



Dorothee Birke,
Stella Butter (eds.)

COMFORT IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

The Challenges of a Concept

[transcript] Culture & Theory

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Comfort in Contemporary Culture

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Introduction

Challenging Comfort in Contemporary Literature and Culture

Dorothee Birke / Stella Butter

Comfort is a central mark of Western modernity. Indeed, one cannot but marvel at our determination and success in coming up with ever new ways of enhancing “a state of physical and material well-being” by developing ever more products “that produce [...] or minister [...] to enjoyment and content” (both definitions of “comfort” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* [OED]). Our aspiration towards comfort is particularly visible in the concept’s ubiquity in advertisements for a broad range of objects and services, from cars and hotel rooms to panty liners or fabric softener. Apparently, there is no such thing as being too comfortable. This is particularly noticeable in the area of home design: not only do house builders choose names like “Comfortable Living” for their company;¹ we are also instructed on how to choose the “most comfortable flooring” (Canty 2017) and encouraged to expect “comfort-enhancing technologies”² in our bathrooms. But even in the competitive banking sector, to name only one further example from a long list, ‘comfort’ is the road to success: “America’s Most Convenient Bank”, as the Toronto Dominion Bank has successfully branded itself, is admired in the business world for having “achieved the deepest market penetration” in Canada with its catchy slogan “banking can be this comfortable” (Alexander 2015). In the bank’s advertisements, this slogan regularly gleams over a comfy chair, which is very similar to the one on the cover of this book.

While these examples pertain to comfort as physical well-being, convenience, and ease, there is an equally lively discourse on acts of comforting people. Comfort in this context entails “relief or support in mental distress or affliction; consolation, solace, soothing”, to cite the OED once again. A google search yields 3.460.000.000 hits on “how to comfort people”, including a ‘wikihow’. Given that comforting those in distress can itself be deeply uncomfortable, as Val Walker writes in her prize-winning book *The Art of Comforting* (2010: vii), there seems to be a need for practical

1 <https://www.comfortableliving.co.uk/about-us/> (accessed: May 5, 2020).

2 https://www.duravit.co.uk/products/all_series/viu.com-en.html (accessed: May 5, 2020).

help with comforting. Such a need testifies, once again, to the high value that is placed on comfort in the first place. In the words of Val Walker, a “comforter’s embrace does the same thing” as “what a cast or a brace does for a broken arm”: “holding us together when we feel broken” (xiv; emphasis in original). In such a view, finding comfort through another appears as nothing less than a condition for psychological survival. Becoming a comforter when need be, in turn, becomes an ethical imperative.

As diverse as these outlined discourses centring on comfort are, they are united in their emphatic endorsement of comfort as good. However, we seem to be equally obsessed with the benefits of discomfort. The idea that we need to ‘get out of our comfort zone’ has become a contemporary mantra in widely differing fields, be they public health, business management, political activism, or higher education teaching. At the same time, the physical comforts of modernity have themselves come under suspicion. There is a growing consciousness that material comfort may have costs beyond those that are visible in an individual consumer’s bank balance. A rising number of voices point to exploitative labour relations that enable comfortable homes and workplaces, not to speak of the thorny issues of sustainability and environmental protection. Comfort, then, is a challenging concept in more ways than one. It is challenging due to its multidimensionality, the many meanings it can take on in different settings, but also because the concept of ‘comfort’ serves as an arena for battling ideologies. A focus on comfort helps tap into neuralgic points of contemporary cultures.

While research contributions centring on comfort can be found in architecture, anthropology, social geography, sociology, history, philosophy, and nursing studies, there is a need for an interdisciplinary dialogue that can explain how and to what ends comfort is valorised in different social fields and discourses. The aim of this volume is to explore what contributions cultural and literary studies can make to such a dialogue. It brings together essays by scholars of literary and media studies, art history, and linguistics in order to analyse the shaping of comfort as a cultural narrative and emotional touchstone. The volume thus pursues some fundamental larger questions: How do representations of dis/comfort in literature, the arts, or media connect to or complicate existing idea(l)s of comfort? How can relations between comfort and discomfort be conceptualised? Wherein lies the value of dis/comfort? How is the concept mobilised by specific discourses or ideologies? How may the semantics of ‘comfort’ help trace cultural formations?

In the following, we will present a compact selection of recent theoretical approaches that represent different avenues of conceptualizing comfort in contemporary Western societies. On this foundation, we will then outline our take on the role of studies of literature, culture, and linguistics and introduce the individual contributions collated in the volume.

1. Modern Comfort: Genealogies and Debates

The need for physical comfort is, in the words of the philosopher and design theorist Tomás Maldonado, a distinctly “modern idea” (1991: 35). Maldonado is one of a number of scholars who posit close ties between a development of the ideal of comfort and processes of modernisation, such as technological advancement, urbanisation, the invention of the nuclear family, and the rise of capitalism and consumer culture. Anthropologists, historians, and sociologists in particular have contributed to mapping out these relations, stating that advances of modernisation led to shifts in the meaning of comfort, namely from spiritual support to a “privately experienced, sensory contentment” (Boni 2016: 138). As the anthropologist Stefano Boni argues, the broad availability of “technological-propelled comfort” (though not evenly distributed around the globe) is a modern phenomenon and its pursuit central to the forging of the contemporary self (ibid.: 133). Using Foucault’s terminology, Boni regards practices of comfort as a “technology of the self” that is tailored to effectively screen the subject from “the toil and impurity associated with direct contact with the organic world” (ibid.: 138).

For the historian John E. Crowley (1999), the key period for this shift is the rise of “a new material culture” (750) in the eighteenth century. This consumer revolution, Crowley explains, should not be understood as merely driven by a ‘natural’ desire for physical comfort shared by humans across time, as there is a large extent of cultural variance in what counts as a comfortable environment (ibid.). Instead, “[p]hysical comfort [...] was an innovative aspect of Anglo-American culture, one that had to be taught and learned” (ibid.). In his detailed analysis of the discourse on comfort in the eighteenth century, Crowley traces how the idea of comfort first served to legitimise new patterns of popular consumption by unsettling the previous economic and moral dichotomy between necessity and (insidious) luxury. Thinkers of political economy during that time pointed out that what counts as a luxury or a necessity depends on context: “Standards of living could improve. The term ‘comfort’ increasingly applied to those standards, and assessed their fulfillment.” (Ibid.: 751)

Crowley (1999: 764) shows how the “extent and degree of convenience and comfort among the populace” came to be seen as a yardstick to measure Europe’s progress towards civilisation. This helps explain why, towards the end of the century, humanitarians regarded physical comfort, understood as a universal and *natural* need, as “a right of the unprivileged” (ibid.: 752) in their striving for social justice. Such a humanitarian construction of comfort still endures today, as can be seen by the name of a Nigerian human rights organisation, namely the “Comfort Human Right Foundation”, whose slogan “access to justice and development”

reflects their aim to further social justice in Nigeria, especially the protection of women and children.³

However, comfort did not just become a concept that could be mobilised in political agendas – scholars also point out its key function in defining social norms. For Maldonado, the ideal of comfort functions as “a scheme for social control” (1991: 35) and conditions disciplinary practices. In particular, he regards the comfortable home in bourgeois Victorian England as a site in which patterns of order (e.g. gender order and class values) and practices of hygiene are instilled. The worried concern with public hygiene during the nineteenth century, which was equally a discourse on social morality, posited the city and the house or home as “an intimate part of the same system of hygiene” (ibid.: 40). Other scholars also agree with Maldonado’s view that ideology of physical comfort can be associated with the rise of the middle-class in the nineteenth century in that it provided “crucial values, consumption patterns, and behaviors for the formation of a middle class” (Crowley 1999: 780).

The continuing significance of the home as a “microcosm [that] perfectly exemplifies the relation between modernization and comfort” (Maldonado 1991: 36) also resonates through the work by the sociologist Elizabeth Shove, who focuses on the progress of comfort in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In her study *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality* (2003), Shove describes the sphere of the domestic as the central place where comfort is performed in daily rituals that have since the nineteenth century drastically changed perceptions of what are ‘normal’ standards of consumption and hygiene. Her study is notable for her astute conceptualisation of the complex interplay between everyday practices of comfort, sociotechnical objects, and sociotechnical systems (ibid: 48ff.).

A similar interest for the interplay between practices and objects characterises Boni’s exploration of the significance of screens, i.e. “artificial shields separating humans from their surroundings” and thereby “disentangling the body from undesired sensuous interactions, mostly with the untamed organic” (2016: 138). His list of screens ranges from thermal control in buildings, the replacement of breastfeeding with milk bottles, to vaccines that protect against the experience of diseases. It seems to us that in the current Corona crisis with its focus on screens (be they plexiglass barriers in supermarkets or face masks), both the desire to control our encounters with the organic through shields and the limitations of such endeavours are becoming glaringly obvious. We can currently also witness the ways in which attempts to inhibit the “direct, [...] sensuous involvement with organic materials [... and] environments” (ibid.: 139) are entangled with the ideology of consumerism.

3 <http://co-hrf.org/> (accessed: May 5, 2020).

Tellingly, the plexiglass screens are repeatedly described as not only ensuring a safe but also a “comfortable [...] space for [...] valued customers” (Geller 2020).

The “collective restructuring of expectation and habit” (Shove 2003: 4) effected by an increasing global demand for comfort has obvious dark sides. Not least, the “escalation” of such demand, e.g. for the thermal comfort provided by heating and air conditioning, fuels unsustainable consumption (ibid.: 3). Roughly half of the energy consumption worldwide takes place in buildings and a substantial portion of this “is devoted to keeping people comfortable” (ibid.). This critical interrogation of how comfort practices contribute to environmental degradation underlines once again how comfort continues to be deeply politicised across different fields. Some thinkers even go as far as to posit the desire for comfortable consumption as the root cause of an alleged political passivity in Europe and the United States since the early twentieth century (Boni 2016: 147).

All these inquiries are linked by their understanding of Western modernity as fixated on physical and material comfort. This certainly illuminates some of the main issues linked with modernisation and also helps to interrogate some of its problematic aspects, such as the focus on consumerism, the reliance on technology as a guarantor of progress, and the relation between growth and sustainability. However, we would argue that two points in particular should receive more attention: one, the continuing role of non-material dimensions of comfort and two, what in some ways seems to be the corollary of the obsession with comfort, namely an appreciation of discomfort.

To start with the second point, as already briefly mentioned above, there are many contemporary discourses extolling the positive effects of discomfort, particularly those crystallizing around the catchphrase of the ‘comfort zone’. A comfort zone, in current parlance, is usually to be avoided rather than sought. According to the OED, early uses of the phrase link it to material conditions, as “the range of temperatures within which an environment is habitable”. However, this usage is now overshadowed by a figurative meaning, where the comfort zone is a “situation in which a person feels secure or at ease”, often with a negative spin: “an established pattern of (professional) behaviour which presents few difficulties or challenges and yields only acceptable results, but which one is reluctant to change” (all OED). Comfort, in this sense, is attributed to a mental state or cognitive condition; the model underlying the negative connotation of the comfort zone is that of growth or development needing to be spurred by a certain amount of stress.

This figure of thought has been applied in various fields, from business management theory concerned with work performance (White 2009) to higher education, where students are encouraged to “push the boundaries of your comfort zone” and thereby “test and expand the limits of your mind and pave new experiences that are *unsimilar* in scope and breadth to your past” (Umelloh 2017). The notion of the ‘comfort zone’ as an impediment to development has been criticised as be-

ing based on simplistic understandings of principles from education theory, like Piaget's concept of accommodation or Festinger's concept of cognitive dissonance (Brown 2008). Brown cautions that it should not be understood as a proper part of a theory of education or an empirically proven finding, but a figure of thought whose popularity (as he argues for his own field, outdoor education) may even have detrimental effects: "I suggest that the adoption of the comfort zone model and the assumptions that underpin it have less than desirable consequences in terms of student engagement, psychological well-being and emotional safety." (Ibid.: 10) However, it may be exactly the undertheorised character of the 'comfort zone' idea that makes it so amenable to being mobilised for a variety of discourses and their identity models, from a neoliberal interest in optimising the individual productivity of employees to an emancipatory rhetoric about students needing to be jolted into independent thinking.

Our second contention, namely that a full investigation of the significance of comfort and modernity also needs to pay close attention to the relation between physical/material and other types of comfort, is bolstered by an important theoretical contribution from a field that by its nature has a strong interest in the practical applications of comfort: nursing studies. 'Comfort theory', an approach developed in the 1990s by the American nursing theorist Katharine Kolcaba, conceives of itself as a reaction against an increasingly technological approach to comfort in health care in the course of the twentieth century. As Kolcaba explains, comfort came to be seen as secondary to the "larger purpose of effecting cure" (2003: 22) and as geared towards facilitating "an absence of specific discomforts" mainly in a physical sense (ibid.: 20) – a tendency that fits perfectly with the historical and sociological models introduced above. Conversely, Kolcaba herself advocates a return to the holistic understanding exemplified in the work of the pioneer of modern nursing, Florence Nightingale, whose followers saw the ability to make a patient comfortable as essential and as encompassing attention to mental as well as physical factors. On this basis, Kolcaba proposes a model with four "contexts" of comfort that are interactional, i.e. indirectly enhance each other, and therefore all need to be addressed: the physical/organic ("pertaining to bodily sensations"), the psychospiritual ("pertaining to internal awareness of self, including esteem, sexuality, meaning in one's life, and relationship to a higher order or being"), the social ("pertaining to interpersonal [...] relationships"), and the environmental (which includes factors like light, noise, and temperature). (Kolcaba 1994: 1179) Debates on conceptualisations of comfort are flanked with research on further topics, such as patients' experientiality of comfort (Morse 2000) or comforting strategies used by nurses (Hawley 2000), which deepen our understanding of comfort's complexity. On the whole, the theorisation in nursing studies is a powerful reminder of the interactivity between physical and material aspects of comfort with spiritual and affective ones.

2. Comfort Studies: New Perspectives

Given the outlined cultural prominence and complexity of ‘dis/comfort’ as an ideal, it is surprising that there is a scarcity of extended studies exploring competing conceptualisations of comfort and their implications for practices of the self, social and ethical relations, and media or political spheres. In particular, there is a research gap on comfort in literary, media, and cultural studies as well as linguistics – hence the very disciplines that can offer a vital contribution in analysing the shaping of comfort as a cultural narrative and emotional touchstone. The present volume, then, can be understood as a first foray into proposing ‘comfort studies’ as a field to which cultural and literary studies play a central role.

For this project, a holistic model like Kolcaba’s, with its keen attention to comfort as a multi-dimensional process with ethical implications, provides a useful starting point. It complements the sophisticated understanding of the central role of physical or material comfort developed in the historical and sociological studies we have outlined. In combination, those theories provide a solid foundation for analyses of the ways in which cultural artefacts – such as novels, TV series, or art installations – reflect on the contemporary significance and the relation between different kinds of comfort. In turn, as scholars of literature and culture, we are also particularly interested in how such imaginings in the realm of the arts can shape or broaden our understanding of what comfort and discomfort mean on an individual as well as social level.

Our interest in the forms and functions of dis/comfort in these artefacts does not just include the level of that which is represented *in* the texts and other artefacts, but also poses the question of how these productions themselves may induce responses in their recipients that can be described in terms of comfort and discomfort. Understood as a state of mind, comfort pertains to at least two different dimensions, an emotional one (e.g. feeling relaxed and safe) and a cognitive one (e.g. experiencing a sense of familiarity and order). Reception theory has long been interested in the effects of literature and art. What may immediately come to mind is the idea that literature and art have consoling power. As the literary theorist Rita Felski writes in her manifesto *Uses of Literature* (2008):

Reading may offer a solace and relief not to be found elsewhere, confirming that I am not entirely alone, that there are others who think or feel like me. Through this experience of affiliation, I feel myself acknowledged; I am rescued from the fear of invisibility, from the terror of not being seen. (33)⁴

4 That such views are popular far beyond the circle of literary critics is attested to by the fact that the already-mentioned ‘how to’-book, *The Art of Comforting*, written by the bereavement counsellor Val Walker, features a whole section on “The Comfort of Art” (2010: 135-177).

At the same time, there is also a long tradition of valorising *discomforting* reception effects in the arts, such as the technique of defamiliarisation (whereby the familiar is made strange through the way it is represented, thus arguably denying the reader the cognitive comfort of recognition) or the aesthetics of shock (which stages discomfiting phenomena like extreme violence and thereby tries to elicit emotional and ethical reactions from the audience). Examining creative work through the analytic lens of comfort, then, helps to focus on ethical, political, and social functions of art and literature. It enables us to understand how aesthetic artefacts operate in culture and how the modulations of comfort are bound to cultural norms and priorities, power dynamics, and to community building.

The contributions to this volume take up comfort as a challenging concept to engage with key cultural developments and different creative productions. The point of departure is a detailed linguistic analysis of the meaning of ‘comfort’, which illuminates the cultural situatedness of the concept and provides a helpful frame of reference for ideas on comfort in the ensuing articles. Zuzanna Bułat Silva’s article “Lexical-Semantic Analysis of ‘Comfort’” explores the meanings of ‘comfort’ in different European languages, namely European Portuguese (*conforto*), English (*comfort*), and Polish (*komfort*). The methodological framework of Natural Semantic Metalanguage, which Bułat Silva adopts, allows to pinpoint subtle semantic differences between what seems to be the ‘same’ word. These comparisons help explain, for example, why the Polish *komfort* often has negative connotations, in contrast to the English *comfort* or Portuguese *conforto*.

The next article shifts the focus from the semantic meanings of ‘comfort’ to the question of how a particular take on the concept may become productive for critical theory. Burak Sezer’s contribution on “Deceitful Sources of Comfort: The Poetics of Slothfulness in Pynchon” expands current conceptualisations of comfort through its critical discussion of Thomas Pynchon’s writings. Sezer shows how Pynchon’s typology and poetics of sloth outline a complex relationship between sloth and dis/comfort, troubling the widespread idea that sloth should be seen as a pathologising of comfort. By bringing into play the cognitive dimension of comfort, Sezer proposes that for Pynchon, sloth can be either comfortable or uncomfortable and that the difference has political implications: uncomfortable sloth becomes a politicised attitude, in some instances even an instrument of resistance. Pynchon’s multi-faceted approach to sloth, which comprises religious, socio-political, economic, and media aspects, helps calibrate the plight of the individual in contemporary life-worlds.

A very different conceptualisation of comfort is developed in Elisa Carandina’s article “Comfort as an Involuntary Cultural Memory”, which draws on psychoanalytic theories to discuss the human yearning for a ‘comfort zone’ that she defines as that which is familiar. Carandina’s point of departure is the observation that we keep striving for comfort although it may not be good for us. In an innovative

move, Carandina explains this curious dynamic by developing a new understanding of comfort that hinges on repetition compulsion, memory, and normativity. These key concepts are captured in the term she introduces to describe comfort: 'involuntary cultural memory'. Carandina explains why life-writing bears particular affinities to this form of comfort and illustrates the explanatory value of her model by using Leah Goldberg's diary and poems as a case study.

The consolatory function of art is at the centre of Angela Breidbach's art-historical essay "Comfort in Contemporary Art: Shadow Works against the Background of Blumenberg's Notion of Comfort in the Cave". Breidbach uses the term 'shadow works' to refer to artistic productions that evoke the play of shadows within a cave. By drawing on Hans Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology, especially his concept of consolation (*trostbedürftig*) and his model of the cave, Breidbach teases out the complexity of the shadow as a figure in the works of the South African artist William Kentridge and the German artist Hans-Peter Feldmann. The viewer of an artwork, Breidbach argues, can draw comfort from the engagement with a work even if its contents are uncomfortable, as it can also be the form that can be comforting. In thus using comfort as a conceptual lens to discuss the effect of form, Breidbach continues a train of thought that could also be found in Sezer's essay.

It is also a central point in the contribution by Sarah Butler, who reflects on the role of dis/comfort in creative writing from the standpoint of a practitioner ("Writing Dis/Comfort: A Novelist's Approach to Ageing Bodies and Un/Comfortable Places"). From her perspective as a writer, Butler discusses her own novel *Jack & Bet* (published with Picador in 2020), which explores the precariousness of home as a comfortable space in the increasingly uncomfortable landscape of contemporary London. Butler emphasises how the comfort of home derives not just from its material and spatial qualities, but first and foremost from its affective ones. Butler's poetic and theoretical exploration of *Jack & Bet* identifies sources of comfort and discomfort within domestic and urban environments and foregrounds the ageing body as a site of potential dis/comfort. These themes are related to the process of literary production: she understands the novel as an un/comfortable home and the process of writing it as an un/comfortable act of homemaking. The novel, just like the home, she argues, both satisfies and eludes our desire for comforting order and stability.

Andrew Liston's article on "Are You Dwelling Comfortably? Heidegger's Home Comforts in *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt" continues the exploration of comfort within the framework of home. Like Butler, he also foregrounds the idea that 'home' should be understood as a practice rather than a fixed entity, and that comfort as a defining feature of home needs to be understood holistically, in Kolcaba's sense. Liston takes Heidegger's concept of dwelling as a key to reading Tartt's novel as negotiating physical and spiritual comforts of the domestic. The ecocritical implications of dwelling or the 'embeddedness of being' are addressed in Liston's reflec-

tions on the etymology of *ecology* (derived from the Greek word for ‘home’) and on the importance of overcoming the Cartesian divide between self and world that underpins the exploitation of nature. He argues that Tartt’s novel stages the entanglement of self and environment in its depiction of homes, which embody the contention that only a home that enables Heideggerian ‘dwelling’ consonant with the (natural) environment is truly comfortable.

Juliane Strätz’ contribution “Subverting Late Capitalist Comfort: Affective Connections in Deepak Unnikrishnan’s *Temporary People*” also deals with a contemporary novel, but her reading is informed by affect studies and an interest in how fiction critically engages with comfort as an instrument of social reproduction in late capitalism. Unnikrishnan’s *Temporary People* provides a damning critique of the dehumanizing migrant labour that underpins the material comforts enjoyed in rich Arab Gulf States and, by extension, also in the West. Strätz discusses how both the novel’s depiction of abject working conditions and its experimental form make for a deeply discomfoting reading experience. *Temporary People* not only establishes the migrant workers as affective agents with a voice, but it also subverts the capitalist commercialisation of material and affective comfort through its particular uncomfortable evocation of reader response.

The politics of comfort also take centre stage in Didymus Tsangue Douanla’s article, but with a focus on postcolonial diasporic identities (“The Politics of Comfort in J. M. Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*”). Coetzee’s novel *Diary of a Bad Year*, which incorporates political essays written by the protagonist JC, invites an autobiographical reading due to the parallels between JC and J.M. Coetzee, who emigrated from South Africa to Australia. Douanla shows how the ambiguous form of *Diary of a Bad Year* foregrounds that private comfort can never be fully detached from the public domain. He demonstrates how Coetzee develops an ethics of discomfort with regard to the socio-political realm and an ethics of comfort in the sphere of intimate relations, thus relating material and spiritual dimensions of the concept. This ethics of dis/comfort is combined with a metafictional perspective on the dis/comforts of the writer and reader.

The uncomfortable presence of collective trauma in post-9/11 USA is at the centre of Dorothee Marx’ discussion of a very different kind of cultural artefact, a TV series about zombies. In “Gothic Hauntings: Post-9/11 Home Spaces and the Discomfort of American History in AMC’s *The Walking Dead*”, Marx develops a political perspective on discomfort, linking it to the return of the repressed in US-American cultural memory following the 9/11 attacks. She argues that it is actually the violent and racist past experienced by Native Americans in the twenty-first century that resurfaces in the gothic spaces comprising the setting of the series. On the level of response, viewers potentially experience discomfort because their longing for stable, secure, and comforting home spaces is repeatedly shattered. Thus, the series

calls attention to the dubious legacy of its viewers' own 'comfort zones', both in a material and a figurative sense.

The shift from literature to television or film is continued with Nourit Melcer-Padon's article "Embracing Mindful Discomfort: Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird*". Melcer-Padon is interested in the complex psychological relation between discomfort and comfort. *Lady Bird*, the teenage protagonist in Gerwig's coming-of-age film, repeatedly puts herself in uncomfortable and precarious positions to achieve her goal of studying at an elite college. Melcer-Padon draws on discourses of hedonic psychology and mindfulness to explain why discomfort appears as *Lady Bird*'s means for advancement and as her comfort zone. *Lady Bird*'s shocking behaviour can be likened to the form of mindfulness practiced through challenging yoga positions, which require getting comfortable in an uncomfortable position. It is this kind of mindfulness, Melcer-Padon argues, that enables *Lady Bird* to focus on the present while working towards her future.

The fairly recent and popular trend of live theatre broadcasting in cinemas is the focus of Heidi Liedke's article "'These Seats Are So Comfy': Livecasting and the Notion of Comfortable Theatre". The concept of comfort, Liedke argues, provides a helpful lens for examining the changes this trend brings for the experiences of the audience as well as for the public perception of theatre-going and the branding of theatre venues. Liedke's discussion is based on audience responses to livecasts on social media, marketing moves of theatre companies, and her own experience of attending livecasts. By drawing on recent research on audience etiquette and 'feels culture', Liedke is able to identify how the marketing of the livecasting experience and the assessment of its cultural significance hinge on four sources of dis/comfort: physical, visual/aesthetic, emotional, and habitual.

The final contribution to the volume, Simon Strick's "Discomforting Silences in Alt-Right America, 2019", is concerned with the performativity and political effect of discomforting silences in a mediasphere marked by attention-grabbing noise and a culture war waged by the Alternative Right. Strick makes use of affect theory to explain the workings of what he calls a politically 'progressive' and a 'reactionary' form of discomforting silence. The unexpected silence of Emma González at the beginning of her televised speech at the *March for Our Lives* protest event appears as 'progressive silence', whereas the "Lincoln Memorial Confrontation" of January 2019, where white Nick Sandman silently 'stood his ground' against Omaha tribe member Nathan Phillips, is a case of 'reactionary silence' instrumentalised by the Alternative Right. Strick rounds off his discussion by addressing the question of what the problem of un/comfortable silence might mean for his own position as a scholar of the humanities.

As a whole, the contributions offer a kaleidoscopic view of comfort's manifold qualities and the way it structures the fabric of modern life, from our most intimate relations to the theatre of political performance. What this specific mix of contri-

butions particularly highlights is the strong nexus between comfort and discomfort – whether they are seen as two sides of the same coin in a socio-political context or understood as interrelated affective reactions. To reflect on comfort means thinking about how we see ourselves, relate to our environment, and to each other. To speak about comfort is never neutral: saying that something is comfortable or uncomfortable entails a judgment on the part of the speaker. To participate in a book project on comfort in contemporary literature and culture is to take up the challenge of ‘comfort’ by using it as a lens to explore experientialities, attitudes, and value systems.

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