



Cultivating Calm Passions

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Building on comments delivered at the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) Meeting in Honolulu recognizing *Wild Experiment* as the winner of the 2023 Ludwick Fleck Prize, my reflections here are anchored in the appreciation of the book's illumination of the value of the cultivation of calm passions. I open by reflecting on book's fresh engagement with core science and technology studies concerns about how durable knowledge is made. I then suggest a few developments that might follow on from that appreciation. First, I reflect on how the role of the erotic might be pushed further analytically. Second, I explore how the book's persuasive arguments about racialized reason and the limitations of the paranoid style of critique might be treated more symmetrically, as elements to be aware of in our own work as well as that of big bad racists with whom we disagree. Finally, I highlight the potentially broader-audience value of grounding ourselves in calm passions in the era of the internet pile-on.



Introduction

It is such a privilege to join this Book Symposium reflecting on a book I absolutely adore.

I come to this book as a reader from science and technology studies (STS), in a notably literal sense. Donovan O. Schaefer's *Wild Experiment: Feeling Science and Secularism After Darwin* was among the dozens of books I read in the summer of 2023 in the context of selecting the winner of the Ludwik Fleck Prize as part of a book prize committee for the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S). As someone who has not previously engaged with religious studies in any substantive way, I did not expect to be captivated by this book. And yet it drew me in, held my attention, and has continued to resonate with me since. Thus, I welcome this chance to return to it for a more extended reflection.

Part of what made the book *accessible* to me—in addition to the lucid writing—was its robust engagement with canonical STS literature as well as with the feminist and antiracist scholarship I do know well. He brings together bold-faced names for STS such as Thomas Kuhn and Bruno Latour, as well as incisive antiracist thinkers ranging from Audre Lorde to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. And yet a key thing that made it *interesting* to me was that it brought those too-often-siloed literatures together with each other and with new-to-me literatures in a way that is original.

Because of these unusually inclusive citational practices, I suspect most readers will find a mix of familiar and new points of reference. I was struck that perhaps in part because of the capaciousness of its reading, *Wild Experiment* does not feel as cliquish as many theory-oriented books do. By bringing together multiple conversations oriented around common concern but that are usually happening in parallel, I was impressed that this book is quite distinct from the books by the tight networks that often get recognized both in STS and in intersectional feminist scholarship—*Wild Experiment* thus offers scholars in both of those domains (among others) with a new voice, which is so refreshing.

Building on comments I initially delivered at the 4S Meeting in Honolulu recognizing *Wild Experiment* as the winner of the 2023 Fleck Prize, my reflections here are anchored in the appreciation of the book's illumination of the value of the cultivation of *calm passions*. I open by reflecting on book's fresh engagement with core STS concerns about how durable knowledge is made. I then suggest a few developments that might follow on from that appreciation. First, I reflect on how the role of the erotic might be pushed further analytically. Second, I explore how the book's persuasive arguments about racialized reason and the limitations of the paranoid style of critique might be treated more symmetrically, as elements to be aware of in our own work as well as that of big bad racists with whom we disagree. Finally, I highlight the potentially broader-audience value of grounding ourselves in calm passions in the era of the internet pile-on.

A Fresh Engagement with the Core STS Concern of How Durable Knowledge Is Made

Let me first delve in a bit into how *Wild Experiment* engages the core STS concern of how durable knowledge gets made. The central argument of the book is the inextricability of thinking and feeling, and this is both a very classic STS concern at the core of knowledge-making and one that is absolutely essential to our age. *Wild Experiment's* engagement with the topic builds on and is relevant to longstanding STS concerns, for example insisting on symmetry in how we locate the cause of true and false beliefs, and at the same time is innovative.

A core concept *Wild Experiment* contributes is “cogency.” I quote at some length from the book’s first elaboration of the term in order to give those who have not yet read it a bit of a feel for the book’s distinctive voice and style:

To say an argument is *cogent* doesn’t mean, exactly, that it’s *true*. It means *it appeals*, or *it’s compelling*. It means it *feels* true. It has a *pull*—a weight. *Cogency* takes knowledge-making out of a binary frame, in which sovereign reason sizes up a situation, strokes its chin, and then judiciously flicks the switch to YES or NO. It suggests, instead, knowledge-making as an ongoing *process*—a contest of forces—and specifically as a constant measuring and remeasuring of the *felt* weight of facts. Cogency lights up the way our spectrum of confidence and conviction is always constituted by feeling. New information that tips the balance *adds weight*. Changing our minds means changing how we feel. (Schaefer 2022, 9)

This is a theory of knowledge and feeling Schaefer contrasts with “cogitation” as a theory, which despite the similar sounds of the words turns out to have a different root—whereas “cogitation” is a la “cogito ergo sum,” “cogent” is related to agonism and pedagogy and the driving of forces together. Schaefer notes the missed opportunity of the historical accident that Thomas Kuhn became the “anointed gadfly of science” (Schaefer 2022, 17) to the neglect of the more affectively-engaged Michael Polanyi. He persuasively argues that we have much to gain from engaging more with Polanyi’s concepts such as “intellectual passions” (Schaefer 2022, 16). Schaefer reprises these, describing “interest” for Polanyi as “a felt sense of what matters,” “intuition” as “a felt sense of what *might* be useful in the future,” “persuasive passion” as the desire to convince others, and especially the “love of elegance,” which Polanyi calls *the feeling of making contact with reality*, which produces a click, the subtle joy of pieces of information snapping together (Schaefer 2022, 16).

Now if the click were the only thing, then knowledge-making practices such as science might not be different from conspiracy theory mongering. What distinguishes science in particular and durable knowledge-making in general is that the desire for that elegance is counterbalanced with an awareness of the

risk of seeing things the way we want to, and the constant subjection of what we believe to a countervailing scrutiny.

Here is how Schaefer describes how the reliability of science endures even after we recognised that science is not drained of emotion:

Naomi Oreskes writes in *Why Trust Science?* that the reliability of science is based on both “its sustained engagement with the world” and “its social character.” Cogency theory adds a third dimension to this picture. It suggests that science works when it stages an agonism of different cognitive emotions, tracking the excitement of click while holding on to nervousness about getting things wrong . . . The same emotional machinery that sends us down the wrong track can also, with just a bit of fine-tuning, build durable science. (Schaefer 2022, 231)

This particular word choice in the phrase “durable science” stood out to me because I have long been interested in how *durability* can offer a way of characterizing the project of knowledge-making—archetypally scientific knowledge-making, and also more broadly. My first book foregrounded the thematic in the title: *Medicating Race: Heart Disease and Durable Preoccupations with Difference* (Pollock 2012). Durability is not a concept used many times in Schaefer’s book, but it is used in illuminating ways. Schaefer uses the term “durable” as he elaborates “cogency theory”:

Good knowledge isn’t knowledge that has been drained of feeling. It’s knowledge that reflects a working, **durable** relationship with the things around us, a relationship resolutely defined by emotion. It’s the product of complicated operations of feeling—an agonism, an invisible clash of forces holding our desire to know the world in tension and trying to outmaneuver other felt priorities that might muddy the waters. This sense of science isn’t a forensic tool for calculating absolute truth. Instead, it’s a cultivated contraption for feeling our way toward truth (objectivity in shirtsleeves) without the anticipation of certainty. Collapsing the binary of reason and emotion doesn’t leave us adrift. It shines a light on the carefully staged agonism of intellectual feelings that is the real driver of good knowledge. (Schaefer 2022, 11–12)

What does *durable* mean in these quotes about the making of good knowledge? Indulge me in an etymological foray. Durability is a common enough word in contemporary vernacular English, meaning “the ability to withstand wear, pressure, or damage.”¹ The etymology of the English word *durability* has its roots in the late fourteenth century: “power of lasting or continuing in the same state, resistance to decay or dissolution,” drawn from Late Latin *durabilitatem* (via Old French *durabilité*) “lasting, permanent,” in turn drawn from the

Latin *durare* “to harden.”² In common with the word *duration*, the etymology of *durability* evokes a relationship between robust materiality and extended temporality.

Even in its day-to-day usages, the term—in both its noun form and in its adjective form ‘durable’—often has a slightly technical valence, as with the term “durable goods” to refer to non-consumable non-perishable consumer goods such as cars and washing machines that are kept for a long time rather than deteriorating, rotting, or being used up, or “durable relationships” by which unmarried partners might qualify for say European settled status. In all these senses, what is durable has the material quality of not being easily broken, as well as a temporal quality of not being fleeting. In these senses, durability is the opposite of fragility or precarity.

Yet durability does not mean imperviousness or invulnerability. *Durus* is hardness in Latin, and yet *hardness* is often at odds with *durability*. That is certainly the case in many engineering contexts, in which hardness can be associated with brittleness and durability is precisely produced by the flexibility that allows the absorption of shock. This quality of openness to modification in the context of new conditions it is true for durable knowledge, and for durable relationships.

The Role of the Erotic

The connection between intellectual passions and durable knowledge spurs me to reflect a bit on a theme at the intersection of core STS and feminist theory that I do think might have been further developed within the book, which is the relationship between knowledge-making and the concept of *the erotic*.

On the book’s opening page, I was delighted to see reference to the classic feminist science studies of Evelyn Fox Keller’s *A Feeling for the Organism*. Fox Keller happens to be someone from whom I learned about feminist science studies during my own PhD. She died in 2023; I miss her.

Wild Experiment is broadly deeply resonant with Fox Keller’s sensibility, but it does not follow her to her articulation of the erotic. Schaefer turns instead to Black feminism for touch points on that theme: Audre Lorde, for whom the erotic names a source of both pleasure and power feminists should embrace, and especially Sharon Patricia Holland, who in contrast with Lorde foregrounds a harmful aspect of *the erotic* to name the racist desire for connection with the denigrated racial other—something return to later—builds on something important about these feminist engagements with the erotic. Yet we might explore other aspects of the erotic, which in feminist articulations including Fox Keller’s is not a simple synonym for pleasure, and is precisely not about a covetous desire for access to the other. The erotic can also distinctively name authentic curiosity in, and deep appreciation for, another in all their depths, and a consensual communion.

Schaefer doesn't really engage the potential of the erotic per se in science, and yet it could be fruitful for his argument. For Evelyn Fox Keller, the invocation of the erotic is an alternative to the pornographic and indeed rape-metaphor-informed ways of knowing the universe articulated by key founders of modern science (and plenty of its contemporary enthusiasts), that posit the universe as a tease and the scientist as its ultimately successful vanquisher. For Fox Keller, the erotic is figured as a longing for a more relational and reciprocal way of knowing the universe than masculine science is structured to pursue – not “having one's way with” the natural world, but communing in a profound way that might blur the boundaries of the knowing subject and leave us transformed by the encounter. For Fox Keller, this erotic quality is central to the “dynamic objectivity” she posits as a more useful alternative to “static objectivity” that would be achieved through total separation of the scientist from the object of knowledge and then mastery thereof. In her classic collection of essays *Reflections on Gender and Science*, Fox Keller writes:

While some scientists see their endeavor in predominantly adversarial terms, as contests, battles, exercises in domination, others see it primarily as an erotic activity. Michael Polanyi, for example, emphasizes, instead of distance, the need to extend our body to include [the object]—so that we come to dwell in it. (Fox Keller 1985, 125)

Fox Keller goes on to quote contemporary scientists rejecting the metaphor of “putting nature on the rack and torturing answers out of her,” which is “like rape,” and instead that good science “is like the difference between rape and making love” (Fox Keller 1985, 125). In the history of science, according to Fox Keller, erotic themes “have been submerged by a rhetoric and ideology of aggression,” and she suggests there is value in attending to the work of scientists who “have seen their relation to their material in erotic rather than adversarial terms” (Fox Keller 1985, 126).

I wonder how this feminist STS thread of the erotic might offer a way to deepen the engagement across philosophy of science and Black feminism? Although I love many things about Sharon Patricia Holland's book *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012), I think she unhelpfully flattens something that can be analytically useful about the potential of the erotic insofar as she equates “the erotic” with “desire.” For Fox Keller, the erotic can't be any kind of unilaterally demanded intimacy, with an objectified racial other or otherwise – the erotic is by definition something that happens in a mutually engaged relationship in which responsiveness to and by the other is fundamental.

This might be why in the context of science as a vocation, the pursuit of durable knowledge about the world can feel like the kind of erotic allure that

is not merely about pursuing gratification for oneself (that Holland rightly warns us to be suspicious of) but rather a form of the erotic Fox Keller has in mind. Following Fox Keller, the erotic might be an element of fleeting but real connection with another, or might be part of a durable relationship, but I think there is something worthwhile in attending to the erotic as a form of desire that is precisely *not* covetous or rapey, but instead is anchored in authentic respect and is reciprocal relationality.

Confronting Our Own Durable Preoccupations with Difference, and Our Own Paranoia

Building from this, I would offer that thinking more about the relationship between the erotic and science might also help to deepen the link between this theme of *Wild Experiment* and its fascinating exploration of racialized reason. Schaefer brilliantly illuminates the pervasiveness of racialized reason in the work of atheist dogmatists and conspiracy theorists.

As Schaefer argues “Feeling makes science work, but it also leads to the *collapse* of good knowledge—the giddy downward spiral of conspiracism or the intoxicated self-confirmations of racialized reason” (Schaefer 2022, 4). He later elaborates that second term: “*Racialized reason* is the skin of thought that forms around racist feelings. It’s another way of naming what critical race scholars have been saying for decades—namely, that racism isn’t just a set of explicit *beliefs*, but a whole topography of ways of thinking” (Schaefer 2022, 24).

Schaefer’s diagnosis of racialized reason in conspiracy theories and atheist provocations is persuasive, and important. And yet I wonder whether conflating racialized reason with racism, and imagining it to be the sole preserve of racists, misses an opportunity to be more symmetrical and reflexive in how we engage with race—in science, and in STS and other domains of humanities and social science.

Yes, as Schaefer persuasively argues building on Holland, the contemplation of the figure of the racial other has a pleasurable affective charge for the racist. But how can we understand how desire is also at stake in the contemplation of race for other actors of potential interest—for example, contemporary scientists of race who see themselves as antiracist, and antiracist scholars in humanities and social science?

One of the intriguing elements of the *Wild Experiment* is the critical way it analyzes the debunking mode used by a certain type of atheist ideologue. Drawing and building on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s classic 1997 intervention in favor of the value of “reparative reading” in addition to “paranoid reading,” Schaefer shows how a “paranoid style of critique” is pervasive among the overlapping groups of conspiracy theorists and Islamophobic advocates of atheism (the core of Schaefer’s engagement is on pp. 95–97, in the context of conspiracy theories,

and it is applied to New Atheism around p. 205). The invulnerable stance of the unmasker in the face of an exteriorized hostile world is common to both: “paranoid reading is about becoming the agent of unmasking, the director of surprises rather than their victim” (Schaefer 2022, 96).

I wonder whether there might be more scope for symmetry here, to consider how the paranoid impulse characterizes not just “them” but also “us.” To make this more concrete, I wonder what it would look like to apply the same approach to race in science as Schaefer applies to atheism.

Reading Schaefer in the context of my longstanding interest in the durable preoccupations with racial difference in science and medicine, I found myself reflecting that the most common form of social science and humanities critique of race in science and medicine takes a paranoid approach, in which the goal is to unveil insidious racial essentialism lurking underneath any given claim in science or medicine and righteously stamping it out. The intellectual and affective quality of that scholarship seems resonant with what Schaefer (2022, 97) describes as “the adoption of the paranoid stance rapidly hardens into a mandate, an emotional orthodoxy demanding exposure of the secret sins of every scrap of culture.” I have long been skeptical of the value of this mode of engagement with scientific claims about race, which often correctly observes that claims about say genetic essentialism in race science can have a hydra-headed quality, but doesn’t follow the logic of that observation to realize that forever chopping off and holding up the severed head of genetic essentialism does not diminish the power of racism in science or in society.

Schaefer does not mention but I am struck that Kosofsky Sedgwick anchors that essay in the discussion of a conversation with her friend Cindy Patton about a debate about a scientific claim: whether or not HIV was developed in a government lab and deliberately set upon gay people and other communities deemed undesirable by hegemonic power. For me, the allure of that rabbit hole is resonant with the limitations of certain type of critique of race in science. The volatile power of race in a racist society does not rise or fall on the truth value of any given scientific claim. In the same way as we should heed Patton’s warning that getting too exercised about proving or debunking the government lab theory for HIV might distract from more urgent questions of care for those suffering and dying of AIDS, honing our antiracist analytical focus too firmly on the debunking of particular scientific claims might be a waste of our energies.

Of course we cannot forgo paranoid reading of claims about race in science. Scientific claims about racial difference can indeed be sites of the articulation of harmful racist ideologies. And yet we should also embrace work that combines paranoid reading with reparative reading—something we might see operating for example, in Alondra Nelson’s *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome* (2016), which develops for a

broader audience ideas she had been working through in STS venues such as her fabulously rich article “Bio Science: Genetic Genealogy Testing and the Pursuit of African Ancestry” in *Social Studies of Science* (2008). In contrast with many scholars writing about contemporary engagements with race and genetics who take a debunking mode, Nelson alerts us to *both* problematic essentialisms *and* reparative aspirations in genetic research including that done by and for African Americans.

This is not a criticism of Schaefer since the science of race is not his topic, but it is a reminder to be alert to paranoid tendencies in our own engagements. We all live in a racist society, and we should not imagine ourselves to be completely immune to any racialization within our own reason. There are big bad racists out there—I am convinced by Schaefer’s analysis that the New Atheists such as Christopher Hitchens should be denounced as such—but there are also inextricably cognitive and affective aspects to race for all of us.

The Value of Calm Passion in the Context of the Internet Pile-On

The quieter, slower, open-ended qualities of the erotic for Fox Keller and reparative reading as a complement to paranoid reading returns me to Schaefer’s discussion on passion. Drawing on Hume, Schaefer contrasts “calm passions,” which are aligned with science, and “violent passions,” which are not. Turning to Schaefer:

“What we call strength of mind,” he [Hume] proposed, “implies the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent.” The calm passions—passions that fixate on distant rewards or pleasures rather than immediate ones—are arrayed in such a way as to discipline and outmaneuver the violent passions. Even tranquillity is not the absence of feeling, but a specific emotional posture that allows us to patiently explore a problem, listening attentively for the soft click of real discovery. “By *reason* we mean affections,” Hume concluded, “but such as operate more calmly, and cause no disorder in the temper: which tranquillity leads us into a mistake concerning them, and causes us to regard them as conclusions only of our intellectual faculties.” The calm passions compose themselves into an alloy that makes scientific knowledge production possible. (Schaefer 2022, 39)

This is an element in which *Wild Experiment* might be brought to bear on broader conversations. The insights into topics of wide and timely interest such as the allure of conspiracy theories could almost have made this into a trade book. I wonder whether Schaefer has considered broader-audience writing, and also how he sees this book in relation to current wider-circulation books and broader conversations.

For example, Naomi Klein's *Doppelgänger: A Trip Into the Mirror World* (2023) tracks the divergent path taken by someone with whom she has surprisingly often been mixed up: Naomi Wolf, a one-time high-profile liberal feminist who has become an anti-vaxing conspiracy theorist and darling of far-right radio. Trying to understand the appeal of that weird world for so many, Klein recounts one of Wolf's bizarre claims: according to Wolf, the Covid vaccines have dehumanized the people of New York City, because the nanoparticles have made them lose their smell and generally seem less human (Klein 2023, 112). However, while being clear that this is "gonzo stuff," Klein acknowledges that there is something that *feels true* about what Wolf says: "There is a lifelessness and anomie to modern cities, and it did deepen during the pandemic—there is a way in which many of us feel we are indeed becoming less alive, less present, lonelier. It's not the vaccine that has done this; it's the stress and the speed and the screens and the anxieties that are all by-products of capitalism in its necro-techno phase. But if one side is calling this fine and normal and the other side is calling it 'inhuman,' it should not be surprising that the latter holds some powerful allure." In a style that might be characterized as calmly passionate, Klein's project seems to me to be aligned with Schaefer's, in that both demonstrate that the rational debunking of the pseudoscientific claims does not quite meet the challenge of undoing the affective allure of the mirror world of conspiracies.

What is true of science also seems true of slow critical analysis more broadly. It puts me in the mind of another of my treasured interlocutors from my PhD days, Noam Chomsky. When trying to grapple with horrific events in Israel and Palestine of late, I find myself rereading Chomsky, and appreciating his calm passion. It stands in such contrast to the dominant mode of today, the hot-headed internet tirade. Even in the face of outrageous events, there is a real satisfaction in developing a more critical engagement that is slower and stronger. Schaefer's brilliant book *Wild Experiment* provides an exquisite model of what a calmly impassioned argument looks like, and this makes the book absolutely vital not only for STS and religious studies and the other scholarly fields on which it draws and to which it contributes, but also to broader conversations of our age.

Note

¹ *Oxford Languages*, “Durability,” accessed November 17, 2024, <https://www.google.com/search?q=durability>.

² See <https://www.etymonline.com/word/durability>.

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