

## “The Only Thing That’s Never Going Away”: Still Listening to *Blue*

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In a 2009 *New Yorker* cartoon a couple sit opposite each other at a cafe. The man is balding, wearing glasses and a long, paisley scarf draped over an otherwise beige-looking outfit. The woman, also wearing glasses, is in a coat with elbow patches, a psychedelic patterned dress and lace-up knee boots. They have both come, in other words, partially dressed as the late 1960s or early 1970s, the time of their adolescence. The man appears to be speaking as the woman listens, smiling. The caption underneath reads: “The only thing that’s never going away is Joni Mitchell.”<sup>1</sup>

What does this cartoon mean? Is its caption a promise? A complaint? Or something else?

It could be a complaint. Maybe the man prefers other objects from his youth and doesn’t understand the woman’s continued investment in Joni Mitchell. “Joni Mitchell is never going away (but I wish she would)” in other words—a cruel reworking of “Big Yellow Taxi’s” most famous line—which imagines Mitchell as a hanger-on, stubbornly present way past her time. In response, the woman smiles but also grips the table—angry, perhaps, at having Joni Mitchell dismissed and mansplained to her by someone wearing paisley.

The caption also tells us something about how sustained and sustaining an attachment to Joni Mitchell can be. She never goes away—outlasting times, places, friends, other loves—while also providing you with ways to bear these losses. Read as a consolation, the cartoon suggests that these other objects come and go but Joni is forever. We know, of course, that this is and isn’t true, but the cartoon’s promise is a salve, nevertheless.

The cartoon asks us to think about the complex ways that Joni Mitchell is, and isn't, associated with youth and youthful attachments, attachments that we might remain in an ambivalent and intense relationship to when we have "grown up." The recognition that an attachment to Joni Mitchell doesn't go away, and an interest in what that might mean, is what drives this chapter. In it, I will think particularly about the cultural positioning of *Blue* as the Joni Mitchell album that you're supposed to "move on" from. Under the canopy of Joni fandom, *Blue* arguably figures as the entry-level record, the Joni Mitchell that most people will own.<sup>2</sup> Culturally, it has appeared as a high school or early twenties album—the album that you leave behind when you exit this period of your life, which I'll be referring to as adolescence, here.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the figure of a sad, mostly middle-aged woman *still* listening to *Blue* is a recurrent image for this chapter, a signifier for longing and thwarted desire, desire for a time prior to the romantic disappointments of entrenched adulthood, especially those disappointments provided by hetero- and homonormative coupling. One of *Blue's* promises, a promise I'll explore by thinking about my own adolescent listening, is that, as a straight woman you can live happily outside of traditional heterosexual narratives. These promises are not what they seem, but nevertheless go some way toward explaining *Blue's* sustainability as an object for those of us still listening to it.

Just as the *New Yorker* cartoon can be read as, at least, two stories—one where a middle-aged man and woman are enjoying together their continued attachment to Joni Mitchell, and one where the man is criticizing the woman for her attachment—this chapter also thinks about how contemporary texts figure women's love for Joni Mitchell as embarrassing, irritating, anachronistic, and cruelly optimistic. The latter part of this chapter watches three contemporary scenes that cannot quite stomach women's (particularly middle-aged women's) feelings for Joni. These scenes index a broader cultural feeling about the late 1960s as a time of failed potential that doesn't seem to be going away.

In what's to come, I move between listening to *Blue* in 1971 (the year of its release), listening to it in 2003 (when I first heard it), listening to it as it appears in recent texts (where relationships with *Blue* are also figured as complexly temporal) and listening to it now. This structure plays out an interest in *Blue's* many incarnations, personal and cultural, and in seeing what happens

when these incarnations are layered over each other, placed alongside each other, or interrupted by each other. But, more prosaically, this structure is shaped by my own self-interruptions. As I wrote this piece, I found it almost impossible to mute the earlier voices of my attachment to *Blue*, attachments that just prefigured my critical training which, in part, it turns out, is deeply wedded (pun intended) to linear, causal, reasoned thought modes. Of late, I have realized that these modes don't lend themselves to talking about things you love and have loved. As such, what follows is shaped by feelings, past and present, for *Blue*.

### *Blue's* promises

Lauren Berlant observes that “when we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us” (2011, 23). Adolescence is a time, we might say, when the intensity of those promises is particularly felt. Here are the promises I heard in *Blue*, aged 21:

1. You can be romantically unattached, but not alone.
2. You can have a life with your own creativity at its center, not squeezed out by work—whether paid, domestic, or emotional.
3. You can have joyful encounters with men and leave without regret or other bad feelings.
4. You can vocalize your desires—in all their excessive, rambling, maybe sometimes narcissistic colors and no one will shut them down.
5. Life can be a series of absorbing scenes that you move through and make things from.
6. You do not have to “grow out of” or otherwise relinquish any of your attachments to these promises.

None of these were easy or necessarily attainable things for all (or even most) women in 1971, or in 2003—nor are they now. But certain songs on *Blue*—particularly “All I Want,” “Carey,” and “California”—suggest their ease and attainability and, relatedly, suggest that the 1960s free-love project has been genuinely liberating for women: or for Joni, at least. Aged 21, a lax reader of

the 1960s, and a lax listener to *Blue*, as will become apparent, it was *Blue*'s three free (sounding) love songs that I invested in the most.

"Carey," "California," and "All I Want" all evoke the agentic pleasures and possibilities of solo, female travel (Greece-maybe, Amsterdam-maybe, Rome; or Greece-Paris-Spain-maybe, California; dancing in dives! dancing on beaches! bitter wine!). Not all of these were scenes of desire I attached to in their specifics (I didn't really want to shampoo a man or knit him a sweater) but I passionately bequeathed myself to the force of their collection, and the freedom of their expression, driven by Joni's apparent sense of herself as a woman who had a *right* to her desires and their proliferation. All three songs keep desire in endless, joyful play, rather than treating it "as a problem to be solved," as Rebecca Solnit puts it (2005, 30).<sup>4</sup> What's more, they don't treat *female* desire as a problem to be solved—in opposition to the standard and prevailing Western pathologizing of female desire as in need of expedient fixing, pace Freud. While even the artsier cultural objects of 2003, objects such as Sofia Coppola's indie film *Lost in Translation*, presented women as (still) rendered unhappy and paralyzed by the amount of choices that they had,<sup>5</sup> listening to these songs on *Blue*, I had no sense that Joni was anything other than fully enthralled by her own capacity for desire and the choices before her.

*Blue*'s capacity for desire is also one of the ways that it seems to avoid advancing down the well-trodden lifepaths of heterosexuality. "All I Want," "Carey," and "California," in particular, are much more energized by flirtation than by commitment. As Adam Phillips tells us, "The generosity of flirtation is in its implicit wish to sustain the life of desire" (2016, xviii). However, flirtation is also the thing that you are "supposed" to move beyond: "Our preference for progress narratives can make flirtation acceptable only as a means to a predictable end; flirting is fine but to be a flirt is not" (Phillips 2016, xvii). Flirtation disrupts heterosexuality's stories about moving forward (where moving forward means giving up on the desire for other possibilities and so means giving up on desire itself). And *Blue*'s flirtiest songs are particularly tuneful retorts to the injunction that flirting is behavior a woman should grow out of.

When Joni isn't overtly flirting in *Blue*, she does still appear to avoid conventional looking forms of commitment. (Think of "My Old Man's" refrain—that a happy relationship needn't be a married one.) We can also see *Blue*'s

resistance to heteronorms in its track sequencing. For example, the album's opening triplet could, if you weren't listening very carefully, sound like a straight trajectory from desire to commitment to a baby. But we never know if Joni gets what she wants in "All I Want," marriage is deemed unnecessary in "My Old Man" (in ways that are more complex than the song admits to, as I'll discuss shortly), and, in "Little Green," the baby is a ghost: long absent, only felt in traces of what she might become, born to parents who are children themselves, and not a product either of "All I Want's" desire or "My Old Man's" (sometimes) domestic bliss. (Further disruption to the order of things: "Little Green," of course, was written before much of the rest of *Blue*.) Or, think about the way in which "The Last Time I Saw Richard" pictures an encounter with an old beau (purportedly Mitchell's ex-husband) that took place three years before *Blue*. The album *does* end with a marriage (two marriages, really—if you count Joni's marriage to Chuck Mitchell), but one has failed and the other sounds miserably bourgeois: Richard sits at home alone with only the dishwasher and the coffee percolator for company. By ending with "Richard," *Blue* undermines the marriage plot, where the wedding is the happy climax that needn't be imagined beyond.

In its disruptions to normative heterosexuality, its dwelling in moments of flight from romantic relationships, its attachment to scenes of potential and, especially, what felt like its relentless insistence on the primacy of female desire, choice and freedom, *Blue* sounded to my 21-year-old ears like a gorgeously promissory glimpse into what it must have been like, being Joni in 1971, and what it could be like for me in 2003, in love with my loving *and* my freedom (like Joni!). "All I Want," "Carey," and "California" provided especially promising scenes of untrammled freedom and potential and made desiring sound like the best possible way a woman could spend her time. Suffice to say that, when I was 21 (which was a very good year), I loved flirting and I always skipped "Blue."

### Skipping "Blue"

"Blue" dragged and held on too tight. "Blue" was fragile, wavering. "Blue" sounded exhausted and felt exhausting to listen to—so deflating after

“Carey’s” flirty flights; such a cold-water shock. “Blue” made hard work out of desire. “Blue” did not make any promises, only tried to extract them from a man who didn’t seem to be listening (we might hear the line “Hey Blue/ here is a song for you” as one of “Blue’s” attempts to get Blue’s attention and the song itself as a *cri de coeur* into an empty space). In “Blue’s” drawn-out, melismatic lines, its use of the sustain pedal so that, even in its pauses you can still hear traces of what has been, I heard a roster of sticky and unpalatable feelings keeping Joni trapped, half-in and half-out of commitment, unable to move one way or another, becoming more enmeshed the more she tried to disentangle herself from the “no strings attached” relationship that was free love’s proposition. As Mitchell herself put it, and as “Blue” makes manifest, free love “came with great strings attached. It was free for men, but not for women, same as it ever was.”<sup>6</sup>

In response to the preceding run of “All I Want,” “My Old Man,” and “Carey,” “Blue” offers two troubling thoughts: first, that Joni Mitchell wants to commit more than a man and; second, that the project of free love, which seemed to promise so much to women regarding the viability and importance of their own desire, was just a trick played by men who wanted “lots of ass/ [and] lots of laughs.”<sup>7</sup> While “Blue” has “lots of laughs,” it doesn’t tell any jokes, unless you count the one it tells about the 1960s—which is not a funny one. Furthermore, in its sandwiching between “Carey” and “California’s” fantasies of romantic nonattachment, “Blue” also suggests how “Carey” might really end and sends out a warning to “California’s” enjoyment of its own mobility. In this way, “Blue” hears free love, a mode invested in the idea that men and women could and, indeed *should* dwell in endless flirtation, as a (pretty) lie, one told by men who turned their commitment phobia into a political manifesto.<sup>8</sup> In its obstruction to flirting (particularly within *Blue’s* schema), “Blue” refuses the idea that flirtation could ever have been a viable political mode and suggests that men fetishized flirtation to make women feel bad about their (possible) desire for romantic commitment.

Free love made flirtation look hip and commitment look square, a thing, as Jenny Diski puts it “that we were supposed to have stopped caring about” (2010, 60). One can listen to many female artists’ songs from the late 1960s and early 1970s and hear the emotional labor of women who clearly *do*

still care and are trying to persuade errant men to commit to them. Think, for example, of the fierce desperation of Janis Joplin, who in “Cry Baby” tries relentlessly to draw her man (who’s not hers, not really) back from his wanderings by promising him a shoulder to cry on. In Joplin’s June 1970 interview with Dick Cavett (following a performance of “Move Over,” another song about a man who won’t stay or go), she remarks to Cavett that men “always hold up something more than they’re prepared to give.”<sup>9</sup> Or think of Laura Nyro’s “Wedding Bell Blues” (1966) which sounds less urgent and labored in its delivery than “Cry Baby” but is no less frustrated by its man, the freewheeling “Bill,” who refuses to marry his girlfriend. “Blue” belongs to this category of songs of women frustrated by men more in love with their freedom than their loving.

The song directs its bad feeling not only at free love, but at the 1960s counterculture as a whole. In the line, “acid, booze and ass/needles, guns and grass/lots of laughs, lots of laughs,” Mitchell sticks a pin in “Woodstock”/Woodstock deflating its airy utopian dreams with pointed, pragmatic precision. “Blue” seems to make light work of both song and event and any reading of it as a political or cultural zeitgeist. Quick work too, because, the 1960s were barely over by the time Mitchell wrote “Blue.”<sup>10</sup> The latter plays out the counterculture’s commitment issues, in its attempts to minimize and shake off “Woodstock’s” hazy, under-conceptualized dreams of what the counterculture might achieve<sup>11</sup> and in its suspicions that men benefit from free love while women suffer, not free at all.

Yet, though they are fading and looked upon with disappointment, the dreams of happier past scenes still persist, faintly, in “Blue” as a “sigh/a foggy lullaby.” Despite its disavowals of the counterculture’s utopian dreams, its heaviness, and its moments of lyrical and melodic drag, it does not fully commit to cynicism and despair. As Lloyd Whitesell identifies, the song has moments of “rhythmic release” and “uplift” (2008, 136) that interrupt its leaden descent. While I heard “Blue” as an unwelcome intrusion into what I perceived as *Blue*’s mostly hopeful modes, Whitesell insightfully points to the way these modes also lighten up “Blue’s” heavy load. Speaking specifically here about the end of the line “Blue, I love you,” Whitesell notices that “the harmonies seem to spin off into a new key altogether”:

This momentary sidetrack is patently wishful, its gestures somehow not fully integrated into the song's fabric. And in fact the piano cadences in these four measures do represent a kind of intrusion, constituting as they do any almost exact quotation of a passage from another love song on the album—the introduction to “My Old Man.” They thus [ . . . ] capture and import the brief memory of a happier time and a different outcome. (2008, 137)

“My Old Man,” lest we forget, is also a song about romantic commitment but one which treats it with a light touch—sure, Joni and her old man aren't married but they don't need to be to commit to each other and, sure, he might go away (where *does* he go?) but he'll always come back again to share her bed and eat her food. Rendered this way, of course, “My Old Man” looks like another song where Mitchell is consoling herself about a man who won't stick around; where free love turns out to be a woman keeping house for a man while he goes out and loves *his* freedom and she mourns a too-big bed. It's not necessarily the case, then, that “My Old Man” represents a “happier time and a different outcome,” as Whitesell puts it (137). That said, in “Blue,” “My Old Man” appears as a foggy lullaby, one about how free love might have kept women's blues away—even if “My Old Man” doesn't quite believe its own bedtime stories.

In her fantastic consideration of queer time and the objects it shapes, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Elizabeth Freeman describes the 1960s and 1970s as composed of “a series of failed revolutions [ . . . ]—political programs not only as yet incompletely realized but also impossible to realize in their original mode.” Here, Freeman is talking of the failure of “class revolution [ . . . ] of second-wave feminism's lost possibilities; the unfinished mutually intertwined projects of black emancipation and gay freedom.” The texts that Freeman deals with all index this period as a moment of failed potential that cannot, yet, be fully disavowed by the contemporary, precisely because the politically revolutionary work of the decade remains undone. Within her corpus “[the 1970s] glimmer forth as an embarrassment, as something that remains to be thought, as [ . . . ] indigestible material” (Freeman 2010, xiv).

Aged 21, I heard “Blue” as *Blue's* indigestible material—the song I rejected because it got in the way of my sense of *Blue* as an album about how great

free love was for women. Coming between the airy mobility of “Carey” and “California,” both songs that appear to make flighty work of romantic attachment (literally, in that both imagine leaving relationships by air), “Blue” drops like an anchor. It looks back on the objects of the late 1960s, particularly free love and the utopian dreams of “Woodstock,” with a kind of embarrassment that fails to fully vanquish the feeling that these objects still have potential.<sup>12</sup>

The contemporary texts that I’ll turn to now suggest that there’s something *unincorporable* (to borrow Freeman’s language) about *Blue* and Joni, that they cannot be absorbed into these texts’ narratives, and that they cause uncomfortable scenes. These texts are also fascinated by the fact that, as in the cartoon, Joni hasn’t gone away. Furthermore, these texts index Joni Mitchell and *Blue* as troubling clues to who these women were, what they might have been, what they became and what they might, still, become.

### *Blue’s stretched-out adolescence*

In *Love Actually*, an episode of *New Girl*,<sup>13</sup> and in *The Kids Are All Right*, women time travel by listening to Joni Mitchell, going back to their adolescence and, especially, modes of adolescent listening: listening on repeat, listening closely, listening in the bedroom, and listening while singing along. Adolescence shimmers in these texts as a time of potentiality, of pleased and extended absorption in objects of desire, particularly *Blue*, a time of learning how to feel—where many of these feelings were learnt by listening to Joni Mitchell.

One of the things *Blue* promises, then, is what J. Jack Halberstam calls a “stretched-out adolescence”:

The notion of a stretched-out adolescence [ . . . ] challenges the conventional binary formulation of a life narrative divided by a clear break between youth and adulthood; this life narrative charts an obvious transition out of childish dependency through marriage and into adult responsibility through adulthood. (2005, 153)

The stretched-out adolescence refuses the temporal markers of heteronormativity (babies, marriage, monogamy), and instead, according to Jana Funke and Ben Davies: “insist[s] on expanded moments lived with heightened intensity and urgency” (2011, 7). As I’ve already delineated, there are several ways *Blue* insists on such “expanded moments,” even if there remains a question as to whether Joni always loves her freedom as much as certain songs seem to proclaim. In this way, *Blue* languishes in a stretched-out adolescence, predicated on what Jenny Diski describes as the counterculture’s intention “to live out Peter Pan’s imperative never [ . . . ] grow up.” (Diski 2010, 3) *Blue* is often also marked as the album of the neophyte listener, the amateur who has not yet matured enough to move on to Joni’s “harder” albums, who keeps going back to *Blue*.

### Backslide/still listening

An episode of the TV series *New Girl* entitled, aptly, “Backslide” (2012) indexes *Blue* as the album that stretched-out adolescents are sad to. The series is premised on disappointed and interrupted heteronormativity; the first episode sees protagonist, Jess, a woman in her late twenties, moving into an all-male houseshare when she breaks up with her boyfriend. “Backslide” opens with Jess listening to “River” on repeat in states of unravelling melancholia over one day—represented in the first few moments by a series of shots: we see Jess on her bed, crying to “River,” fetal on the floor, crying to “River,” then sitting in her closet with her best friend, crying to “River.” In these moments, Jess appears adolescent: she cries in her room, she doesn’t seem to have to go to work, she has time to listen to “River” on loop, and she gets on everyone’s nerves.<sup>14</sup>

The episode plays out a series of scenarios where its central characters (particularly Jess and romantic lead, Nick) go back to ex-partners. Backsliding, both in the romantic terms that the program employs and, more broadly, is culturally coded as a bad move (although those of us who lean to the queer might rather like it); associated with regression, relapse, and going astray. “Backslide” recognizes the temptations of straying off the path of

straightforward relationality but also presents its characters' sallies back into the past as wrong-footed, a wrong-footedness that, in Jess's case, is mapped onto her retro and repetitive listening to "River." In this way, the episode reads Jess's attachment to "River" as an *over*-attachment to a past that will not reward her. She ends up sleeping with her ex, an "ugly crier," who happens to be in a relationship. Listening too much to "River," the program imagines, will lead to you being uncomfortably saddled (albeit temporarily in the episode) with a man whose abject emotionality trumps your own. As such, Joni Mitchell's music is presented as a bad object Jess needs to move on from, if she is to move forward.

As Joanne Winning has discussed, the film *Love Actually* (2003) also figures Karen's relationship to Joni Mitchell initially, through "River" (here, in its guise as sad Christmas song—prefiguring Karen's own sad Christmas to come) which plays in the background as odious husband Harry remarks "I can't believe you still listen to Joni Mitchell." "True love lasts a lifetime"<sup>15</sup> Karen responds, suggesting both the durability of an attachment to Joni Mitchell (Joni Mitchell is never going away) but also prefiguring the masochistic structures of heterosexual romance played out by Karen's later response to Harry's infidelity: the film implies that she will not leave him, although he might leave her, for a while.<sup>16</sup> In an unarticulated but implied triangulation, *Love Actually* also implies that Karen's lifelong attachment to Joni Mitchell is one of the reasons why she *will* stay with Harry: the lesson she has learnt from Joni Mitchell is to feel deeply for a man who doesn't deserve her depth of feeling. (Another of heteronormativity's cruelties in *Love Actually*: you might wind up saddled with a man who does not like Joni Mitchell and cheats on you with someone who prefers the Sugababes.)

Initially, it appears to Karen (although not to the viewer) that her articulation of her love for Joni Mitchell might reap surprising gifts. She finds a jewelry box, a heart-shaped necklace, in Harry's coat pocket, a Christmas gift that, she presumes, is for her and a promising change from the boring scarves he has been buying for most of their marriage. While *we* know that this gift is for Harry's secretary, not for Karen, she doesn't know this yet. As such, the film indirectly associates Karen's articulation of her lifelong love for Joni Mitchell with her husband suddenly seeing her as a desirable love object again.

Yet when Karen unwraps her gift from Harry, it is a copy of Joni Mitchell's 2000 album *Both Sides Now* that she finds. In this way, Karen's attachment to Joni Mitchell both works as the object that allows her to imagine that her husband still finds her desirable and the object that confirms he does not. "To continue your emotional education," says Harry, as he hands her the box. This is undoubtedly the film's most misogynistic moment: with its message that middle-aged women need to be educated out of hoping that their husbands could ever want them again. Joni Mitchell is tooled, here, to deliver that gift and to provide consolation, on receipt. Upon receiving the album, Karen goes into the marital bedroom, puts on the record and paces in circles, fighting back tears, while Mitchell's 2000 version of "Both Sides, Now" plays in the background. The film ultimately diminishes Joni Mitchell and the woman who loves her by showing Karen minimizing, squashing down, and sublimating her feelings about this betrayal, while listening to "Both Sides, Now"—a song, inevitably, about romantic disappointment and the (female) hope that produces it.

Harry's observation that Karen "still listens" to Joni Mitchell—like Jess's housemates' growing irritation as she listens to "River" on repeat—positions Mitchell and, particularly, *Blue* as an object from the past that women cannot let go of. These texts read Jess's and Karen's attachment to Joni Mitchell as an adolescent and retarding desire threatening their ability to move forward (Jess supine in her room, listening to "River" on repeat; Karen in the marital bedroom, pacing the floor to "Both Sides, Now"). Insofar as either *New Girl* or *Love Actually* have negative feelings about heteronormativity, these texts play out these feelings via Joni Mitchell and the women who (still) listen to her. Both texts also employ minimizing strategies to try and contain *Blue's* threat to heteronormative narratives. In *New Girl*, Jess's listening is figured first as a joke, then as an irritation, then as a thing that she needs to be relieved and distracted from. *Love Actually* presents Karen's love for Joni Mitchell as an anachronism (why is she *still* listening?), thus also interpellating Karen as a love object from the past who will be traded in for someone new. There's an uncanny twisting of the marriage rite old/new/borrowed/blue/*Blue* to this.

### “All I Want”

Another scene, from the queer family drama *The Kids Are All Right*,<sup>17</sup> picks up the same troping of Joni Mitchell as the musician women are unhappily glommed to, but with a difference in that this scene proffers more fully the possibility that this attachment might be an energizing and sustaining one. Part of the way through the film, we see Nic, an uptight, possibly alcoholic middle-aged woman contemplate a copy of *Blue* as her assembled family—featuring wife, Jules, their children Laser and Joni,<sup>18</sup> and sperm donor Paul, who is having an affair with Jules (but Nic doesn't know this yet)—happily prepare dinner behind her. Nic is excluded from this scene of hetero-worldmaking; her (re)discovery of *Blue* presages a brief, unadulterated moment of pleasure, despite this exclusion.<sup>19</sup>

Nic brings up the subject of Joni Mitchell at the table, as the family are assembled, eating. “Hey, I noticed your record collection,” Nic says to Paul before asking him what his favorite Joni album is. “*Blue*,” replies Paul. “Ohhhh,” sighs Nic—reaching to high-five him across the table—to which Paul replies—in a snaky moment of disingenuous connection, when placed against Nic's real vulnerability in this scene, not to mention evidence of the film's insidiously conservative gender politics<sup>20</sup>—“my brother from another mother.” In response, mercifully sidestepping Paul's interpellation, Nic invokes a time before she was a woman at a family dinner trying to bond with the sperm donor who happened also to be fucking her wife: “Listen—I spent half of high school in my room crying to that album. That record? It kills me.”

Nic then launches into an earnest, vulnerable, tuneless, and arrhythmical performance of “All I Want” as her family (with the exception of Paul who is a fellow, if less ardently vocal Joni fan) watch in varying states of discomfort, states which deepen the longer that Nic performs. We see Nic move into a kind of rapture: her eyes close, her head tilts back, she is lost in music; she is, posturally, an uncanny if more-butched reiteration of Joni on the cover of *Blue*, a reiteration that suggests the rightness of her attachment to the album, while also never letting the viewer forget her distance from Joni's straight femininity.

But Nic is also at a painful series of removes from the song's original which plays, extra-diegetically, throughout the scene. Her alto might, at a stretch, invoke the deepening of Mitchell's voice to come but here it stands in stark contrast to Mitchell's young soprano. And Nic's timing and tuning are out: she stretches words Mitchell doesn't; she falls in and out of the original key (mostly out). She's singing along but isn't—both because she can't hear the original and because she isn't rendering it faithfully. This makes sense, viewed in one way: after all, "All I Want" is a song, on its top layer, about straight desire—that Nic cannot sync up or sing in tune with its melody (it is a tricky one too, to be fair) is one of the film's only true queer moments.

Nic's attachment to *Blue* and her rendering of this attachment through "All I Want" isn't nostalgic, or not in any simple way, at least. As Elizabeth Freeman argues, simple nostalgia suggests that "a given form has a stable referent, a prior wholeness locatable in a time and place we ought to "get back to"" (2011, 31). However, Nic's attachment to *Blue* is a thing of the present, happening now, as well as then. We see this in her description of *Blue* as an album that she cried to in high school, and that kills her now, still; one of the understandings that dawns across this scene is that the way *Blue* kills you in high school might be very different from the ways it kills you in middle age. "All I Want" may sound like pure hope to an adolescent, practicing desiring and being desired, but by the time you have collected a few relationships, there might be something exhausting about its endless oscillations between loving and hating, desiring another and wanting your freedom. The scene unfolds this knowledge via a series of awkward (in)congruences: between Nic and the rest of her family and between Nic's voice and Joni Mitchell's voice.<sup>21</sup>

By the overlaying of Nic's voice onto Joni's in this scene we are made to confront the disjuncts between what Nic wants (the desire, freedom and potentiality that are suggested as romantic love's possibilities in "All I Want") and what she has (a wife who is cheating on her with the sperm donor; a drinking problem). We might think, then, of Nic's as a bad cover version of "All I Want"—bad, in its explicit mapping against the original in this scene; bad, in that Nic's rendition results in her family's embarrassment and bad, in

that Nic's pleased, loosening absorption in *Blue* loosens her up to the point that she goes to the bathroom, whereupon she discovers her wife Jules's hair in Paul's hairbrush, then in his bathroom bin, then by his bed.

In *New Girl*, *Love Actually*, and *The Kids Are All Right*, listening (and sometimes singing) to Joni Mitchell evokes the promises of a stretched-out adolescence. Yet each text also punctures these promises in a series of horrible, "educative" moves where female characters are shown that they can never get back to their adolescent potential and that their adult lives are also worsened by their sustained attachment to Joni. In this way, these texts present attaching to Joni Mitchell beyond adolescence as an exercise in cruel optimism. "A relation of cruel optimism exists," as Lauren Berlant tells us, "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (2011, 10). All of the women in these texts want Joni Mitchell, in complex ways, and all of them are punished for this desire. What Karen and Nic want, particularly, as middle-aged women is to feel endlessly desirable and desiring, feelings that they associate with being young, and listening to Joni Mitchell. But more expansively, these women desire the same things that *Blue* desires but also cannot make happen for itself: namely, sustained and sustainable ways of being a woman outside of the misogynistic, deterministic, heteronormative and constrictive narratives of the patriarchy. As a dear friend and contributor to this volume put it to me: "Not even Joni could be Joni. *Blue* [ . . . ] with all its contradictions, kind of shows that."<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

"The real problem with adolescence," writes Adam Phillips, "is that most people can't sustain it." (2016, 169) This is one of the sadnesses of listening to *Blue* once deep into adulthood: there are ways in which it reminds us of things we have failed to sustain, of things we thought were endlessly sustainable which we now feel are not, of feelings/people/scenes/dreams we have forgotten or moved away from which we did not think we ever would. Some of these are *Blue's* feelings, too.

Maybe the thing that's most painful about listening to *Blue* in adulthood is that it takes you back to a time before you had quite realized, as a woman, how certain cultural stories were waiting to close around you, that you would be implicated, either way, by your relationship to these stories, and that your sense of yourself, aged 21, as endlessly desiring, desirable, possible, porous, and suspended joyfully in your utter, utter *Blue* rapture would not last. I'm not saying that, aged 21, I hadn't experienced misogyny, or other forms of gendered injustice, or that I didn't have a feminist politics. I am saying that I didn't yet know how much of my time would be taken up by thinking about and in resistance to these stories about being a woman, stories about who I was, should be, could be, would be.

Instead, I spent my time listening to *Blue* (but not "Blue")—dreaming of all I wanted.

## Coda

*Our unlived lives—the lives we live in fantasy, the wished-for-lives are often more important to us than our so-called lived lives.* (Phillips 2016, xvi)

It is 2003 in Norwich and I have missed my 21st-birthday party twice: first, by sneaking out to a nearby park to drink wine on the swings with a man I am in love with who has a girlfriend, second because, on my return to a worryingly quiet house, I get so stoned that my friends have to put me to bed, whereupon, so I'm told, the party happens without me. The next morning, at 6.00 a.m., I awake to the sounds of "Hi-Ho Silver Lining" belting from my neighbor's kitchen. He is an ex-policeman; he has been kept awake all night; he smelled the drugs. Abject and frightened, I apologize before going back home to clean up after a party I missed. That afternoon, tired already of being 21, wishing I was anywhere but there, feeling too old and too young, a friend gives me my birthday present: a ripped copy of Joni Mitchell's *Blue*. "This will sort you out," he says.

And for a long time and still, sometimes, it does.

## Notes

- 1 Victoria Roberts, “The Only Thing That’s Never Going Away is Joni Mitchell,” *New Yorker* (March 16, 2009). [http://jonimitchell.com/library/cr\\_miscellaneous.cfm?id=336](http://jonimitchell.com/library/cr_miscellaneous.cfm?id=336) (accessed: June 11, 2018).
- 2 In her essay on Joni Mitchell, Zadie Smith describes *Blue* as “the album pretty much every fool owns.” See Smith, “Some Notes on Attunement: A Voyage around Joni Mitchell,” *New Yorker* (December 17, 2012). <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/12/17/some-notes-on-attunement> (accessed: June 2, 2018).
- 3 Recent research suggests adolescence now extends into early twenties. See, for example, Lucy Pasha-Robinson, “Adolescence Now Lasts from 10 to 24, Say Scientists,” *The Independent* (January 9, 2018). <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/adolescence-puberty-10-24-teenager-scientists-report-lancet-a8168481.html> (accessed: June 11, 2018).
- 4 Solnit is not talking explicitly of *Blue*, here but she is talking about blue—specifically the desire one might feel when looking towards the blue of a horizon.
- 5 Postfeminist ideology reigned throughout this period. For an account of this ideology, see Angela McRobbie, “Post-feminism and Popular Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies*, 4.3 (2004): 255–264.
- 6 Quoted in Judy Kutulas, “‘That’s the Way I’ve Always Heard It Should Be’: Baby Boomers, 1970s Singer-Songwriters, and Romantic Relationships,” *Journal of American History*, 97.3 (2010): 682–702. [Actual source unknown].
- 7 Joni Mitchell, “Blue,” *Blue* (Hollywood: Reprise Records, 1971).
- 8 Sean Nelson makes a similar point, with regards “Little Green” in his *Court and Spark* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 29–30.
- 9 Janis Joplin and Dick Cavett, *The Dick Cavett Show* (June 25, 1970). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-QBjZF4e4o> (accessed: June 2, 2018).
- 10 As Michelle Mercer puts it: “In retrospect, everyone can see how the ’60s went bad. But Mitchell’s time frame for hindsight was always much tighter than most people’s. What take most of us a few years to realize seemed to take her only a few months” (Mercer 2012, 175).
- 11 Let’s not forget, though, that “Woodstock” was already nostalgic for Woodstock, an event which Mitchell did not, herself, attend.
- 12 “California” has similar feelings to “Blue” but tries not to look at them as closely.
- 13 “Backslide,” *New Girl*, dir. Nanette Burstein (2012).
- 14 It should be clear from this that the episode presents Jess’s listening in highly gendered ways.
- 15 *Love Actually*, dir. Richard Curtis (2003).

- 16 There is much to hate about *Love Actually*'s treatment of Karen.
- 17 *The Kids Are All Right*, dir. Lisa Cholodenko (2010).
- 18 Jules and Nic's naming of their teenage daughter after Joni Mitchell is another way that the film associates the singer with figures of adolescence.
- 19 And maybe also because of it—something I don't have the space to discuss here.
- 20 For more on these, see Jack Halberstam, "The Kids Aren't All Right!" *Bully Bloggers* (July 15, 2010). <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2010/07/15/the-kids-arent-alright/> (accessed: June 11, 2018).
- 21 There's a further incongruence in the combination of Paul and Nic's voices in this scene—they start by singing together—that is another of its complex layers.
- 22 Conversation with Pam Thurschwell, private correspondence, May 2018.

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