Suturing “The TV Studies Sutras”

Headnote

Dodie Bellamy’s *The TV Sutras* is a dividual book of unequal parts: (1) seventy-eight sutras, transcriptions of language heard in television broadcasts, which are accompanied by commentaries that gloss them, followed by (2) a long personal essay, describing itself sometimes as a novel, in which Bellamy writes her first extended, confessional account of the ten years that she was “lost” in a cult. The essay is also (pardon, as you will see, the pun) a meditation on the interval between Bellamy’s time in the cult and her life now in San Francisco — and what it positions her to philosophize about some ideas that we have likewise encountered in *Television Scales* (charisma, complexity), some that have yet to enjoy the same level of attention (sincerity, the master con).

Sincerity, and the possibility that it is painfully cringe-worthy, is also explored in Bellamy’s short headnote, “The Source of the Transmission,” which follows the first part of the book’s epigraph (Krishnamurti: “*Truth is a pathless land*” — but a *Pathless* one?) and precedes the sutras themselves.¹ That headnote’s admission of the risk of sincerity culminates a paragraph that

begins with Bellamy’s explanation of how she composed the book’s first part:

In receiving the *tv Sutras*, I attuned myself to messages that are broadcast into the living room of my San Francisco apartment. My method: I do a half-hour yoga set while watching the DVD *Peaceful Weight Loss through Yoga*. Then I turn off the DVD player and TV, sit cross-legged on the floor, facing the television, and meditate for twenty minutes. [...] When I finish meditating, I crawl off my cushion and turn the TV back on. Words and images emerge. There’s a flash of recognition and my hand scribbles furiously: I transcribe the first words that strike me, then briefly I describe the scene from which the TV sutra arose. I take a breath, scoot against the wall and quickly write my commentary. Sometimes my interpretation surprises me. Sometimes I disagree with it. But I write down whatever comes. I do not attempt irony, cleverness or perfection—or art. The *TV Sutras* are totally in-the-moment sincere, even if that sincerity makes me cringe afterwards.²

As the reader turns from this headnote to the sutras and commentaries, she will, *pace* the headnote’s apologia, find moments of evident irony, cleverness, and artfulness, as well as passages that seem unvarnished: sincere without putting *sincere* in scare-quotes. Is Bellamy, then, trying to con us in the headnote when she says that the sutras are “totally in-the-moment sincere”? And how can we tell?

These questions are not quite meant to be answered, because Bellamy’s overall strategy in *The TV Sutras*—of which the first instance in the headnote is a synecdochic representative—is to leave us globally uncertain about truth’s relationship to fiction, not just locally uncertain regarding sincerity and its obversions. Beyond their sincerity or its occlusion, were the sutras actually composed according to the method that Bellamy describes? Was she really in a cult for ten years, or is the seemingly memoiristic

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² Ibid., 14.
essay that comprises the book’s second part a wholesale fabrication? Again, Bellamy is canny and deliberative about wanting—at least a first-time—reader of the book not to be able to make conclusive answers to these questions during the phenomenal, beat-to-beat reading of the book (and hopefully, I believe she would aver, its charisma will seduce the reader to read the book in one sitting without putting it down). If, afterward, that reader discovered online an essay-length exposé that Bellamy wrote, some time earlier than *The TV Sutras*, about the cult Eckankar, then it would be a short walk from that discovery to a set of “keys” for reading the essay: the unnamed cult of the essay is indeed an account of Eckankar, or ECK; the cult leader whom the essay’s narrator describes as her “Master” closely matches other accounts of Eckankar’s Darwin Gross, who was eventually forced out of his leadership role in the cult; Gross released an album called *It Just Is!*—rendered as *The Sound of Spirit* in the essay; a high-ranking member of the cult, Neva Novak, who claims to hail from Jupiter, appears in the essay as a translation of ECK’s Omnec Onec, who claims to hail from Venus; and on and on. Yet, fascinating a rabbit-hole as this one is to slide down, that eventual sliding takes nothing away from, and is perhaps wrongheadedly at odds with, the end toward which Bellamy is driving the uncertainties and instabilities that animate her text: namely, to give us a sensorial and affective experience of, and not just a didactic argument about, what it feels like to flip and flop inside a con…that maybe isn’t a con…but that *must* be a con…but that isn’t, right?

In this way, what Bellamy demonstrates, indeed theatricalizes, about cults (and, as she makes plain, cults as one period-specific manifestation of what she takes all religions to do) connects her estimation of them, much less partially than, say, puns on *transmission* and *receiver*, to estimations we may likewise make about television. Television, like religious or cult teaching, is full of banality, clichés, and lies; television, like those teachings, blends fact and fiction uneasily; yet television and such teaching also have in common seductive appeals and, harder for one to swallow when one is committed to critique, conditional ac-
cess to truth and poignancy. So, too, Bellamy, as she well understands by using television words and images in the first place, and as she figures herself authorially in the book’s first part. There, in the complex swirl of tones that animate the sutras and their commentaries—sutured together at times with delicate humor, pulsing at times with gestures toward barely submerged or displaced critique—Bellamy gives us truth and lie, banal cliché and poignant moments. And she does so charmingly.

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Like Bellamy’s own headnote, this one frames a series of writings, “The TV Studies Sutras,” that I have produced in homage to her. Every day for a month in 2018, I meditated for twenty minutes in the afternoon. Next I turned to some work in television studies, flipping pages quickly and scanning words without overthinking until I alighted on the passage that announced itself to me as the day’s sutra. Then I wrote the accompanying commentaries to which the sutras are sutured, likewise quickly and without overthinking. They now follow this headnote’s final cut, and they will in their turn be followed by (once more, pardon the pun) a meditation on cuts: as sutures, and as formal elements that, among other partially connective qualities, unite Bellamy and Strathern.

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1 September 1, 2018

Sutra

“In all developed broadcasting systems the characteristic organisation, and therefore the characteristic experience, is one of sequence or flow. This phenomenon, of planned flow, is then
perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form.”

Commentary
Unlike in meditation, to go with the flow of television is to be insufficiently critical. Television should be read as closely — and as broadly — as television studies is read: here, notice the simultaneity of flow’s structuring of technology, irreducibly complex at one scale, and of cultural form, irreducibly complex at another. As with the broadcasting phenomenon, which may be paradoxically, simultaneously scale-slipping and scale-maintaining, so too the work of the word *simultaneously* here, which asks us at once to appreciate the distinction in order and register of technology and of cultural form and to conceptualize the fractal coincidence of flow’s organization of each of these elements of television.

September 2, 2018

Sutra
“The usual episodic character of television only gives the illusion of continuity by offering series consisting of twenty-six individual units. The series may continue over a period of years, revolving around the actions of a set of regular characters. As pointed out, however, there is no sense of continuous involvement with these characters. They have no memory. They cannot change in response to events that occur within a weekly installment, and consequently they have no history.”

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Commentary

Have the classic characters of sitcoms, procedurals, Westerns, and the like been conferred the slippery gift to which the student of meditation aspires, perpetually? Being in the now, wholly of the moment, do they enact pure consciousness without having to intone their mantras? Or what but degraded mantras are these series’ incessantly repeated gestures, facial mugs, gag lines, tag lines, and catchphrases? Like the lure of transcendence, they promise to take us “to the moon!” Yet we hear the violence in that promise, the threat that it really constitutes, coming at it from the dark side of the moon: remembering, tending histories, not occcluding ourselves at the foreshortened scale of the episode but cultivating the expanded, serial life.

3
September 3, 2018

Sutra

“Television is itself a major agency for the daily enactment of that ‘common co-existence of cleavage and continuity’. Its modes of presentation are derived from both dominant and subordinate codes, and the tension between different sectors of society is actually enacted—not so much in the denotative content of the messages as in the way those messages are presented.”

Commentary

Cleavage may be contrasted with continuity. Yet, corrugated and involute, a cleavage may itself be understood as dividual: a cleavage from something and, at the same time, a cleavage to that thing. In cleaving to and from television, do we subordinate ourselves to it, and are we also trying to dominate it? What is the mode of our enactments before, behind, and beyond screens? Tensile in my sensate engagements with television, I may appear

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quite still as I tune in — maybe even as still as the meditator also tuning in to one frequency or another — yet my inner eye could be a major agency, moving across different scales of encodement as if moving across different sectors of an (inevitably) classed, capitalist society.

4
September 4, 2018

Sutra
“Even bestsellers reaching several million readers touch only a small percentage of the total population. If the scale of magnitude by which television audiences are measured were applied to these bestsellers, even they would not rate publication, let alone serious novels and books of poetry or philosophy, which sell in numbers too small to be noticeable on the scale used for TV audiences.”

Commentary
When the scale-upsetting multiplication of television forces, forms, and forums rhymes with their fragmentation and dispersal, a de-scaling of the expectations for popularity and the metrics for success also obtains. Out of the Bunker, into the niche. If we can no longer speak or write of “the age of television” as an era defined saturatingly and saturatedly by television as technology and as cultural form, but rather must reckon with the age of television as its slides ever further into its lateness and belatedness, we can also look to ageing television for vital poetry and lively philosophy — as well as for the a-poetic and the anti-philosophical. But we can look backward, too, carefully opening our eyes wider and wider, as we are blasted forward with thunderous speed; and if, so looking, we examine forgotten corners and forlorn crevices of television past and television passed, what

missed poetry and mistook philosophy will we comprehend was in the tube all along, waiting to be filtered from the static?

Sutra
“Twice a week, three times a week, five times a week, the familiar signature tune alerts us to the fact that the serial is about to begin. It does not disappear ‘until the autumn’ or ‘until the next series’.”

Commentary
Waiting for autumn to come — and, with it, first the bursts of color and then the falling of the leaves — I am already mournful for all the canceled serials of my youth. Like sophisticated rulers, they measured the intricate passage of time, its weathers and its whethers. The rock star asks in her signature tune, “Can I handle the seasons of my life,” and I picture her addressing the dozens of suffering serial women parading across the screen. The Seasons of My Life would make a splendid name for the kind of programming that is no longer commissioned for American daytime television — and from which the under-acknowledged borrowings are so wholly yet etheareally diffused across the primetime landscape that they are impossible to map. Without the ruler of yesteryear, without the impossible map, we prick our ears and hope to hear, as if falling from the sky, the strains of some familiar, comforting song.

Sutra

“Fantasy is therefore a fictional area which is relatively cut off and independent. It does not function in place of, but beside, other dimensions of life (social practice, moral or political consciousness). It is a dimension of subjectivity which is a source of pleasure because it puts ‘reality’ in parentheses, because it constructs imaginary solutions for real contradictions which in their fictional simplicity and their simple fictionality step outside the tedious complexity of the existing social relations of dominance and subordination.”

Commentary

“I look at you, and I fantasize: you’re mine tonight,” I could sing in time with the terrible— which is to say, delightful— music video, if you would mean the light of the TV screen and mine would mean immersion in its glow. Could a version of immersion be achieved, so fantastically pleasurable and pleasingly fantasmatic, that I would really feel cut off, hovering in another dimension? In that suture, the irreducible complexity of existing social relations would have no place or space. And place itself would be nothing more than the only vaguely discernible location of a breath; space would liquefy into dimly perceptible color and sound. Floating into entrancement would not count me a feminist, but it also would not count against me in return to “reality” (is it “really” in parentheses, or does its literal scare-quoting, not identical with parenthetical aside-making, bracket it in some other, relative way?).

Sutra
“The network anchor is a very special variety of star — subdued, constructed through reduction and simplification, and authorized to speak the truth. The influence of the ‘evening star’ seems personal, but it is really positional.”

Commentary
Decades ago, television studies found rightly needful the imperative to identify technical, cultural, and ideological constructions, to trace their contours with great care and detail so that, grasped thus, they could be grappled with. The study of television still needs versions of this work, but now the work must proceed in the baleful context in which the best journalists lack deserved support, while the worst leaders’ cults are full of passionate followers. I wish reality television had been given a different name — and one more aggressively sutured from reality than “reality” in scare quotes. Along with the wish, a hope: that it is not narcissistic to have just read and taken solace from some of my own writing about where and when a positional- ity may take on the character of an oppositionality. An astute friend takes to social media to rebrand and recast the creepiest cult guru of them all, the one about whom we hear that he hates dogs, as the “abuser in chief”; while a gag gift from my mother-in-law, a tea towel, is emblazoned with the catchphrase, “My cat would make a better president.” That is a fact.

Sutra
“For many intellectuals historically leery of entertaining machines of pleasure, TV is just too banal an object. Or, when faced with television, their response is akin to Jack Gould’s comment (quoted by Boddy) that after one episode of a quiz show or a Western, he had nothing else to say. The aim of this book is ‘to change the object itself,’ transforming TV into a theoretical object.”

Commentary
When regarded from the right angles and for the right aspects, television is an eminently, stunningly theoretical object. It opens itself up, then, not for banal theory but for the theorization of banality, as well as for theoretically inflected challenges to the supposed banality of its objecthood. Hear the words entertaining machines of pleasure two ways: machines of pleasure are entertaining; and we should make time and space to entertain machines of pleasure, thereby understanding their circuits, levers, gears, and coils. All of those descriptors may be taken literally, metaphorically, or both at once. And television may be taken not only for its objecthood but also for its generative subjecthood. Whether pleasurably, painfully, or otherwise — and transformatively, ever — it emits, it implants, it installs. We come to it, and it becomes us.

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Sutra
“Requiring upper middle class status as a mark of normalcy creates a world that forces black viewers to accept a value system in which they are the inevitable losers. A value system based upon social class (upper equals good, lower equals bad: a notion with a sinister Orwellian ring) devalues most black people, for whom a high-income life-style like the Huxtables’ is quite unattainable. Black viewers are thus caught in a trap because the escape route from TV stereotyping comes with a set of ideologically loaded conditions.”

Commentary
Whether in 1984 or 1984, the loser feels the sinister as sting or slap or stop. Her black life matters, if only the expensive clothing chosen by the sitcom’s wardrobe department would reflect that mattering. But asking to be reflected is a dangerous game to play in, with, and through a medium whose simultaneously miniaturizing and giganticizing screen is almost always a funny house mirror. Misrecognition is the signature code, misrule the signal scale. But then again, onscreen come slender moments, subtle zigs, sudden zags, and dwelling delicately inside them, a viewer feels between herself and her putative television avatar a proportion so synced that gratification soars and swells. Its ambiguous aftermath: the churning of a desire that by its nature cannot be fulfilled, another kind of trap from which no escape route discloses itself other than uneasily.

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Sutra
“The approaches represented here begin with the belief that relationships between viewer and television are so complex and multidimensional that they resist all attempts to reduce them to phenomena that can be explained by the same procedures that work for the chemist.”

Commentary
If not chemists, then alchemists? How to make gold of the output that is television studies, especially when, our capacious understanding of the relationships between viewer and television notwithstanding, we take a look at some of our inputs and find them particularly dull or drossy? And can we be good alchemists if we are at the same time compelled, as if following a laboratory procedure, to keep intoning the mantra about the irreducible complexity that obtains at every scale of television phenomenality and materiality? Today I have more questions than answers, but my meditation practice encourages me to be untroubled by the experience of doubt and worry, which — perhaps here is an alchemical transformation — could also become an experience of wonder over television, over television studies, over the sutras that come to me in little waves and sometimes little earthquakes.

Sutra
“Since the inhabitants of critical discourse cannot avoid the intellectual work of audience-creation, let it be explicitly creative,

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and not hidden behind the fiction of a ‘real’ audience that’s always located somewhere beyond the critical activity itself.”

Commentary
Reader, I am making you up. But don’t worry about it; I’m kind to my creations. I don’t think you’re a monster itching to write a bad review on Amazon, a distracted multitasker who isn’t reading closely enough, a zombie who’s just flipping through the pages to see the next screen capture. I am making you in my image, and I have an abundance of self-regard. And yet, regarding you (in both senses), I do not think to make you work. I let you be.

Sutra
“It is not a question, finally, of understanding simply television’s ideological (or representational) role, or simply its ritual (or socially organizing) function, or the process of its domestic (and more broadly social) consumption. It is a question of how to understand all these issues (or dimensions) in relation to each other.”

Commentary
To scale, or not to scale? That is the question. Like a number of profoundly secular atheists I know, I make a ritual of reading various versions of my online horoscope throughout the morning and the afternoon, organizing my time — through a kind of dayparting — with predictions, advice, and other banalities. Coincidentally, mine is the sign of the scales. I can share that datum, though my mantra is “secret” — but you can figure it out

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if you know the year of my birth and of my teacher’s training. Two non-representational syllables, two ideologically overdetermined years, my domestic consumption of words and images on my smartphone and computer screens, the broad planets, the social gods: how should I understand all these partial issues (or partial dimensions) in relation to each other? Scooby-Doo, where on heaven or earth are you?

Sutra

“The TV Studies sutras”

September 13, 2018

Sutra

“Television programs not only transmit therapeutic strategies taken from the world of psychological theory and clinical practice but also construct new therapeutic relationships.”

Commentary

I confess: I survived childhood abuse with television as a therapist. *Knots Landing* was the best clinician, allegorizing my victimization and my fighting back in ways I did not properly understand when I was eleven, but *Roseanne* was also a boon and a salve. So when *Roseanne* came back from the television grave, and before *Roseanne* and “Roseanne” got justly ushered back there, I found an awkward and partial catharsis in bearing witness to scenes of Roseanne and Darlene on the Conner couch — symbol, icon, and prosthetic prop, all at once. My mother votes deplorably, too, yet she has not had the capacity (or the opportunity) to give a good hug in quite a long while. Cut to a music video: “My therapist says not to see her no more.”

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“In a similar way, *Laverne and Shirley* (1976–83) often developed its lesbian narratives and queer pleasures by ‘passing through’ heterosexuality and other forms of relationships with men in order to reestablish the emotional and erotic status quo of two women living and working together. Much of the audience pleasure in this series is bound up in seeing how various threats to maintaining Laverne and Shirley as a couple are overcome.”

**Commentary**

“We’ll do it our way.” Yes, our queer way. If the way involves finding what we have pleasurably hoped and expected to find, then at least sometimes we owe that gift to its having been placed by some industrial agent or agents right where we knew to look for it, hiding in plain sight. Television: a glass closet. Television: a strict enforcer and gleeful breaker of heteronormative law — although I would not like an episode in which Laverne goes to bed with a cop. If she does have to pass through the precinct of heterosexuality to find her way home to lesbian heaven, let the route be peopled with handymen instead. Dear producers, when designing women, remember that we like to see them live together, and we like to see them work together, and if we can see those status quo coincides, then it’s double the pleasure, double the fun.

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Sutra
“The geotelevisual system does not merely facilitate consumption of commodities but produces a substance of value all its own: socialized culture time.”17

Commentary
If it’s six o’clock in the evening, it’s time to play Family Feud and then to cook family dinner. If Valene’s identity starts to dissociate, it’s time to roast the Thanksgiving turkey. If spring cleaning is overdue, it’s time for May sweeps. If…but by and large, these are ifs of another century’s television. Reruns are now confined to narrow channels, appointment viewing is for the middle-aged and elderly, and if it isn’t streaming, it is not only not in my students’ flow but also persists at a smaller scale in the field from which the coming teachers’ sutras will be drawn. Sometimes I wish that they could come more slowly; that chasing after theory after television was less a chase, less a scramble, more an amble; that, with television and with theory, I could still have more still life in more real time.

Sutra
“Of course, these very contradictions—the multitude of differences within what’s been dismissed as television’s vast sea of indifference—prevents us from selecting any one case as the representative one. Nonetheless, some texts seem to me to be

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particularly instructive in considering television’s relationship to discourses of gender (both on TV and about it).”

Commentary
“Joan Van Arking” is a term that was dubbed in the television industry to describe the way a “difficult” diva performs — with the collateral lesson that the best thing one can do in such cases, if part of the camera crew, lighting department, or the like, is to stay out of her way (it’s always her way), let her do her thing, and hope for the best in attempting to capture it in one or another take. Have I been Joan Van Arking lately? Are my high standards and keen demands — of myself, of others, of television, of television studies, of the sutras — “too much”? Maybe it’s time to channel the alternate excess of my inner Donna Mills and echo her sing-along to the one-hit-wonder’s hit: “Don’t worry, be happy.” At the same time, as with any mantra, I shouldn’t cling to it but hear it lightly, let it come and go. Melodramatic womanhood is no one thing. Its multitude of differences doesn’t merely erupt across putatively representative case studies but within them, too.

September 17, 2018

Sutra
“Talk shows not only promote conversation and debate, they break down the distance between the audience and the stage. They do not depend on the power or expertise of bourgeois education. They elicit common sense and everyday experience as the mark of truth. They confound the distinction between the public and private. Talk shows are about average women as citizens talking about and debating issues and experience.”

19 Jane M. Shattuc, “The Oprahification of America: Talk Shows and the Public Sphere,” in Television, History, and American Culture: Feminist Critical
Commentary
You may want to talk about Oprah, but consider the time that Omnec Onec appears in The Jerry Springer Show. Far from average, she is a stunning blonde beauty and claims to be a multi-hundred-year-old Venusian who has temporarily assumed human form. It’s true that her charisma doesn’t depend on bourgeois education — but she also claims a longer, higher, and deeper education in the halls of her native planet’s single domed city. Ice in her eyes and caged and cagy restraint in her voice, she creates a bracing fourth wall between herself on stage and Jerry and the audience on its other side. She is not really, she explains, a citizen of the United States, nor even of the earthly realm. If she breaks down the distinction between the public and private, she does so unwittingly. We have to understand that her internationally circulating book (she’s big in Germany), with its hackneyed public message of peace and love, has a painful, private subtext of childhood abuse and trauma, dissociation, and thus the embrace, the fantasizing, of another world.

September 18, 2018

Sutra
“This book should serve as a siren — one that incites action. That action might take the form of self-interrogation, change of career, critical debate, or screaming in the streets. Whatever the response, critical contemplation and action are needed to stop the nihilism informing the treatment, evaluation of, and prolific visual representation of Black women’s actual and fictionalized bodies.”

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Commentary
This sutra should serve as a siren — whether you take that assertion to mean that the ambulance is justly speeding the bruised and battered body to the emergency room, or that the sweet, seductive voice is calling the men who steer the ship to annihilation: also justly. The men's nihilism leads to a different kind of annihilation of different kinds of subjects, raced, gendered, and classed otherwise, living the paradox of marginalization and disappearance even as (and because) they are ushered spectacularly into view. These days, as in others, a stunning amount of screaming in the streets gets televised, sometimes stirringly… but often in the frame of damaging, disturbing misprision. Will television deliver us from evil — or straight into the gaping maw of its devilish star?

19
September 19, 2018

Sutra
“If there are to be more Tiananmens and fewer 11 Septembers, the viewers of today and tomorrow must have a wide range of pleasurable, smart, progressive TV programmes to look at, learn from, and influence.”

Commentary
Of course give your money to PBS, and enjoy your tote bag and your access to Thirteen’s partial online archive. But how not only to help public service television to survive but also to restore the slenderly glimpsed, radical promise that could have been its lot? How to generate new versions of beautiful “old” programming — like the sadly shortlived Soul! — for the old “new” medium that is now our television? For starters, I want my FCC. I dream of harnessing the voting power of all the viewers of The

Voice who come close, but almost always never close enough, to giving beautiful, soulful black divas the win.

20 September 20, 2018

Sutra
“Television—once the most familiar of everyday objects—is now transforming at such rapid speeds that we no longer really know what ‘TV’ is at all.”

Commentary
The familiarity that television used to have was always the strange, estranged familiarity that we most commonly denote as uncanny. One need only conjure a memory of its weird houses to savor that uncanny flavor. As for the relation of that then of uncanny television to whatever it is “now,” I shared this observation with friends at the time of the initial airing of the Twin Peaks revival, Twin Peaks: The Return: “I gave up a long time ago on Lynch’s television project, so, no, I am not an informed commentator who slogged through eighteen summer hours of his latest TV business. But I remember the first season keenly and mournfully (though precisely not nostalgically), and I watched the last few minutes of the sequel with real interest and curiosity. And I think they make perfect and splendid sense to anyone who has clocked about this series/these series that they are fundamentally preoccupied with the unfinished and unfinishable work that trauma creates, creates again, and creates ‘one’ more time for the people who have, without choice, to tarry with trauma—especially in its more discrete forms as abuses and their legacies. And the suburban house is a goddamned magnet and lightning rod for that work.”

Sutra
“The interdisciplinary scope of the project has generated a need to imagine television not only as a site of commercial entertainment but as a site of military intelligence and scientific observation as well. Decades of satellite uses have shaped not only what we see on television but also how we understand what ‘television’ is and means.”

Commentary
If I were an archaeologist, or an astronomer, or a geographer, how would I look at “television,” and what would I think it means? With a weak and a lazy mind, I have been spending too much time instead on questions borne from astrology, and everybody knows what Adorno would think about that. All the same, value erupts every now and again from the screen. Today, for instance, the horoscope in the app on my phone tells me, “Soap operas are often a hyperbole on life’s drama. It's getting tiresome, right? The only way to stop this annoyance is to refuse to participate, as you may play an integral role in keeping it going.” Sure enough, I have to let go of someone and something this afternoon. So maybe the disciplines aren’t incompatible after all. Taking the seer’s advice, I can detach from the toxic norm and float so high, so far, that I am like a satellite in orbit, where I apprehend the televisual drama unfolding below not with affective intensity but rather with a kind of remote sensing, approaching (if not quite arriving) at scientific observation. And I am television, still.

Sutra
“We have, and will continue to process coming changes through our existing understandings of television. We will continue to call the increasingly large black boxes that serve as the focal point of our entertainment spaces television — regardless of how many boxes we need to connect to them in order to have the experience we desire or whether they are giant boxes or flat screens mounted on walls in the manner once reserved for art and decoration.”

Commentary
When wasn’t television art and home décor? Think of all those luscious, baroque manifestations of television as furniture, populating the suburban living rooms of the Cold War. Perhaps because of the foreshortened scale in which they have dated, the television receivers of more recent history — those large black boxes of the late 1990s and early 2000s — are ironically quainter and goofier. If some of the television scales belong to Libra, I would like to weigh the large black box and the slim flat screen against each other. It is all right for those scales to tip markedly one way. After all, as Yoko Ono has it, “If you focus and lose balance, you fall. If you balance and lose focus, you die.” Living as well as I may, I am keeping my eyes on the prize, the focal point of our entertainment spaces, and, as the teacher instructs me to do, I continue to call it television.

“While the convergence of commercialism, popularity, and nonscripted television has clearly accelerated, much of what we call popular reality TV can be traced to existing formats and prior moments in U.S. television history.”

Commentary

When Adam Sandler told Bob Barker, “The price is wrong, bitch,” he anticipated both the banal address that the host of The Apprentice would make to his costars and one that millions of us would now address to him in turn. Four years too late to sync with the moment at which we first learned what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real, two years too late to bite reality, Sandler was even further out of touch with one of television’s anni mirabiles, the one in which it ate a Loud family. For my part, I am doing my best to make my trademark slogan, I am a candid camera: I’m not kidding, I see shit.

“Certainly, I believe that the long-running and intensive debate about the ‘adequacy to the real’, the social sufficiency, of television’s news and documentary portrayals is given a further, instructive point of reference by the photographic practices and the discourses of photographic comment that have been encouraged by digital platforms.”

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Commentary
But what if I do not rise to the status of a candid camera? What if I unwittingly introduce distortions to the sutras that I record? I want to say, my words ringing in time with those of the evening news anchor and of the voicing-over narrator in the television documentary: Trust me. Believe me. As I do, I see an analogy between the relationship of television to digital photography and the relationship of sutras to commentaries. I have a responsibility to the real and the true, but I also have the opportunity to play, to unstick the “study” of “television study” from its more typical forms of truth telling. Am I a camera obscura?

September 25, 2018

Sutra
“To say that Reality TV is rife with gender stereotypes is a bit like shooting fish in a barrel.”

Commentary
I used to joke that “The Epistemology of Snooki” would make a great name for an essay that would collide “high” theory with a “low” object. But there is truth in jest. I would dearly love to read that essay. Remember what I have been telling you all along about the irreducible complexity to be found at every scale of television? You only have to take a trip to Jersey Shore to discover as much.

Sutra
“Mike’s assurance to Edith seems apropos: ‘Maybe we’re not supposed to be understanding everything all at once. We need you.’ This narrative refusal of closure and seeming acceptance of a gift of queer love that undoes sitcom timing results in a second close-up on Edith’s face that, in my screening notes, I marked as lasting ‘forever.’ Maybe not quite, but almost.”

Commentary
Giver of this sutra, you are an adept at close reading, notwithstanding the footnote in which you point us to your screed against the practice. At the same time, close reading should not be autotelic, and it is not here. Maintaining the scale of close reading, the sutra also slips that scale in order to produce a constellation of (hear it two ways) moving parts: a theory of television time and its unraveling, a theory of the gift, a queer theory of love. If Edith’s tears really could last forever, they would make us an ocean. Out of the bunker, into TV’s wide, open waves.

Sutra
“Television can only enable identification within the parameters of its business models, and the business model of network television requires that representations be broadly legible and palatable.”


**Commentary**

With reference to the previous sutra, we could call Edith’s ditzy fluttering broadly legible, her fundamental kindness broadly palatable. But in the scene that said sutra describes, her tears in close-up render her otherwise, curious, special. It’s that stranger Edith whom I crave to see whenever she might pop up. Ditto Will and Grace, Ellen, and whatever the name of the character John Goodman played in *Normal, Ohio*. Blink, and you’ll miss these moments.

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September 28, 2018

**Sutra**

“Indeed, one could go so far as to say that in the confrontation between receiver and animation, identifications, should they obtain, obtain as identifications with forms rather than via forms to putatively agential character/actors with suspect pretensions to rounded subjectivity.”

**Commentary**

A proto-queer and crypto-queer child of the eighties, I adored the protocols animating that queerest of TV cartoon crypts, *He-Man: Masters of the Universe*. Fast forward: an obliging consumer of neoliberalism’s products, I wear a tee shirt on which He-Man and Skeletor are imaged — voguing. Its retailers advertise it with the tagline, “Eternia Is Burning.” When I tried to share this detail with a friend, I made a Freudian slip and called Eternia Eterna, another super-queer zone of my youth, the underground city where a bunch of *One Life to Live’s* denizens were sent in unflattering hazmat-like suits. What can I tell you? Even cowgirls get the blues, and even gurus make mistakes. But if I wanted to sell you a tee shirt, a program, a bootleg DVD — the world — I would claim rather that my slip was not Freudian but

a brilliant example of sliding across television scales, starring partial constellations. After all, the slip takes the \( I \) out of Eternia, which also, paradoxically reemphasizes it and puts it back there: there, Etern(i)a, where I am the masters of the universe.

* * *

In an essay, “Citation Matters,” that is well worth citing, cultural geographers Carrie Mott and Daniel Cockayne draw keen attention to the often under-attended politics of citation and the ways in which they matter:

We argue for a conscientious engagement with the politics of citation that is mindful of how citational practices can be tools for either the reification of, or resistance to, unethical hierarchies of knowledge. Our approach is qualitative and conceptual, and offers a productive way to understand how citation can be rethought as a feminist and anti-racist technology. To ignore the politics of citation risks the continued hegemony of white heteromasculine knowledge production incongruous with the nuance and richness of other understandings of and perspectives on geographical phenomena.\(^{31}\)

The salience of these observations not only to the study of “geographical phenomena” but also to scholarship writ large was very much on my mind during the period of my work on *Television Scales*. To be sure, Marilyn Strathern has enjoyed a highly successful and influential career, but she is not widely cited outside the discipline of anthropology. And she is certainly much less cited than theorists like Gilles Deleuze and Manuel DeLanda, from whose approaches I explicitly distinguish Strathern’s in this book’s introduction — in part because choosing to cite

\(^{31}\) Carrie Mott and Daniel Cockayne, “Citation Matters: Mobilizing the Politics of Citation toward a Practice of ‘Conscientious Engagement,’” *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no. 7 (2017): 954–73, at 956.
her in their stead constitutes my aim to honor and extend her feminism.

Similar to and, for this reason, connectable to Strathern, Bellamy is a writer who is widely admired in a number of circles. But they are smaller circles than the ones that laud — and cite, or devote critical essays and books to — other San Francisco-based novelists and poets; whenever in reading Bellamy I would encounter a confessional moment about the challenges of her somewhat precarious teaching life, I would think, for instance, of Lyn Hejinian’s longstanding tenure at Berkeley. Devoting more sustained attention to Bellamy’s work than has otherwise obtained in the scholarly humanities may, I hope, work to offset an imbalance in how we have been recognizing — or failing to recognize — the contributions of contemporary experimental writers.

Choosing to write sutras also makes Bellamy a candidate to connect, partially, to Strathern. As Bellamy reflects in the essayistic portion of her book, “Sutra literally means a thread or line that holds things together. It is derived from the verbal root siv-, meaning to sew. I think of embroidery, the precise knots and stitches my grandmother taught me to make flowers appear on pillowcases.”32 In other words, sutras themselves are connectors, and commentaries upon them partially extend their connective value and valences. Yet just as important to Bellamy’s project as sutras and commentaries are the page breaks between one day’s commentary and the next day’s sutra, as well as the white spaces, small gaps, between various sections of her essay: namely, the sutures in which some artistic and intellective work, often not immediately or determinately nameable but nonetheless real and suggestive, is always getting accomplished — just as it is in Strathern’s cuts. That is, sutures, or cuts, are not mere gaps but connectors in their own right, albeit connectors likelier to do the threading that they do in slippery and enigmatic ways. Perhaps that makes them not, as we might have expected, like the typical cuts used in television’s camerawork — or even like tel-

32 Bellamy, The TV Sutras, 104–5.
television's less typical, more pointed jump cuts—but rather like the second or so of black space that, on occasion, fills the screen right before a commercial break.