, solar power itself is a kind of cannabinoid (Kefali and Yelich-O'Connor 2021a). Lorde takes a hit from a

bong made of a fennel root before she sings the album's most percussive and memorable line, "blink three times when you feel it kicking in: that solar power."

But even though that first video features lyrics such as "I'm kinda like a prettier Jesus," the fennel bong, and a moment where she skips past a pile of trash on the beach and mimes "ssshh" (finger to her lips), the satire initially failed to register to most listeners. An exception to this was Auckland-based writer Sam Te Kani (2021), whose review of the single calls out "the public's apparent inability to register [this as a] dead-pan satire [...] in which Ms. Lorde riffs on a tongue in cheek aestheticising of the global party-line that's cast [New Zealand] as an Atlantean paradise under the leadership of a benevolent empress." In other words, the prettier Jesus is Jacinda Ardern. And in *Mood Ring* video, it's Gwyneth Paltrow, who Lorde mocks by wearing a platinum wig while she and a clique of thin white women she calls "all the sad girls" burn sage in a calico tent, pour chia seeds between shallow wooden bowls, lay about in loose silks (Kefali and Yelich-O'Connor 2021b). She sings: "let's fly somewhere Eastern, they'll have what I need."

The audience's failure to distinguish this as satire is largely thanks to the sincerity that keeps interrupting it. That is, Lorde, much more than any other peroxide subject, admits that she mourns her loss of innocence. This is most conspicuous in a 2021 promotional video sponsored by *Vogue,* where she performs her apocalyptic lament "Fallen Fruit" after a throaty cover of Britney Spears's 2007 song "Break the Ice." This is also kind of a tribute performance to Britney's 2021 emancipation: Lorde wears red tights and a matching bra, in homage to Spears's iconic pleather jumpsuit from the *Oops!...I Did it Again* video (Dick 2000). Before an intimate, questing camera, Lorde moves with the brittleness of someone who feels uncomfortable but is nonetheless committing to sexualised movement, even overcommitting, slightly, as compensation for the discomfort. The performance reveals the gulf of time and mood between the two artists, the elder of whom was probably the first millennial popstar in the West, while Lorde, at age 25, is the last.[7] Spears, via Lorde, sings:

> I'ma hit defrost on ya, let's get it blazin'
> We can turn the heat up if ya wanna
> Turn the lights down low if ya wanna
> Just wanna move ya, but you froze up
> [...]

**7** This is the "Pluto in Scorpio generation" Lorde calls out in *Mood Ring*: according to Western astrology, those born between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s.

Let me break the ice
Allow me to get you right
Once ya warm up to me
Baby, I can make you feel *hot, hot, hot, hot*

By casting back to a time in which "break the ice" could not be punned to sound apocalyptic, Lorde narrates the history in which young Spears's famous lyric "I'm not that innocent" turned out to be mistaken. Arguably, the chief complaint of 2020–1's #FreeBritney campaign is precisely this loss of innocence, given the revelation that her innocence was all along a smokescreen for the Father's captivity and design, and is thus a loss that Spears's career tracks: "we had no idea the dreams we had were far too big," Lorde sings ("Fallen Fruit").

So instead of delivering every line with equal seriousness and humour, as Bridgers does, Lorde seesaws between the modes, and the overall effect is confusing. This confusion is reflected in the album's press coverage, which emphasises that—beside all the album's jokes about white millennials trying to return to nature—Lorde really has set her phone to greyscale to make it less addictive, deleted social media, and spent more time outside. At the end of "Mood Ring" she sings: "watch the sun set, look back on my life / I just wanna know, will it be alright." In an interview seemingly designed to clarify that the song is satirical, she also describes this line as her own voice chiming with the blond Paltrow caricature (as cited in GeniusLyrics 2021). And finally, as if her position had not yet been ambiguous enough, in June 2022, she dyed her once-iconic dark hair the exact blond of the *Mood Ring* wig.

It is tempting to argue that Lorde's interest in surviving the apocalypse—that is, her failure to commit to a comedy of the drive—makes her a more conservative figure than Bridgers. This argument would reflect a sense that Lorde's work is more drawn to cliches, less reflexive about its solipsism, and selectively deaf or indifferent to its likely reception. Such a critique also matches the accusations of cultural appropriation levelled at Lorde's decision to release a 6-song EP version of *Solar Power* in the Māori language, under the title *Te Ao Mārama* (meaning not "solar power" but "the world of light"). The original English-language had already made conspicuous a settler-colonial attitude: in the *Fallen Fruit* music video (Kefali and Yelich-O'Connor, 2021c), Lorde looks at a distinctly Aotearoa/New Zealand foreshore, framed in a long shot from behind her so as to capture the landscape as beheld by white eyes, in the tradition of settler cinema. In this pose, she sings: "how can I love what I know I'm going to

lose? / don't make me choose," her voice rising pleadingly. To lose something requires first having it, and looking at this place while she sings this line implies that what she possesses is this colonised beach, and she wants, in spite of what she understands about imperialism (remember "let's fly somewhere Eastern"), to keep it.

Bridgers is so thoroughly bleached it would be very difficult to accuse her of appropriation. She also feels dislocated from place: where Lorde still wants the stolen land on which she was born, Bridgers in "I Know the End" sings "I'll find a new place to be from / A haunted house with a picket fence / To float around and ghost my friends." She presents an image of home as only existing beyond the grave, and an image with characteristically incongruous cuteness. Comparing her with Lorde makes it possible to frame Bridgers's comedy with a paradoxical kind of logic: Bridgers is more successful at failing to create meaning. In other words, in being fully committed to meaning everything at once and thus nothing, no (one) thing, Bridgers departs from content in favour of a formal ambivalence so complete it is a form itself: a split form—sincerity/irony—no less readable for its splitness. Lorde is unable or unwilling to consistently produce any particular sort of content or form.

Epitomising this difference is Bridgers's embrace of the end as compared to Lorde's albeit doomed interest in survival. Lorde's interest persists in the face of apocalyptic knowledge and seems to require a renewal of settler-colonial possession, a sorry return that Freud would describe as the turning-outward of her death drive: in *Civilization and its Discontents,* Freud (1962) writes that the externalisation of drive in the form of aggression (or, here, settler possessiveness) is what dooms every society to violence, so this move from Lorde could be considered a comedian of the drive after all. This makes it worth noting that the two artists are collaborators: Bridgers provided backing vocals on nearly half the *Solar Power* record. Te Kani (2021) registers Lorde's ambiguity as something of an achievement: "It's not like Ella whatever-her-last-name-is has presented herself as an overtly political figure to date—no wee feat considering this climate of compulsive virtue signalling." Yelich-O'Connor concurs: "I'm not a climate activist, I'm a pop star. I stoke the fire of the giant machine, spitting out emissions as I go. There is a lot I don't know" (as cited in Snapes, 2021). To succeed at non-meaning, or to fail at it: is there any real distinction between these, as reflections of the drive, as ways of relating to apocalypse, i.e. as politics?

## Peroxide as Combover

"Hope everyone's enjoying their apocalypse," Bridgers says cheerfully, standing behind the desk of a very two-dimensional Oval Office: a cheap green screen setup, as if for a comedy skit. This is her September 2020 NPR *Tiny Desk* (*Home*) *Concert*. She wears a skirt-suit that would be presidential if it was not so grey—instead it seems she's bringing a precociously washed-out Lynchian realtor into her sartorial repertoire—and her bandmates look like bodyguards in black ties and Aviator sunglasses. She plays a couple of nice songs, and then before the major lift to the "driving out" line in "I Know the End" (always the last song of the set), she switches off the political stage to finish with just the green sheet hanging behind her, framed mostly from the side by a shaky handicam so you can see the edges of the screen, pegs and all.

American politics is propped up by nothing but its own image and in the *I Know the End* video, the drive is depicted as running through the night rather than driving at the sun, what seems to be a perpetual night in brutalist concrete spaces with a surfeit of dystopian signatures (grey stone buildings; long corridors with those replaceable MDF ceiling tiles that always have brown stains; prison-like uniforms and zombie-like uniformity of movement; and, the most contemporary dystopian image, empty arenas). Everything is a bit backwards—she is wearing her skeleton suit in the bath at the beginning—and her running articulates a distorted lifepath: before she sets off, Bridgers is handed the apple of knowledge by her younger self, a dirty blond child; she takes a bite, drops the apple, marches out of a concrete compound that might once have been a grand government building, and runs onto a baseball pitch, where her band is. With a socially distanced handful of robotic inmates as an audience, she starts thrashing her guitar for the song's cascading end. The musicians all wear the signature Halloween-style skeleton suits, and one of the guitarists has a platinum wig, too: a Bridgers copy and reference to an earlier video, *Scott Street* (Lill 2018), in which a motley crew of people dress as her and bash a piñata that also looks like her. At the end of *Scott Street*, you notice Bridgers is one of the clones in this crowd, both self-negating and overcommitted to her aesthetic.

In the middle of the zombie audience at the end of *I Know the End*, an elderly white woman dances, having somehow avoided zombification, and after playing her last few bars of distorted guitar, Bridgers runs to her. They grab each other's faces and begin to scream gutturally, triggering a sequence of jump cuts to pans though the haunted stadium as Bridgers yells into the face of her death, a figure whose hair is the same colour as

the present-day but because of age (peroxide kills). Then, as the music fades, we hear a choked whisper that sounds also like faraway crowd screaming, and the shot blacks out for a moment, flashing back to reveal that the white-haired pair's embrace has become a long kiss that blinks in and out of visibility as though under a police searchlight (see Figure 1, page 1). The kiss is a comic tribute to a sodomitical self that knows it can't be healed, the record's anti-signifying yell routed into visibility through this masturbatory double.

"Apocalypse" in its old form means 'revelation' or 'unveiling.' This etymology implies that the End actually precedes something else, a lifting of a screen. Bridgers reveals that running to the End, at least for her, secures her bond with the one thing she knows for sure, which is also the one thing she always had and can always have: her death. This peroxidal attachment to doom is in many respects a kind of anti-combover. Bridgers embraces indignity and revels in the worldly fault of both politics and love. Naturally she does not articulate her project as one of embracing negativity or drive, but her gesturing towards it gives form to an optimism that almost, or to the extent that any artist could, takes negativity itself as a love object.

In *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Berlant and Edelman 2013), Lee Edelman gets close to endorsing this by claiming that a "fantasy of breaking fantasy down" is the only solution to the problem of hetero-/homonormative sexual optimism (87). Sexual optimism, which this book writes as almost interchangeable with 'fantasy' in the psychoanalytic sense, is a problem because it always negates negativity. Edelman acknowledges that having a fantasy of breaking fantasy down is a contradiction and commits to it anyway, perhaps thinking that the irony of both his acknowledging this and his position regarding fantasy make both radical; irony, for Edelman, has a "corrosive force" against the symbolic order, because that order that relies on language to mean what it says (2004, 23). He acknowledges that there is no way of relating to a political vision or even to other people except via the optimistic structure of fantasy, but insists on a project of destroying fantasy anyway, an all-in commitment to the antipolitical thesis of his *No Future* and a kind of theoretical cheat. Forgetting that irony is a form in and of itself—that irony, too, can be read—Edelman appears as something like the Spaceyesque figure Berlant (2017) studies, for whom irony is a kind of last-ditch defence against a sincerity that irony reveals in spite of the speaker's wish to appear uninvested.

This makes the peroxide mode look a little better: because the subject knows that everything she could say is readable also for what it might contrarily reveal about her, she is armed by nothing at all against her ambi-

valent love of her nothing, a love whose comic double-vision brings her closer to an exhibition of holey subjectivity than Edelman's anti-fantasy. The peroxide subject knows that she does not know what to do or what to think, knows that pessimism always betrays the subject as optimistic on a formal level, knows that all she has is her nothing, but knows also (as opposed to Edelman) that the nothing is not getting her anywhere and is thus terribly funny—funny and terrible—and a little embarrassing, like knowing you're too weak to smash a guitar but trying to be punk anyway.

## Conclusion

As the *I Know the End* video indicates, Bridgers has, in the End, her death, and this she shares with her audience. When, after the green screen cracks in the NPR Tiny Desk concert, the "end is here" chant starts, and little phone-in videos of people singing along appear, dotted around Bridgers and her band. There's tension in all the faces as the fans wait for the song to build to the catharsis of bellowing into the void left by US national politics. This devoted echo is sure to be part of the reason Bridgers's fame has risen in the time since. *Punisher* was lauded upon its release for supposedly predicting the major events of 2020 in the US (especially the pandemic and Black Lives Matter resurgence). In the tweet releasing it, Bridgers cheered at BLM rioters to keep going because she loves a burning world. Her interest in staying with disintegration—which is an attachment to the End, not a prophecy about it—has earned her a reputation as a "voice of a generation" (Moreland 2020). Bridgers offers her fans a scream to repeat, choked by its comic ambivalence but, as a choked thing, not hampered in the least, because it wins Bridgers public esteem just as well as any combover.

Apparent in the work of Bridgers and Lorde—as well as the various other contemporaries I mentioned, including Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Sally Rooney, and Hera Lindsay Bird—is a strain of feminist cultural production founding itself on an insistent not-knowing. This is noteworthy, as most feminisms have been premised on expanding knowledge. In Second Wave 'consciousness raising,' the most relevant example, the expansion of knowledge was also a project to make trauma politically useful, which contributed in turn to the overvaluation of what Berlant (2000) calls the "subject of true feeling," establishing the virtue of her pain as guarantee for her rights as a citizen. A true reaction to this, the peroxide subject's not-knowing is intended as an insistence on her guilt, and so it is also a kind of rejection of citizenship. The result could be understood as a kind


Figure 3: Bridgers performing for NPR Tiny Desk (Home) Concert in September 2020

of *juxtapolitics*, Berlant's (2007) term for cultural projects that sit beside politics as such, the prefix *juxta* indicating both *close to* and *in contrast to*. Juxtapolitical culture is so not because its subjects have no stake in politics, but because they have given up on its terms of engagement. None of this erodes the dominance of white women in feminist popular culture; in fact, in this context, the peroxide subject's wilful falling out of (political) life perhaps ensures that dominance better than anything else could.

There is of course nothing new about the reification of white feminine dominance in cultural production. Indeed, the cases I consider and my focus on peroxide as a literal whitening technology call for a more sustained analysis of the peroxide subject as a specifically white, Anglo, and settler-colonial creature, even a contemporary twist on the age-old white supremacist casting of elite women as beacons of cultural purity. Such an analysis would frame peroxide subjectivity as a response to myriad contemporary Indigenous resistance movements, Black Lives Matter, racialised migrant crises, and the rise of neo-Nazism; it would argue that the peroxide subject replaces the wash of virginal/motherly purity that has historically glossed the white woman with a caustic melanin-dissolving agent that binds her to (her own) toxicity but nonetheless still beautifies, so that, in offering up her nothing, the peroxide subject loses nothing, gives nothing up, indeed is met with popular ascendancy. This is indeed happening, and it has an even more definitely white supremacist risk wherever the peroxide subject frames her own hole-ness as an actual property of whiteness—one can sometimes detect hints of in this in or around the work I have considered—as though racialised people are the new bearers of virtue, and whites have exclusive possession of indignity. Indignity must

be universal. This paper is a case study in a particular sort of depressive white femininity as one modality in which a subject meets the revelation of her own culpability and shelter and, faced also with the universals of her primary masochism, impotence, and already-brokenness, chooses to surrender. If her indignity can be praised as universal, this all might not preclude a broader popular shift to privileging subjective fault over subjective innocence, which is no minor event in this climate of compulsive virtue signalling.

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