

Vanessa Cambier - Slowing Down with Fast Films: The Animated Work of Sally Cruikshank

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Discovering Sally Cruikshank's Work

The first time I saw Sally Cruikshank's animated film *Quasi at the Quackadero* (1975) it ran in the middle of a program including 15 other short experimental films, all made in the 1960s- 1970s. Shown as part of a special screening of 35mm projections at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, *Quasi* just appeared; the anthropomorphic ducks Quasi and Anita struck me as strange screen-mates to films by Stan Brakhage and Kenneth Anger. I was immediately hooked. The entire screen transformed into the bright, loud, and fantastical world of the Quackadero, an amusement park centered on various forms of time travel. For ten minutes, I sat enthralled by the bizarre antics of Quasi and Anita, a quarreling couple of duck-human hybrids, and Rollo, a small but spirited mechanical pet on wheels. As the trio made their way through the various time warps and psychic adventures, all within the walls of the Quackadero's amusement park atmosphere, I could not believe I had never heard of Sally Cruikshank.

A brief search of her career after the screening revealed how important she was to the landscape of American, independent film in the late 1970s and into the 1980s. From 1986 to 1996, the American Film Institute gave out an annual Maya Deren Award for Independent Film and Video. The first recipients of the award were Stan Brakhage, Nam June Paik, and Sally Cruikshank.^[1] And, at the time of the Walker screening in 2014, *Quasi at the Quackadero* had just been added to the National Film Registry.^[2] It made sense that Cruikshank's film was shown in a series of other experimental films. What did not make sense was why her work seemed to lack critical engagement and scholarly attention. I was also struck by her erasure from feminist media histories. Throughout that year, I had been conducting research on experimental and avant-garde films made by women and Sally Cruikshank was nowhere to be found within the scholarship on the topic. The 1970s saw a large number of women making films, working independently, entering film and animation programs in record numbers, and creating artwork that would both push against socio-political, gendered boundaries and have long-reaching aesthetic influences on contemporary films and television. Sally Cruikshank was a vital part of that formative history.

In terms of Cruikshank's place in the field of animation studies, both *Quasi at the Quackadero* and *Make Me Psychic* (1978) are regularly cited in critical histories of animation. Generally given brief mention, Cruikshank's work is set adrift in a sea of other female animators coming to prominence around the same time. Language typically employed to describe *Quasi at the Quackadero* and *Make Me Psychic* include words like "zany," "madcap," and "wildly inventive." These descriptions are by no means off the mark and both films are indeed "zany" and perhaps even "madcap." I will add that these films are also *fast*; they move rapidly and through an abundance of scenarios in their roughly 10-minute run times.

My aim, in this article, is to slow down and linger in these fast films. Slowing down, and putting pressure on individual moments within the texts, or reading them against their 'grain' (so to speak), challenges us to view them differently--perhaps even against the director's intentions. To clarify, it is not so much that Sally Cruikshank's work has been totally ignored; though it has received nowhere near its due attention. Rather, it has been watched carelessly, and only in the spirit of that high-energy, fast-moving fun that it provokes. Her films are animation for adults that play with older forms of aesthetics historically meant for children (i.e., cartoons). This is also how Cruikshank's work has been interpreted. Placing Cruikshank within that crucial, formative history of female, independent animators and artists opens up new viewing practices and levels of meaning or interpretation.

To invoke Patricia White, women's filmmaking and feminist politics are always already interconnected, because they demand dual focus on both their own production histories and critical scholarship of other films made by women. I argue, in that spirit, Cruikshank's films have yet to be analyzed in terms that go beyond their production histories (White, 2015). Or, at least, with attention to the critical aesthetics evident in *Quasi* and *Psychic*. Slowing down their reading demonstrates that these two films are, on the one hand, deeply symptomatic and illustrative of anxieties that arise from changing social landscapes. At the time of their production, in the mid-1970s, they reflected the placelessness of the American promise or American dream. The films' feminist stakes, occasionally described as "partial," come to life in the contexts of rapidly changing gender politics of the American landscape in the 1970s. During this time, a wave of female filmmakers and animators crafted very new visual representations, often providing panoramic, multi-dimensional views of life.^[3] On the other hand, and on the other side of anxiety, the films radiate agency especially through the combination of aggravated and fidgety characters, edgy visuals, and narratives that supply constant access to carnivalesque situations and atmospheres.

Both affect and agency emerge in these films unattached to specific bodies. They are mobile and abundant, easily read as "zany" in shorthand, and, I argue, have something to tell us about Cruikshank's critical relevance to the contemporary moment when one takes a slower approach to viewing them. *Quasi at the Quackadero* and *Make Me Psychic* provide a sharp elucidation of American life past and present; they have a built-in breathing room that makes them also applicable now as critique especially against the backdrop of feminist scholarship reassessing feminism's second wave for its continued importance in our contemporary moment. At the same time, animation studies is also looking back to recoup histories of female animators and the work they made. Cruikshank's filmmaking especially connects us to contemporary feminist cultural politics and "offers a less stable frame through which to view women's work." That frame, in other words, offers a vital, flexible feminist view of a rapidly shifting concept of America (White, 2015).

Stealing Scraps of Time: Sally Cruikshank at Snazelle Films

During the production of *Quasi* and *Psychic*, Sally Cruikshank was working in San Francisco at Snazelle Films. Of her time at that job, Cruikshank says she "was like a respected houseplant...I had permission to experiment in animation, little oversight, paid a low but manageable salary, no harassment...I've always been a loner" (email interview,

2019). Here, the language of the domestic and private intersect with the concept of producing film semi-independently. While Cruikshank was certainly allowed access to space and equipment around and outside of company time, her choice of language describing her role in the company and at work is noteworthy. While she suffered no harassment at her job and worked primarily alone, the domestic environment carries into the way she describes herself, a “respected houseplant.” This, I argue, aligns with the way in which the majority of feminist artists and filmmakers were working at the time.^[4] Often working from home, around the limitations of family, time, and child care, and sometimes in the shadows of successful artist/filmmaker partners, women started stealing scraps of space and time to create.^[5]

In her text *Women & Animation: A Compendium*, Pilling uses an essay on Sally Cruikshank by film critic, historian, and scholar J. Hoberman written in 1981. While a shorter article, it is quite perceptive in its assessment of Cruikshank’s work and its relation to both the past and the contemporary. Contemporary here signifies in two ways. First, it is the contemporary of the 1970s; the films are products of their times, particularly in terms of their psychedelic aesthetics. Second, I also mean contemporary in a fluid sense that extends even to our own contemporary in 2019. Already in 1981, Hoberman’s article captures something of both Cruikshank’s films and our American landscape, stating, “Her cartoons revel in the depiction of impulse behaviour, their characteristic image is the amusement park (with its promise of fun and freedom, a suggestive metaphor for America itself,” (Pilling, Hoberman, 1992). I would go even further. They now offer suggestive metaphors for grappling with the neoliberal politics of feminist agency and creativity. For example, they attempt to rebrand sites of labor as akin to the amusement park and even, in many circumstances, the laborer as independent artist.

Currently, in 2019, several popular animated texts bear striking influences of Sally Cruikshank’s animated characters from this time period at least partially cribbing the characters Quasi and Anita, and aspects of the wild world of the Quackadero. Specifically, Lisa Hanawalt’s brilliant shows *Tuca and Bertie* and *BoJack Horseman* demonstrate, quite clearly, the influence of Cruikshank’s early work in animated film as well as her later work in GIFs and computer coding featuring an animated horse named Whinsey.^[6] So, the question remains, for me at least: why have these films been misrecognized and commonly reduced to the “zany” when they clearly help forge original pathways toward new deploying new representational strategies within existing patriarchal media systems?

Jayne Pilling and Maureen Furniss have written evocatively about Sally Cruikshank’s work situating it in the independent animation scene in the 1970s, which offered burgeoning roles for women. As Maureen Furniss notes, “During the 1970s, animation programs saw an increase in the enrollment of women, and many of them...were interested in making films that focused on gender issues, identity, and domestic or creative spaces” (Furniss, 2016). Women were gaining access to creative production spaces and making those spaces their own. Considered in terms of the larger feminist art movement occurring in America in the 1970s the works were often public displays of domestic labor that took “women’s work” into public spaces.^[7] Notably, while Cruikshank’s films themselves are not specifically representing gender or identity issues, they are, in a unique way, illuminating something unique about domestic space and creative settings. Also notable is the way in which a great deal of women’s work was described as representing the “feminine,” the “psyche,” and types of “embodiment” only accessible through, unsurprisingly, the

feminine psyche. Cruikshank's films do engage these terms but, starting with *Quasi*, also turn them on their heads and inside-out.

Quasi at the Quackadero: Quasi and Anita

The opening sequence of *Quasi at the Quackadero* reimagines domestic space and renders new representational strategies of terms such as "feminine," "psyche," and "embodiment" by shifting the focus of the domestic scene immediately to issues of labor. Highlighting labor at home is eventually contrasted to what takes place in the outside world, namely affect. I read affect in this film as something produced by noncathartic yet agential emotional experiences that take place outside of domestic space and arise from situations of social and public interaction.^[8] Further, *Quasi* opens with an ambivalent stance towards what constitutes the differences between labor and affect, a tension that becomes a stage on which most of the film's narrative plays out.

Quasi at the Quackadero also sets up a seemingly heteronormative relationship between Quasi and Anita only to undo this logic as the film progresses. The film opens in Quasi's bedroom where he is sitting in bed, eating cake. This bedroom scene acts as a foreshadowing for the adventures yet to come at the Quackadero, an amusement park full of features that bend and manipulate time. The Quackadero is also the destination point at which the majority of the film's (very loose) plot unfolds. The bedroom is further a visual double for the amusement park atmosphere that dominates the rest of the film; Quasi's bed canopy is nearly identical to the entrance to the Quackadero. This pointed foreshadowing is more than just that, though. The doubling grounds one of the primary confusions the film celebrates, the confusion between interior and exterior, among a sea of auxiliary confusions based on time, identity, and memory.

The confusion between interior and exterior, the bedroom and the Quackadero, creates a kind of charged, carnivalesque atmosphere that runs across the landscape of this film. But, it also flows across and through the characters themselves. Quasi, Anita, Rollo, all find themselves, at various points, negotiating the fuzzy border, and border breakdown, between what might qualify as the inside and the outside of their individual experiences.

On one hand, we can read this, at the outset of *Quasi*, as the whimsical nature of an animated world, a world in motion and full of potential where objects vibrate in anticipation of moving or speaking. On the other hand, though, there is the horror of a world that never stops, never shuts off and at nearly every turn, demands interaction. Every object in this world has a face including cars, houses, telephone poles. Objects say 'hello' and 'goodbye' and, occasionally, carry on conversation. The stakes of this disruption, within the charged atmosphere of a seemingly never-ending carnival, largely play out, in Cruikshank's work at the level of motion.

Cruikshank's approach to motion informs and produces a concept of affect that can only arise from animation. It is excessive and, here in *Quasi*, uniquely placeless. The affective atmosphere is abundant and full of competing energies that are everywhere and also no place, attached to nobody in particular.

The cut to the factory production line signals a tension in the text around the concept of animation in a different sense. Bodies animated by labor take the center of the frame. The

factory itself is also pictured as part of this strange world, the constantly moving and shifting landscape full of faces and talking cars. The divide between machine and man, laborer or not, is not presently different. Agency is everywhere as labor and leisure bleed into each other, also abundant and as placesless as its twin, affect. The only true “humans” in the film thus far, the factory workers produce cakes at various stages of decoration. The factory itself is brightly colorful and aesthetically akin to Quasi’s bedroom and hence also the Quackadero. This then poses the question, is everything in Quasi’s bedroom moving or actually performing labor? And, where do we locate the differences between labor and leisure?

Time, identity, reincarnation, and various selves projected from infancy to decay all form the center of amusement in this ever-moving world. And, as nothing stops working, moving, or interacting, this reinforces the slippage between fun and factory production. A dialectic between motion and being moved (physically through labor or affectively) largely plays out through constantly quivering characters, and the ‘being moved’ of labor, on the one hand, and regular expressions of aggressive anger, on the other (particularly in terms of Anita). The tension between exuberant joy and terror erases the necessity for ‘cause and effect’ scenarios in the narrative of the film thus, again, opening up spaces where the main focus is character response. The relationship between time and over exaggerated emotions seems to be the clearest link to the plot or narrative, over even needing the constant presence of the main characters. And the film builds this relationship over time and through playing with the concept of time. Starting in Quasi’s bedroom where nothing much seems to matter and then presenting a series of scenarios in which horrible things happen or are constructed as a memory that might be true or false, the importance of “effect” (and possibly even “cause”) seems to fall away in favor of holding tensions.

However, and counter to Quasi’s immobility, Anita is the character who disrupts the logic of the ideology that aligns women or a concept of the feminine with immobility, motionlessness, and domestic space. Anita enters the frame and her presence shifts the sequence’s dominant shots. Originally initiated into the diegesis through medium distance shots, Anita brings a new dynamic. Anita’s affective engagement with nearly everything in the film, but especially Quasi, is through aggressive anger. Anita’s anger here is at Quasi’s indifference and this switches the shot logic to a series of extreme close-ups. Often used in narrative cinema to help express emotion and interiority, the close-up here is used to show Anita’s anger, to be sure. The anger, though, does not only emerge from a look or a series of facial expressions but also from small daggers literally shooting out of Anita’s eyes. But we are now also aware of the constant movement of Anita’s face. Her eyebrows, eyes, and lips never stop moving. The incessant wavering of eyelashes, the never-ending shifting and rolling of eyes, the constant pucker to frown of the lips. Each word Anita speaks changes the movement and expression of her face eventually allowing her words and face to blend as she states, “You know we are going to the Quackadero today.”

The mobility of Anita’s expression combined with her general annoyance and frequent aggression towards Quasi reframes the conventions of the close-up shot. Generally used for the purposes of studying the subject at close range and, especially in the case of women, showing emotion, Anita’s close-ups are multitudes of movement as one can never quite catch her expression before it changes. And, her cross-fade with the Quackadero itself aligns her with the carnival or circus. Often associated with excessive

displays of emotional outburst, Anita's character might be the closest thing available that insinuates a representation of some kind of feminized experience. Cruikshank's films give us an example of the way in which animation can ride an affective tension between fun and terror. Specifically, in the case of Anita, we are handed a model of female anger that does not fall into the category of supposedly "hysterical" or the stereotypical overly angry or vindictive woman. Rather, this affective tension allows Anita's anger to be fun (the Quackadero!), terrifying (daggers!), and never quite settling on either term fully. The film also channels Anita's not quite human status here through her interactions with Rollo. The two clearly have chemistry. However, Rollo is also clearly a sort of sentient motor bike and pet. So, the entire notion of female anger embodied by Anita and directed at Quasi (a masculine counterpart) is satirized through a near-love triangle with a vehicle. The fight between Anita and Quasi, a dynamic that infuses the rest of the film centered on supposed female anger and male apathy, is undone as nothing less than ludicrous here at the outset of the film. This undoing has larger stakes. It also starts to erode conventional genre tropes such as surrealist cartoons, feminist art, experimental film or any number of labels that might include comedy, drama, anime, or fantasy. *Quasi* does something that Thomas Lamarre notes, in his methodology at least, as tracking animation's potentials rather than stating what it actually is (Lamarre, 2018).

If these conditions have actively suppressed, rerouted, or "un-translated" certain past forms of feminist activism and scholarship they have not yet rendered them unrecognizable in our current moment; rather, they are hyper-recognizable. Current associations with the labor of the "creative class" as "freedom" and "fun" instead of with the falsity of the American Dream, then certain forms of aesthetic representation, like film and animation, especially made by women working during the 1970s might also be disregarded as either representations of something "feminine" or the products of a "silly" imaginative process instead of being recognized as critique.

Cruikshank's films negotiate, within their textual-visual centers, a slippery relation to easy historical placement. When we go, along with Quasi, Anita, and Rollo, to the Quackadero we are entering an amalgamation of references that Cruikshank evokes: silent slapstick comedies starring figures such as Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton, and also American cartoons of the 1930s and 1940s, often considered the "golden age of American animation" (Furniss, 2016). As Furniss notes, these films focused on pranks, comedy, satire, and caricature (especially of the Hollywood star system). Furniss makes a critical point about the studio's development of humor through sound elements such as "film music, sound effects, and skillful delivery of dialogue" (133). And, for Russett and Starr, the "comic cartoon" often eclipses the "experimental" in terms of written history and analysis (1988).

Cruikshank's work skillfully blends the history of the "comic" with elements of the "experimental" creating work that inhabits both worlds, skillfully blending them together until there is neither a beginning nor an end. Rather, the constant tussle of experiment and cartoon keeps both films moving. Attractions like "Tunnel of Youth," "Your Shining Moment," "Think O' Blink," and "9 Lives 2 Live" are all featured at the Quackadero and become structuring devices for the story itself. Variations on the movement of chronological time are important both for the narrative but also for the form of the film. The looseness of the narrative seems to invade the film's form and vice versa. Whatever continuity existed prior to entering the Quackadero seems to break down further as the

editing differences and shot composition changes again from that of the medium and close-up shots of Quasi and Anita to a nearly sole reliance on medium and long-shots. The three characters, much like the workers in the factory at the beginning, get folded into the world of the Quackadero and become increasingly less important to the diegesis.

Make Me Psychic: Anita's Animation

In *Make Me Psychic* the primary characters from *Quasi at the Quackadero*, Quasi and Anita are, again, present. This time, though, Anita's psychic journey guides most of the story and a new love interest, Snozzy, is introduced. The films, though, are strikingly similar. They center on similar characters, the colors and sounds are largely the same, the jerky character motions persist. Less movement fills this entire world, as it did at the Quackadero, reserving the shifting and vibrating for the main characters and some, but not all objects. Anita is the central focus and, once she purchases a psychic device called a Mesmerama. From here, the heart of the film takes place in Anita's domestic interior and highlights the relationship between her physical body and inner life.

As Anita prepares for a party her clothing seems to have a life of its own. Her dress chokes her, her shoes flip on and off of her feet, and her hairbrush seems to give her hair a sort of movement and life of its own. The point here is that the animated world of crazy toys and psychic devices is largely the same whether or not the Mesmerama is active. Even Anita's makeup routine is disrupted (or possibly just erupts) into an encounter with the bizarre.

By the time Anita reaches for the Mesmerama to turn it on, Anita's world, or at the very least her domestic life, has been explained as already affected by independently moving objects, clothing and makeup with lives of their own, and a home full of objects that is not very different than the novelty shop. At this point, we are also in the position of hypnotized subject or viewer. An extended sequence of hypnotic white lines leaves us suspended for a time both inside and outside the world of the film. A series of flashing red lights pull us back to Anita as she kind of swirls around in a daze. Her body splits into two as her psychic or perhaps internal self walks away from her physical self still sitting on the edge of the bathtub. In the next frame, the physical self looks transparent and the internal self looks solid. This reversal marks a confusion, just as the makeup and clothing sequence did, regarding which Anita has actual psychic powers and if there is any difference between them at all.

At this point, Anita begins waving her hands at various objects in her house; her piggy bank comes to life and spits out coins as it oinks, her fingers produce an electrical charge, and vacation trinkets come alive. Anita waves her hand and a pencil draws on its own producing a picture that moves or animates itself. As she steps toward the television set, it moves and falls over releasing the small figure of a man from inside of it. Just like the paper, the interior of the fish tank takes over the entire frame dissolving the inside/outside border of the scene. The limits of a piece of paper or a fish tank disappear through this process of bringing things to life. The man and the fish continue to swim through a range of arches and buildings, happening upon a mermaid and a castle with a drawbridge. As the fish swims toward the viewer, mouth open, we go into the dark. As an eyeball emerges from the black background, the momentary collapse of inside and outside, spatial boundaries and infinity, dark and light provide a moment of

representational alchemy; this creates an overall blur between public/private, interior/exterior, and comic/experimental.

If all of these terms are difficult to define, Cruikshank exploits that difficulty to produce a body of films that challenges categorization. And, the films also defy only one form of critical engagement. So, while *Quasi at the Quackadero* and *Make Me Psychic* are certainly “zany” they are also loaded texts that point to the mobile conditions of placelessness through concurrent represents of both anxiety and agency. Emerging in each text as a symptom of constant relationality (to another being, to the landscape, to anything really), anxiety and agency take the place of older ideas about fixed boundaries and ossified notions of public and private spheres. Furthermore, one of the primary debts we *all* owe second-wave feminism is understanding the private sphere as a site of the silent reproduction of public capital and industry.^[9] In other words, the personal is *still* political and Cruikshank’s films carry an older version of that feminist rallying cry into a recent moment of America through her animation.

The interplay between the history of mainstream animation and the work of independent filmmakers is itself an important topic. Maureen Furniss reminds us that the “perseverance and accomplishments of animators creating short, independently produced work sustains the vitality of the animation world” (2016). The keyword here is “sustains.” There is much more work to be done on Sally Cruikshank’s films and many others, to be sure. Cruikshank’s animation is indeed independently made and should be considered in the light of larger questions about women working within the industry. However, both *Quasi at the Quackadero* and *Make Me Psychic* do not only sustain the industry, they also advance feminist debates about representation. When we slow down and look closely, these films open up new feminist artistic pathways that move between our current moment and the 1970s. Circling back to the start, to my first encounter with Sally Cruikshank’s films, I am forced, once again, to relive encountering a vibrant film like *Quasi at the Quackadero* in the midst of a screening centered on live-action experimental films made by men. Perhaps the curation actually produced a significant interruption into the male-dominated world of experimental cinema, encouraging me to slow down and take a closer look at Sally Cruikshank’s films and her legacy.

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Notes

[1]

<https://www.undergroundfilmjournal.com/underground-film-history-afis-maya-deren-award/>.

This entry lists the entire history of winners, most of whom are well known and highly regarded independent filmmakers, many of whom were women, including Shirley Clarke, Joan Jonas, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Julie Dash, Chick Strand.

[2] Please see at <https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-09-250/>.

[3] The reference to Cruikshank's "partial feminism" can be found in: Paul Wells, *Animation and America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 72-3.

[4] For more on this relation between the domestic sphere and its associated labor, as well as the ways in which women artists negotiated new roles as artists, see Judy Chicago's *Through the Flower: My Struggle As a Woman Artist* (1975, 2006). Author's Choice Press. In it, Chicago speaks directly to this concept of environment and the swirl of public and private that women experienced in terms of their creative work, "As we traveled to more studios, we saw that some women had an attitude toward artmaking that was strikingly different from men's. Many women had an interpenetration between their life and their art that made it hard to distinguish where one left off and the other began. Objects, toiletries, children's toys, pets, old postcards and curios, paintings, and drawings all intermingled in a rich, womanly environment" (98-99).

[5] For more on women's new spaces in the world of art (and I argue also filmmaking and animation) as independent creators, please see Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1988). *Women Art and Power*. 145-178.

[6] In the mid-late 1990s, Cruikshank learned how to use animated GIFs and started self-publishing a weekly comic featuring a female horse, Whinsey and Anita the popular duck from *Quasi at the Quackadero* and *Make Me Psychic*. She eventually also learned code to make the characters interactive. For a time, people could ask Whinsey questions and, if they were disgusting, she was programmed to shut them down and tell them to ask something worthwhile. <http://funonmars.blogspot.com/2015/09/>. It is also worth noting that Cruikshank herself sees the relation between her work and Hanawalt's. In an interview I conducted with Sally Cruikshank in May of 2019 she stated that, at least, she "would be really surprised if Bojack wasn't inspired by Whinsey" (email interview, 2019).

[7] Compelling examples include Judy Chicago and Miriam

Schapiro's *Womanhouse* (1972), Mirele Laderman Ukeles' *Maintenance Art Tasks and Hartford Wash* (1973), and Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in May* (1977).

[8] Here, I invoke a similar definition to that of Sianne Ngai in *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2005).

[9] For more on this please see Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body And Primitive Accumulation and Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004); Robin Truth Goodman's *Gender Work: Feminism After Neoliberalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013); Nancy Fraser's *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2013); and Kathi Weeks' *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).