INTRODUCTION
LONELINESS AND TECHNOLOGY

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A US survey published in summer 2021 reported a 'friendship recession' as a contributing factor to the rise of feelings of loneliness and isolation: 12 per cent of respondents said they do not have close friends; this contrasts with 3 per cent in 1990.[1] Half of the respondents report losing friendships during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study positions the pandemic as one of the most obvious factors impacting the rise of loneliness; it also notes the impact of geographic mobility, shifting work patterns and the concentration of leisure time within the nuclear family. Like many studies, this one assesses the risks of loneliness in relation to the severe impact it is reported to have on health, and links it to the rise in various medical conditions.[2] The survey is characteristic of reports that at once position states of loneliness as symptomatic of a contemporary crisis, and its repercussions as detrimental to health. Loneliness has become, as participants of a roundtable in this special issue note, a catch-all term that is often a stand-in for feelings of depression, isolation and a sense of being politically or socially unconnected. It is often negotiated and intensified across screens, and in relation to new technologies, though, the articles in this section concur, that it is not driven uniquely by technology.

To be lonely is to feel the absence of a community; a lack of belonging, whether it be registered as a psychic, social or political state. A respondent to a 2019 Mass Observation survey on loneliness describes their own sense of belonging as an unfolding series of circles; and that they 'get closest to feeling [they] belong when [they are] with the few "inner circle" people who completely accept' them.[3] A sense of loneliness arises, then, when this inner circle is compromised by an internal or external situation; loneliness can be generated through shifting psychic factors, though it is often intimately related to material and social structures that drive a lack of community. There is, as Fred Cooper observes, a shame in articulating loneliness; shame operates as a social forcefield that demands certain kinds of social participation to the exclusion of others.[4] To be lonely is to feel socially undesirable, and the risk of admitting to loneliness is that one feels further excluded from inner social circles, as well as outer ones.

The difficulty with history of emotions research is that it risks conflating vastly different experiences; most people will feel lonely to a certain degree; others' lives will be marked or impoverished by a failure to connect. As participants in the roundtable discuss, language and diagnosis are part of the problem. But if not everyone's loneliness is equal, then focusing on the

1. Daniel A. Cox, 'The State of American Friendship: Change, Challenges, and Loss', 8 June 2021, Survey Centre on American Life, https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/the-state-of-american-friendship-change-challenges-and-loss/. See also: Daniel A. Cox, 'American Men Suffer a Friendship Recession', 6 July 2021.

2. For more on the framing of loneliness as a health problem, see: 'The Guardian View on Loneliness: Editorial', *The Guardian*, 8 May 2023; John Leland, 'How Loneliness is Damaging Our Health', *New York Times*, 20 April 2022.

3. 'Spring 2019 Directive: Loneliness and Belonging', The Mass Observation Project, http://www.massobs.org.uk/images/Spring_2019_Directive.pdf

4. Fred Cooper, 'Loneliness and Shame: Towards a Historical Genealogy', Wellcome Centre, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W48qspUTCHY

5. Hastings
Women's Study
Group, *Women and
Loneliness*, University
of Sussex Centre
for Continuing
Education, 1984.

6. Michel Foucault,
'Technologies of
the Self', in Luther
H. Martin, Huck
Gutman and Patrick
H. Hutton (eds),
*Technologies of the
Self: A Seminar with
Michel Foucault*,
Tavistock, 1998,
pp16-49.

7. Denise Riley, 'The
Right to Be Lonely',
differences, 13.1,
2002, pp1-13.

structural forces in which loneliness arises offers a useful way into a historical and political analysis that cuts through the social panic that surrounds the perceived 'crisis of loneliness'. When the Hastings Women's Study Group, based at the University of Sussex, set out to investigate the topic of women and loneliness in 1984 they observed not only the effects of austerity and the stripping of the welfare state on single mothers, in particular, but how difficult it was to assess the impacts of loneliness since it would necessarily be hardest to reach the loneliest of all, those most subject to social exclusion.[5] As Anna Maguire notes in an article in this section, one of the difficulties in writing about refugees' experiences of loneliness is the absence of refugees' own experiences of being alone. Histories of emotion, like other histories, remain shaped by the class and racial authority of the archive.

Foregrounded in the articles in this section are the technologies that produce and alleviate loneliness. This focus on technologies – understood in the Foucauldian sense as structures that are related to systems of power – is designed to open up questions about the relationship between social structures, cultural resources and the history of emotions.[6] The intention is to understand loneliness not as a free-floating individual emotion but rather as a psychopolitical state that is intimately related to technological forms, social structures, cultural resources and political movements. For Denise Riley, feelings of acceptable or unacceptable loneliness have to be understood within the framework of existing structures of social belonging, most notably, the nuclear family, which determines the shape of most people's inner circle.[7]

As we discuss in the roundtable, scales of loneliness are rarely reliable guides to managing individual experiences of loneliness. These articles complicate the empirical certainty of these scales and tell a history of loneliness that allows for a more complex understanding of the way that social and material infrastructures produce certain psychosocial states. The technologies of loneliness under consideration include feminist magazines and small groups, streaming services, 1960s cinema and refugee infrastructures. The articles look at specific political and cultural moments from the 1950s to the present in the UK and the USA where loneliness is commonly perceived to be in a state of crisis. By providing a historical survey of some of the ways that political and social infrastructures during the postwar period have impacted feelings of loneliness, the articles open up new ways of thinking about how loneliness might be addressed, and its implications, outside of a health framework.

In an article on the women's movement and *Spare Rib* magazine, Eleanor Careless and Jess Cotton chart how women who were brought into the feminist movement in the 1970s transformed their experiences of isolation through grassroots organising and feminist print publications. These political resources and print networks provided a social forum in which experiences of loneliness were articulated and alleviated as they resulted in the generation of new political collectives and queer intimacies. At the heart of this politicisation

of loneliness was a questioning of women's domestic role – a critique, then, of the 'inner circle', and with it an expansion of the intimacies and forms of community that exist outside the nuclear family. The small women's groups and feminist publications allowed women to establish communal networks on their own terms, which spurred the creation of new resources in the local community at a moment when the welfare state was under strain. The letters pages and lonely hearts of *Spare Rib* were designed to bypass the geographical and social exclusions that made women lonely. It was, nonetheless, easier for some women than others to become part of these networks. If women were not geographically and socially isolated, then they were often politically isolated; Black British and Asian British women created their own print publications and feminist communities that redressed the predominately white and middle-class women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s, which generated its own structure of unbelonging.

Anna Maguire charts the loneliness of the refugee as a psychosocial state of exclusion that is systematically produced by Britain's hostile environment. Maguire draws on case studies by Alexander Mezey's psychiatric clinic for Hungarian refugees at the Maudsley hospital in London in the 1950s, where he identified victims of isolation amongst those referred by reception workers. Maguire proposes that, rather than understanding refugees as isolated by the experience of exile, we might think about the structural enforcement of loneliness through inhospitable border policies. Loneliness is, for Maguire, a weapon used by the state to enforce control by weakening states of belonging. The article shows how perceived failures to integrate, assimilate or connect cannot be understood outside of the 1993 Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act and the 1996 Housing Act, which enshrined dispersal as immigration policy. The implementation of the hostile environment forecloses the collective bonds and solidarities that are required for the refugee to create grassroots spaces and communities of their own. In Maguire's reading, whilst the City of Sanctuary movement aims to build 'a culture of hospitality', it often falls into earlier corrective patterns of supporting refugees, rather than allowing them to create communities of their own which might shift the mechanics of social inclusion and exclusion in a more radical way.

The rise of loneliness is often seen to be enmeshed with the emergence of new communication and visual technologies, which provide at once new ways of being together and new ways of being alone. The complex relationship between televisual and cinematic screens and experiences of loneliness is given extensive consideration in articles by Carlo Cenciarelli and Zlatina Nikolova. Cenciarelli's essay examines the conjuncture between new musical and cinematic technologies that inform the 1960s 'cinema of loneliness'. His article shows how the transistor radio, which allowed everyone to be in their own imaginative headspace, even in public, is represented cinematically in the 1967 film *The Graduate*. Through a close reading of the film, Cenciarelli traces the cinema of loneliness' intricate relation with the counterculture.

The article demonstrates how this film, and the cinema-going and listening cultures with which it is entangled, aestheticise loneliness, and offer a version of disaffected youth culture that stands in contrast with the political and communal organising of the late 1960s.

Turning to the contemporary, and to the emergence of new streaming platforms, Nikolova challenges the commonly held perceptions that ceaseless interaction with digital technology is psychologically and socially harmful. Her article maps how ideas of loneliness in studies from the 1960s and 1970s have consequences for how we think about the relationship between loneliness and technology today. Nikolova argues that such streaming devices, rather than producing or intensifying loneliness, might instead be understood as ways of managing it. For Nikolova, these viewing platforms can be understood differently when we think of them as devices of solitude. By shifting our understanding of this new visual technology, Nikolova does not underestimate loneliness as a social problem, but rather shows how the source of the problem lies not in personal viewing habits but rather in the normalisation of social forms of isolation that drive people to solitary viewing.

The article argues that streaming platforms such as Disney Plus, which launched in 2019, engage tactile forms of recognition which, whilst distinct from cinematic viewing, include a performative element of engagement. Disney Plus addresses perceived anxieties about the lack of sociality of streaming platforms by creating a more sensuous, interactive mode of spectatorship. Nikolova shows how the channel has rebranded itself as an object of comfort and connection, which turns on nostalgic associations of Disney in the postwar imaginary that collapses the perceived stark opposition between cinematic publics and individual streaming platforms. The article demonstrates how forms of solitary viewing might be understood as a 'technology of the self', rather than simply as passive consumption. Viewers, she contends, form attachments to streaming platforms that allow them to project, or work through, their psychosocial states of dissatisfaction. Streaming, then, might be understood to provide a reliable medium that allows viewers to work through structures of intimacy, familiarity, and desire. If loneliness is experienced as a state of atemporality – as a state of awaiting company – streaming provides entertainment, financed by conglomerates, for the meantime.

These articles collectively show, then, the importance of thinking loneliness through the infrastructures and technologies that produce states of inclusion and exclusion that allow for an expansive and hospitable 'inner circle'. Some of the most useful and transformative infrastructures and technologies in countering loneliness have been produced at a grassroots level. We see this, in particular, in the way feminist small groups and publications allowed women to connect their own feelings of loneliness and use it as a springboard to generate new forms of collectivity. The work of feminist and local community activism has, however, become increasingly harder to sustain since the 1970s.

In an April 1974 diary entry of the Kingsgate Place Women's Centre in north London, which would close within the year, a volunteer records the intimate relation between states of austerity and loneliness:

> Here I am all alone in an empty house – full of creaking noises. The refrigerator goes on and off and belches frequently. The phone rang. Sherri left no message for Jackie. Well I think I'll use the solitude to some benefit and do some reading – that is before it gets totally dark and I have to start lighting candles and paraffin heaters. There goes the fridge again. How annoying. Imagine – a whole women's centre to myself. A wealth of information at my fingertips and I'm bored.

> I'm leaving – it's cold and lonely here. 9:00[8]

The political attempt to 'end loneliness' – a goal that is, of course, a fantasy – cannot, then, be understood outside of the social, material and cultural resources that allow lonely subjects to create radical communities of their own.[9] States of austerity, which disavow structures of dependence, prevent the solutions that are required to sustain creative and hospital models of community, where loneliness might be experienced not as a state of exception or exclusion, but simply as one feeling among others.

8. Diary 1973-4, Kingsgate Place Women's Centre, 1972-194, 7TAK/03, LSE Women's Library Archives.

9. https://www.campaigntoend loneliness.org/