

**Negative Affect and Political Momentum**

Undergraduate Honours Thesis for Political  
Science and Women's & Gender Studies

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**A note on the below text:**

Writing of this sort requires a content warning. At its core, this paper is an analysis of the many experiences of political violence faced by marginalized communities. As such, I will be talking about bigotry, particularly and in detail racism and queerphobia. I will describe the experience of hate crime and speak frankly about genocidal and murderous racism. These topics are not light, and are not gentle on the reader, especially in a piece as dedicated to emotion as this is. I advise you to interact with these realities as you can and step aside as you need to. Emotional responses are valuable, and we can learn from them, but we should not hurt ourselves needlessly. Be kind to yourself, first and foremost.

**ON METHOD,**

Before starting, I feel it is important to establish my method and explain my choices before you brush—perhaps unhappily—against them. First and most simply: my goal in the following pages is not to be objective, and especially not to delude myself or you into forgetting my very partial and positioned relationship to academic scholarship and the world more broadly. I am coming to this work primarily—as is the intent with affect scholarship—to express the plurality and scope of emotionality as it interacts with politics. This work is, intrinsically, partial and personal. I hope my commitment to feeling as method inspires you to look into yourself as a worthy academic resource, even if just for the length of your time here.

Another commitment: I will be showing little care to disciplinary boundaries. Affect theory as a body of work is perhaps more accurately described as a collection of arguments for the inclusion of non-conscious emotion and sensation in our theoretical musings. Some of these pieces do not even rely on the language of affect itself, and some have been retroactively inducted into our hall of fame, as it were. Yet more works of ‘affect theory’ have been unofficially snubbed (whether intentionally or unintentionally) due to their emergence from racialized scholarly communities, which is a problem in itself (Garcia-Rojas, 2016). Ultimately this interdisciplinarity is intrinsic to affect theory, as is my above commitment to personal connection and sensation:

There is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be. If anything, it is more tempting to imagine that there can only ever be infinitely multiple iterations of affect and theories of affect: theories as diverse and singularly delineated as their own highly particular encounters with bodies, affects, worlds. (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, pp.3-4)

To simplify, there is much more to this field than one set of rules. While I will attempt to give you a lay of the land in a later chapter, ultimately the lines here are blurry at best. There is no

real way to delineate one work on emotion from another, nor is it strictly possible to define something as *not affective*. If you are feeling, you are engaging affectively.

In bodies of theory where the writing practice is more world-building than obviously descriptive, abstraction in the name of illustration is common. Especially when engaging in topics as broad as ‘feeling’, there is a risk that we may devolve into undirected poetics without concrete examples to hold our words in place. To counteract this tendency of mine, I have included some personal anecdotes among the more densely-theoretical sections of this text. This is a method many theorists (Ahmed, 2006; Garcia-Rojas, 2016; Highmore, 2017; Lorde, 1997; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010) employ to illustrate their points. Affect theorists are not the first to claim this methodology; of note are the many Black, feminist, and queer authors who have seen the value of the personal and emotional as illustrations of larger political organizations (Ahmed, 2014, p.12; Garcia-Rojas, 2016). I am thus following a long trend here and operating in this text under the belief that political theory is lived, everyday and everywhere, and so the personal vignettes in which politics emerge are invaluable to the task of building richer theoretical works.

This may feel new for some readers who are not already firmly rooted in this sort of political thinking. Emotions and sensations are frequently relegated to the sidelines; “The realm of feeling is an aspect of life that, within the reflexive world of intellectual writing, is often more gestured at than directly attended to” (Highmore, 2017, p.27). We are becoming increasingly aware of the significance of emotions in our actions as political beings, but still seem to balk at the idea of sensation as a tool of learning. This critique is admittedly less or more true depending on *which* academic tradition you are looking at—we (women’s and gender studies scholars and critical theorists generally) are fighting the devaluing of academic emotionality back with sticks—but still it is true that a lot of our writing in academic spaces either flattens or outright avoids the

necessarily softer aspects of the human experience. So, my goal here is first and foremost to make you feel sensation, and second to make you understand the theory behind it.

In this work, the academic writing will be folded in between stories. I urge you to engage with these stories as relevant not by virtue of their inclusion in an academic paper, but by virtue of the feelings they express. By its very nature, affect is ephemeral. They cannot be captured or accurately named, only reduced to distinct sensations that we *do* have the ability to control and describe (Deleuze, 1978/2020; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). This does not mean, though, that we cannot evoke these sensations in various means, or talk about it. Per Elspeth Probyn, “Simply put, writing affects bodies. Writing takes its toll on the body that writes and the bodies that read or listen.” (2010, p.76). Whether we like it or not, the words we read move us in some way, much as the world around us affectively pushes us every which way. The goal here is to move you affectively. I do hope you can let yourselves get lost for a moment in the feelings I thought were important enough to pass around. I certainly felt their affective pull in the living of them, and I hope they give you a deeper feeling of the complexity affect holds for us personally, and of course by virtue of that, politically.

This is why I have chosen the language of you, I and we, here. I do not want the scholarly distance of one illustrating the capacities of one’s political emotions to an audience held at arm’s length. I want us to feel, together. The flow of affect demands it. We do not exist in our politics as lone, emotionless entities, and so I write to an us and to a ‘we’ that emerge perhaps not from shared ideologies (though if you find yourself in possession of this paper we likely do), but from shared emotional ties to the worlds we move through together, for better or worse.

With all explanation aside, I close with what you will come to see is a desire woven through this piece with almost the intensity of a manifesto: I hope that you, as method of

engagement here and in your lives outside the short time you spend with me, take affect and feeling seriously as life-moving and politic-synthesizing realities. It bears restating that we have a systemic habit of rejecting the emotional (Ahmed, 2014; Highmore, 2017) truths in our larger governing structures. We are trained to reduce ourselves to affectively-barren wastelands, political automata with only objective and autonomous thought as our guides. This is not the truth, but a forceful flattening of our full capacities, and furthermore a politically-harmful narrowing of our perceptive scope. As Bertelsen and Murphie (2010) argue,

However, in political life, in theoretical life, and in everyday life, attempts are often made to particularize and stabilize this intensity, and to pacify affect, to reduce it, classify it, and quantify it. In a sense, affect often finds itself in a situation like Pavlov's dogs, harnessed up in the laboratory, given electric shocks, but then reduced to the functioning of their salivary glands (and what came to be called "experimental neurosis."). (pp.147-148)

Feeling is not and should not be a quiet act. We should give ourselves the freedom to feel loudly, and see this not as frivolous or unacademic, but as foundationally important even as it is wildly subjective and chaotic. Especially in our current political climate, political affect flows constantly and powerfully. The solution is not to become more obstinately attached to so-called emotionless objectivity, but to understand the implications of our emotions as necessarily political. I invite you to see affective engagements as critical to the building of our political realities, and perhaps more importantly, as an important part of your selfhood, and your movement through the world.

## **ON AFFECT,**

Here, I do my best to explain what precisely is meant by 'affect'. It is a necessarily slippery subject of inquiry, and as such the following pages will break down some of the core concepts.

In the affective sense, the word ‘objects’ (or at times interchangeably, ‘bodies’) refers to any given item, person, or structure with the capacity to influence one’s motions, emotionally and practically (Deleuze, 1978/2020, Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). Anything can be an ‘object’, in the affective sense, and as such anything has the capacity to influence the sensation of an interaction (Deleuze, 1978/2020). Through these interactions, we come to be driven towards and away from these objects by our responses to the affects we draw up around them.

It is important to be very specific about what precisely is an affect, and what moves beyond it. We certainly have *thoughts* about objects, and in some cases even quite strong responding *feelings* about them. This is especially true when said objects are other people, or beloved pets, or deeply hated public art pieces, for some examples. These feelings for objects are quite easily named; beloved or hated, there are words available to pin down objects with a relatively high degree of success. Affect, on the other hand, cannot be specifically defined without reduction of the sensation, and cannot be attached to individual objects, though they may be felt in proximity (Deleuze, 1978/2020). We may have ideas—thoughts—about particular objects, but affects are not so clear or precise (Deleuze, 1978/2020). They are sensations that are not tethered to material objects, or really any identifiable ideas. Affect is, then “any mode of thought which doesn’t represent anything.” (Deleuze, 1978/2020). Affect is prediscursive, is a non-representational feeling (Deleuze, 1978/2020). The affect comes to us first, and it is through the addressing of this felt-but-unnamed sensation that specific feelings and ideas are reified. This is all to say, affects do not lead to the emergence of particular emotions, but rather are feelings-as-trajectory: a specific set of sensations is likely to push us towards a certain reading, but this is not a firm tie (Ahmed, 2014; Deleuze, 1978/2020).

As such, all emotional/felt responses to affect are just that: *readings*. Affect is the underlying sensation that is always present, even between definable moments of felt ‘somethings’; it collects alongside the action without being cleanly defined by it (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p.2). When affects are consciously engaged with and named, they lose their plural (non-representational) quality and become necessarily more specific (Deleuze, 1978/2020). The sensation of affective experiences can be described, but the reduction of affect to the language of feelings does not sufficiently capture the experience. Simply, you can *feel* affects, but you cannot describe it merely through the language of *feelings*. Reductionist naming and illustrating, though helpful, will always be a partially incomplete analysis.

Affect cannot be truth, then, but it is honest. Even if the attribution of meaning to affect is not—again I emphasize, cannot be—entirely accurate to the felt sensation, its presentation and our engagements with it are telling. Our affective motions, before we have allocated cognition and time to their analysis, are an integral part of our selfhood. Though it is much easier to say that we are all complexly interrelated primarily through our thinking and conscious acting, there is a certain amount of our living that can only be found in the thoughtless flows of feeling around and through us. Highmore (2010) articulates it best:

Affect gives you away: the telltale heart; my clammy hands; the notes of anger in your voice; the sparkle of glee in their eyes. You may protest your innocence, but we both know, don’t we, that who you *really* are, or *what* you really are, is going to be found in the pumping of your blood, the quantity and quality of your perspiration, the breathless anticipation in your throat, the way you can’t stop yourself from grinning, the glassy sheen of your eyes. (p.118)

There is more to you, to me, to the objects around us, than are held in our thinking and our naming patterns. Something sizzles and boils, twists and folds, eats at, hollows out, sparks and burns at the centre of you. It hums in your fingertips. You feel, and feel, and feel, and most of the time you are not even really aware of how much of you is being revealed by your body’s

sensation. Before you have caught up in your mind, you have already internalized the sensation. Then you make feelings of it.

Despite my use of ‘you’ language here, it is important to emphasize just how relational affect is. The boundaries of an affective *you* and *it* are, ultimately, arbitrary (Ahmed, 2010, 2014; Deleuze, 1978/2020, Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). As above: anything and everything can be an object in the affective sense, and therefore any of these objects have the potential to *effect* the flow of affect, as it were (Deleuze, 1978/2020). Even when we are not touched in the literal sense, we are touched—affected—by all that is around us (Highmore, 2010, p.120). And of course, ‘your’ affect is specific to you, but neither does it emerge from you alone, nor is it explicitly *unique* to you.

Affect then, must be seen as highly relational to be properly understood. Ahmed argues “Emotions are relational: they involve (re)actions of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’ in relation to such objects.” (2014, p.8). What we feel is not bound within us, it comes from outside us as much as it comes from inside. Seigworth and Gregg (2010, p.2) helpfully explain:

Hence, affect’s always immanent capacity for extending further still: both into and out of the interstices of the inorganic and non-living, the intracellular divulgements of sinew, tissue, and gut economies, and the vaporous evanescences of the incorporeal (events, atmospheres, feeling-tones). At once intimate and impersonal, affect *accumulates* across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between “bodies” (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect). Bindings and unbindings, becomings and un-becomings, jarring disorientations and rhythmic attunements. Affect marks a body’s *belonging* to a world of encounters but also, in *non-belonging*, through all those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual in-compossibilities. Always there are ambiguous or “mixed” encounters that impinge and extrude for worse or for better, but (most usually) in-between.

Affect relies on relations between bodies/objects to make its way around and through us. It is not held by any boundaries, but rather flows between. There is no affective sensation without the

motion of objects with each other. At its simplest, this means that our moods and feelings are highly socially-contingent; though there is an intrinsic diversity to sensation, “[affects possess] the quality of being both generally felt and specifically articulated in that mood’s domain.” (Highmore, 2017, p.3). We operate under the assumption that emotions emerge from within and are externalized, but they often emerge first from external affective stimuli, and attach us to the outside world through our brushing against them (Ahmed, 2014, p.8). There is no real interiority to our emotionality, no real delineation between what is experienced around us and what is felt within us. “We move toward and away from objects through how we are affected by them.” (Ahmed, 2010, p.32). We experience feeling as an interrelated motion: that which draws us in or pushes us out.

We can call affect a *force* here, but it is not always—or perhaps even often—an abruptly *forceful* experience. It is rather the inverse, that “affect more often transpires within and across the subtlest of shuttling intensities: all the minuscule or molecular events of the unnoticed.” (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, p.2). Across the board, affect is best articulated as an intensity: an increase/decrease or arousal/depression response to sensation (Bertelsen & Murphie, 2010, p.139; Deleuze, 1978/2020). It is not always strongly felt, but it is there.

When affect *is* felt particularly strongly, though, it becomes as literally moving as it is figuratively. Initially explained as “puissance” or the capacity to act, the variation of affective intensity as it flows can influence our ability to act; the “force of existing” held within us is influenced (Deleuze, 1978/2020). It is a push and pull. This is how the aforementioned intensity moves us: an affective *increase* in capacity moves us towards, and affective *decrease* in capacity pulls us away. “In other words there is a continuous variation in the form of an increase-

diminution-increase-diminution of the power of acting or the force of existing of someone according to the ideas which s/he has.” (Deleuze, 1978/2020).

This constant flow must be emphasized. Affect exists as motion between objects and other objects and, importantly, a changing capacity to engage with the world around us. When one is affectively depressed, they no longer possess the capacity to move themselves towards and within their affective environments. They withdraw, perhaps literally but often and more dangerously, sensationally. On the inverse, when one is affectively open, they are receptive to new sensations and connection with other objects. They can move, pay more affect forward, we could say, rather than consuming it (or letting it consume them). The above quote by Ahmed takes on a secondary meaning, here; that “We move toward and away from objects through how we are affected by them.” (Ahmed, 2010, p.32) does not just imply that we are connected to other objects by our affects, but also that we are emotionally and at times subsequently physically drawn or withdrawn from certain affects and their objects. We can become more or less receptive to sensation, more or less capable of engagement with our worlds on an emotional level, more or less capable of literal action, all because of the subjective connections we form through affect (Ahmed, 2014; Berlant, 2010, 2023; Deleuze, 1978/2020; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010).

It is important to emphasize again at this juncture that no objects contain particular affects, though certainly a repeated *attribution* of affect to, or expression of affect in *response to* an object will lead to a felt accumulation around it (Ahmed, 2014). Simply, though no objects ‘hold’ any particular affect intrinsically, they are implicated in the motion of sensation. When we encounter an object, we feel something in response to it, and often attribute this feeling *to* the object; an evocation of affect is *attached* to a given object (Ahmed, 2014, p.8). Further, affects

attached to objects can ‘spread’ to nearby objects and attach to them, too (Ahmed, 2010, p.33). Our receptivity to affective sensation may not be influenced by specific objects *per se*, but certainly here we can see that particular affects (and their subsequent approaches or withdrawals) are tied very strongly to certain objects by our engagements with them. Bertelsen and Murphie call this a “refrain”: an affect that has been repeated and repeated to form a cycle of sensational accumulation that leaves one objects solidly if not permanently tied to a particular affect (2010, p.139).

Affect is not any one thing, but we can see that it follows particular *trajectories* if given proper situational and emotional history (Bertelsen & Murphie, 2010). It is heavy in the air in certain places, attaches to people and things and ideologies in particular ways. The use of the word “palimpsest” by Seigworth and Gregg (2010, p.2) is no fanciful metaphor, then. They are telling us something critical about affect. A palimpsest is a document on which a previously-written section was erased and covered up by new writing, but traces of the original work can still be detected (Oxford Dictionary, 2004). The use of this word indicates to us that affect is *residual*, it sticks to the body—to ‘bodies’. Traces of an affect remain after the encounter through which it emerged and can be felt long after the initial sensation.

We are constantly managing our relationship to affect, whether we consciously acknowledge it or not. The claim that we come to our perspectives and feelings about the world around us independently and as ourselves alone is ultimately a falsehood at its most base level. Though “[...] the everyday language of emotion is based on the presumption of interiority.” (Ahmed, 2014, p.8), our emotions actually originate outside of us in many ways. Our particular experiences and interpretations of affects are significant, do not get me wrong, but they are often less distinctly our own than we would like. If our environments are already encoded with

affective sensation when we enter them, and we ourselves are being actively moved through these spaces by our collected affects, then there is much to consider about the relationship between emotionality and personal, political, and social engagements. How we feel is important, full stop. But certainly it becomes critical in analysis when we consider how these feelings are built in political ways, and how they influence our experience of politics. The “personal is political” here again (Hanisch, 1969/2009), through individual (and then therefore group) sensations of affect.

To put this most plainly, how we feel in our day-to-day affective experiences is personal but is also informed by greater affective structures, which define the feelings of groups as political wholes and include them in same-feeling histories. Williams (1977) introduces the concept of “structures of feeling”; historical times have distinct groups feelings that are not exceptionally noticeable when we are living ‘inside’ of them. Much as affects themselves must be captured by reducing language to be articulated (Deleuze, 1978/2020, Seigworth & Gregg, 2010), structures of feeling cannot be cleanly defined from within their experience, and come to be held as concise icons as the feeling of them moves into the past (Williams, 1977). The differently-resonant present is always an uncapturable structure of feeling that has replaced a prior emotional collective, that we can now see looking back. As Williams (1977, p.132) explains:

We are then defining these elements as ‘structure’: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies. These are often more recognizable at a later stage, when they have been (as often happens) formalized, classified, and in many cases built into institutions and formations. By the time the case is different; a new structure of feeling will usually already have begun to form, in the true social present.

There is no history or political structure without first the lived and felt structure of feeling. So, histories more broadly but specifically the trajectory of our personal political realities are informed by the emotional resonances of a time (Williams, 1977). Our moods and feelings are highly socially contingent, and our “*Moods and feelings are historical.*” (Highmore, 2017, p.3).

We come to our current unnoticeable structure of feeling informed by the sensations and structural realities of times before, though (Williams, 1977). It is important not to delude ourselves into thinking that the ending of a distinct era necessarily separates us from the feelings of the time (Williams, 1977, p.129). Often, from one structure of feeling to another the emotional resonances of our histories stay the same. Affects present in such a way that they generally maintain the continuity of felt experience (Berlant, 2022). As Ahmed suggests, “[...] how the feelings feel in the first place may be tied to a past history of readings, in the sense that the process of *recognition* (of this feeling or that feeling) is bound up with what we *already know.*” (2014, p.25). Simply, the structure of feeling, though new in its negotiation of sensation and almost inevitably entering the remembered past as a distinct narrative piece, still follows lines of feeling and thinking that have been reinforced over history and through the prior felt— affective—structures. New feelings can emerge from old stories, but most probably the teachings of the past will influence the shape of them.

Even as they are informed by the past and as such often hold particular felt meanings, our structures of feeling are largely ambivalent, much as affective sensation can be (Highmore, 2017); different structures of feeling can emerge at the same time, and be felt differently by one group or another (Williams, 1977, p.134). The way we feel about things need not be just one thing. We are not bound to any given affective habit or tied to any particular refrain. Everything is, in the conversation of affect, at least, subject to change. Affect is highly adaptable, and can

change resonance and direction on a dime. What we hold comfortably as the feeling of a space is intrinsically insecure, can be disrupted at the emergence of a different affective turn (Ahmed, 2010, p.33). Feeling is a fickle and flowy experience, and at once also rigid and militant in the maintenance of our interactions with other bodies.

So, affect is not one simple thing or particular set of emotional resonances. As above, it is more and increase or decrease in sensation and capacity than any necessarily positive or negative sensation (Deleuze, 1978/2020). It is ultimately, though significant in its feeling, value-neutral until cognition takes over and *assigns it* a value. Any number of named affects can incline us towards certain readings: happy, ecstatic, loving, enraged, despondent, hateful. But this is our interpretation. Affect moves us neutrally, however aligned it may feel to particular things and feelings (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010).

This is particularly significant in conversations about the political implications of affective sensation. As Seigworth and Gregg (2010) argue:

As much as we sometimes might want to believe that affect is highly *invested* in us and with somehow magically providing for a better tomorrow, as if affect were always already sutured into a progressive or liberatory politics or at least the marrow of our best angels, as if affect were somehow producing always better states of being and belonging— affect instead bears an intense and thoroughly immanent neutrality. (p.10)

We must be attentive to our affects, because they do not direct us in intrinsically positive directions, or are necessarily aligned with political ‘truths’. And in a body of scholarship largely moved by liberatory and equality-based politics, we need to be aware of where we might be deluding ourselves that the ‘good’ feelings of togetherness are a) felt by us alone, b) eventually going to naturally counteract the ‘bad’ affects of others, or c) intrinsically aligned with what we consider technically ‘good’. Plainly, affect is not good or bad; as all things, movement towards our particular affective (and political) end goals must be directed. It would be a failure on our

part to neglect the emotional in the political, and equally damning to ignore the very diverse modalities of affect that move us negatively. Affective depression and negativity can be just as *affecting* as our shared happy feelings, and the assignation of good/bad is a lot more fluid than we would like. Though admittedly it feels better to contend with positive affects, and is literally more actionable to work through an increase in affective capacity, we get nowhere by ending our analysis here.

Thoroughly politically neutral but not so in action, our affects move us in all things. “In other words, affects have specific effects [...] The point needs to be stressed: different affects make us feel, write, think, and act in different ways.” (Probyn, 2010, p,74). *How* we are moved is affective, and *towards/away from what* is all our own contextual and cognitive construction. Who we are, how we think, what we do, how we feel and create and engage with the world, are all tied up in affect. Contending with this sensory movement is critical in our analyses of and engagements with the political that surrounds us.

## **ON DANCING,**

The first time I ever attended a protest, the sun was just setting on my high school years, and I had to drive 3 hours to get to it. It wasn’t the sort of thing that happened in my hometown, at least not back then. I’d met up with a friend before, and when we got to the park where the protest was being held, I made a joke to her about the amount of people there; I was relatively confident that there were more people at the protest than lived in the town I came from. And a fair few of those numbers had come from home to participate, too.

I had no idea what I was doing. Though I had been an active classroom warrior prior, this was the first real political moment to drive me into the streets. I’m ashamed to say this, now. I wish I had been more aware, sooner. There’s a lot of seventeen-year-olds that don’t just get to

*decide* to pay attention. There's a lot of guilt to feel over my younger self. At the time, though, all I felt was angry, and a little afraid. I had been worried the whole drive in, anxious as I always was and bolstered in this by unfamiliar situations and quite honestly, an unfamiliar set of feelings. I didn't know what it was like to have directed emotions in this way. I had spent a good amount of my life either aimlessly angry or feeling a very cultivated nothingness. I was becoming new in distinctly emotional ways, here. The buzzing under my skin had taken on a new tone and, through this, was pushing me to run full pelt towards the world rather than away from it.

It was surreal to arrive at the protest. People were handing out water bottles to protestors, everyone who made eye contact with me smiled. Calls went up and were passed around, and there was an energy, something close to sadness, a little off from the anger I'd been cultivating but similar, and a calmness sticking in the air. Everything was sensational, and loudly sensory.

Most of the day past this is remembered in fits and starts for me. More feeling than strong held memory. But I do remember certain things, snapshots in my brain years removed from the living of it: At some point during the speeches, a couple of counter-protestors tried to agitate. I could barely see them in the crowd, but I certainly felt their presence. Everyone was tense. We moved closer, pulling towards the agitators, and my friend, too short to see beyond the people in front of us, asked what was wrong without seeing the problem. What had previously been a loudly emotional but certainly affectively welcoming environment shut down. A blanket hostility had covered us all, and we were moving inwards, towards the feelings clawing into us. I was so sure we were about to witness a fight, and I can't say I was unhappy with the idea. My anxiety took on a different tone, bared its teeth. I could tell that the people around me were waiting for the same. Tense shoulders, angry shouts. Fear of imminent danger.

The speaker at the time, a woman whose name I've lost but whose voice I can remember clearly, shut down this wave of feeling impressively quickly. She had us all take a knee if we could, stand still otherwise, and breathe through the feeling. Think love for these people who meant hate to the protest and the people it advocated for. Thousands of people quietly reworked a matchstick rage into love, or something at least adjacent in calm. The agitators, unsuccessful, walked out of the park. The protest continued. It is one of the most impressive things I have ever seen, grabbing a group feeling like that and stopping it before it could complete its trajectory.

*Breathe. Feel it, and let it go.*

Another moment: I was dancing in the middle of the street with my friends—we found a few more people we knew as we left the speeches—and there were songs blasting from the cars on the other side of the road, each one different even as the smiles and cheers from the cars stayed the same. There was a lot of laughter. I thought *I am dancing in the street* and I kept doing it. This moment, so full up with other people's joy and pride, still makes my hands shake. There were hundreds of people around me, enough of us to block traffic in a city, and *I am dancing with strangers in the street*. Someone climbed up a streetlight and was hanging above us. I had never been in a place this big, in a moment that felt this big, in a feeling that grabbed hold of all of me like this. It was something close to hope, a word close to community, feeling glee, grief, triumph, stubborn pride. It felt deeper than a name can hold. My skin sung and my lungs pressed too big against my ribs. I remember that my hands didn't stop shaking the whole of the drive home; three hours alone in the dark couldn't take this feeling away.

A third moment: my phone buzzed as I left, and I opened it to find an article in the family groupchat stating the estimated attendance number for the protest. I laughed, and tears ran down my cheeks. Within a couple hundred, the protest had beat out the population of my hometown.

More people here than I had ever known. More people instantly closer-feeling than every recognizable face in a seventeen-year period. It was vindicating to have been proven right, but beyond that, the revelation of scale also pushed the hopeful feeling of the moment deeper into my bones. *The world is so big, I thought, and it can be this good.*

And I have not gotten rid of that feeling and that hope since. The feelings of this protest, and any I've been to in the years after, have added logs to the fire and captured me in and affective net strong enough to make me smarter, make me braver; jumping over barricades, into the street, dancing and shouting and remembering to take a knee when someone wants to take our feelings—our communities—from us. I was not the same person I was before I felt the world this way, and I know that many of my peers have similar stories to tell and the same praises to sing for the activist spaces they call home. *I have never felt like this before. I'm going to do it again.*

## **ON AMBIVALENCE,**

So what does any of this mean, anyway? What is the point of spending so much time elucidating a point that can be made in a single sentence? I could say it simply: We all feel a lot of things in a lot of ways, and a lot of these feelings are tied to the worlds we move through. Or shorter: We feel in subjective ways, politically. There and that's all. Not so, unfortunately. The problem here is that there are so many ways to feel, and a lot of very directed movements that emerge from these feelings.

Even if our ideas—our affective realities—feel as though they are linearly attached to politics, or perhaps even as though the emotions we feel emerged *logically* from our political realities, they are not internally-modulated. Affect presupposes ideas (Deleuze, 1978/2020). We interpret—catch up to— what *catches us*. Feelings are attached to ideas, which have meanings

and values and practical implications, but the feelings themselves do not mean anything before meaning is attached. Again, affect is prediscursive. Deleuze (1978/2020) states, “There is an idea of the loved thing, to be sure, there is an idea of something hoped for, but hope as such or love as such represents nothing, strictly nothing.” This ‘nothing’ is not *meaningless*, of course, but does not have a meaning. What we feel is representative of feeling, but not necessarily representative of the thing that feeling is tied to. This clarification is a necessary one, because we habitually tie feelings into our assessments of the world; “To be affected by something is to evaluate that thing. Evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn towards things” (Ahmed, 2010, p.31). And of course we are feeling, evaluating, and turning towards that which feels good, more often than not.

So, the problem becomes our collective (and I really do mean *all* people as collective, here) belief that what we feel ‘good’ towards is intrinsically positive, meaningful, and indicative of the internal validity of our affect-evoking politics. We want to believe that the people we are drawn towards are good. That our politics and the passion we feel for them are just, our strength of belief meaningful and representative of some deeper truth. But again, “[...] affect instead bears an intense and thoroughly immanent neutrality” (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p.10). None of us can claim to have a politics validated by logic alone, as I argued in my section on method, but neither can we claim that our emotional truths unveil a deeper reality. At least not without more critical engagement.

We want to believe that there is an optimistic soundtrack to our lives, one that illustrates *our* hero’s journey to success, but we must understand that there is an uninterrogated reality beneath this that is, oftentimes, willfully detached from what we are hearing, or *want* to hear (Berlant, 2010, p.104). We are all operating within a structure (or, plural structures) of feeling

that organize and manage group feeling (Williams, 1977), and we need to be aware of how this may be driving our thoughts and actions towards unreachable and oftentimes destructive ends. It is of the utmost importance that we learn to distinguish between our instinctual reactions—what we feel as natural extensions of our selfhood—and emotional responses that have been imposed upon us situationally (Massumi, 2010, pp.56-66).

As Berlant (2010, 2011) argues, we find ourselves emotionally invested, optimistically attached to, and driven towards a great many politics that have no real investment in us, and which often present farcical resolutions to our other more ‘negative’ affective realities. The term “cruel optimism” (Berlant, 2010, 2011) points to the reality behind much of our affective mobilizations; feelings attach us to ideas that are out of our reach, and drive us to set ourselves alight and burn ourselves out on the pursuit of affectively-felt but materially nonexistent spaces and things. Importantly, this attachment is almost always a necessarily destructive one; when we are cruelly attached to a particular emotional set, we attempt to move further into it for our good, but ultimately this is at the expense of ourselves and other people (Berlant, 2010, 2011). The attachment is *cruel* because it is an optimistic attachment to an unreal and often cannibalizing emotional state of being. So, it is clear in the case of cruel optimism that affective attachments, though directional, do not expressly lead to a *location*, or a desired result. Additionally, though they may feel good, they may not be in practical effect. We feel. There is no ‘so what’ in this statement without further interrogation.

It is important that thus far the emotions I have centred in my political analysis of affect have been in the language of ‘positive’ feeling. It is also important to note that these affects, as any presented in the language of emotion, will seem to be more complete than is practically true. The structure of feeling, viewed looking back (Williams, 1977). The cruelly optimistic narrative,

brutal but cleanly laid out (Berlant, 2010; 2011). An emotional politic all explained and logical. There is a sense of continuity and positive motion to these narrations, even if the theory is abstract at best. This is intentional: it is an easy starting point. ‘Desirable’ affects such as optimism (however cruel), joy, hope, and general goodness are easier to grasp because they feel moral and more importantly, complete (Highmore, 2010, p.123).

These are the emotions that are easiest to mobilize people around, or at the very least towards. These are the affects that we operate in the pursuit of. Of course, we cannot be chasing this goodness, this perceived wholeness, without the presence or threat of alternative affective set. There is always, to paraphrase Sedgwick and Frank, a negative duck to positivity’s rabbit in the larger picture of affective politics (2003, p.116). Simply, “If good emotions are cultivated, and are worked towards, then they remain defined against uncultivated or unruly emotions, which frustrate the formation of the competent self.” (Ahmed, 2014, p.4). Positive emotions seem to be constructed, good affective tool use. And bad affects then must be improper constructions, *failures* in tool use. Those feelings that affectively immobilize us or make us feel ‘bad’ are habitually devalued and often attributed to other people (Ahmed 2010, 2014; Berlant, 2010; 2011, Massumi, 2010).

It is from this habit of devaluation that I want to begin. With the ambivalent zeal I have come to appreciate in affect-related fields, I have internalised on one hand a deep commitment to affectively-positive sensations as community building, and on the other hand a belief in the significance of emotional negativity to our relations. There are benefits to emotional politics, but certainly also drawbacks. We run the risk of becoming too absolutist in our attachments, too connected to certain modalities of affect. Even when we think that we have been dealt a ‘good’

emotional hand, we need to be careful to engage critically with the affective entanglements we let ourselves move into.

In the case of activism, then, it is especially clear that we cannot afford an exclusive attachment to ‘good’ affects, either within ourselves or as externalized activist practice. We become more inclined towards the maintenance of a toxically-positive (perhaps, cruelly optimistic?) attachment to our politics if we expect that the only way to do action and do it ‘right’ is to hide behind a faint patina of goodness. What I worry about here is the potential for harm in striving for only ‘good’ affects as group forming. Ahmed (2014, p.50) drives this concern home:

What concerns me is how much this affirmative turn actually depends on the very distinction between good and bad feelings that presumes that bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive. Bad feelings are seen as orientated toward the past, as a kind of stubbornness that “stops” the subject from embracing the future. Good feelings are associated here with moving up and getting out. I would argue that it is the very assumption that good feelings are open and bad feelings are closed that allows historical forms of injustice to disappear. The demand that we be affirmative makes those histories disappear by reading them as a form of melancholia (as if you hold onto something that is already gone). These histories have not gone: we would be letting go of that which persists in the present. To let go would be to keep those histories present.

To attach yourself to only one presentation of affect is to ignore entire other histories of feeling. It is to ignore a rich and political background of feeling. The association between ‘good’ feelings and affective momentum is at best reductive, and at worst actively working to erase histories of affective negativity that have been equally significant and moving. It is important to remember that the positive affective realities that we find ourselves in—the places towards which our cruel attachment moves us—are always provided at the expense of someone else; often unseen others hold the affective consequences, at times we do too (Berlant, 2010, p.123).

Even as certain affects seem to have an internal continuity and provide conclusive and positive outcomes, this is not necessarily the case for all affective sensations. These feelings are validated because they do not feel chaotically-moving and incomplete. Other affective experiences do, and are thus either ignored or pushed to the sidelines. It is critical to acknowledge that positive or explicitly ‘moving’ affects are *not* the only ones we have, or even the only necessary ones (Highmore, 2010). I would like to argue that they are not even the most useful, at least in the building and managing of our political realities. We may be most drawn to the feeling of and analysis of staunchly whole and good realities, but “Much of what constitutes the day-to-day is irresolvable and desperately incomplete, yet, for all that, also most vital” (Highmore, 2010, p.123). There is much valuable politicking to be found in the affective experiences that appear anxious, withdrawing, negative, broken, non-linear. These feelings, as intimidating as they seem, must be emphasized anew as ambivalent and neutral, even as the language of them implies certain negativities (Deleuze, 1978/2020). Affect, again, is neither good nor bad. As such, movement towards our desirable political locations cannot be ensured by particular sensations; whatever our intent, affect does not motivate change without direction (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010).

It is here where all that talk of relationality as critical to the building of affect—and all that arguing that affect *is actually important*—comes back around. Affects, as we have established, do not come with any particular meanings, but certainly “feelings are, in some sense, material; like objects, feelings do things, and they affect what they come into contact with.” (Ahmed, 2014, p.85). What affects us effects us. Because there is still a high degree of subjectivity in this relationship, these effects are highly contingent on the angle of our approach in an affective interaction (Ahmed, 2010, p.36). There is not a linear translation of felt-sensation

to identically-felt-sensation; how objects become interlocutors will determine the sensation and trajectory experienced. Since affects are *experienced* and not really something that can be *possessed*, they are not transmitted linearly and consistently (Ahmed, 2014, p.4). If you have the flu, then you will pass on precisely that flu. If you feel an affective motion called, say, giddy joy, you may not necessarily pass on precisely that giddy joy. “Emotions in their very intensity involve miscommunication, such that even when we feel we have the same feeling, we don’t necessarily have the same relationship to the feeling.” (Ahmed, 2014, p.10); context, experience, and many other factors complicate the flow of affect.

All this talk of direction and subjectivity is not intended to convince you that all affect is arbitrarily-circulating feeling, constantly being managed and mismanaged on the individual level. Though it is true that we are all reading affect through particular frames (Ahmed, 2010, 2014), there are some universalizing factors. First, affect shapes what we call our many structures of feeling (Williams, 1977), and must therefore be able to move large populations at least similarly enough to become recognizable as a collective. Second, affect is often *oriented* towards or away from certain objects (or, as we will see, political bodies). It is through the naming and articulating of affects that this orientation comes to be, and becomes consistently available (Ahmed, 2014, p.14). It is perhaps more the *direction* of affective sensation that we should contend with than the particular (and only relatively accurate) descriptions of its sensation.

## **ON POLITICS AS ORIENTATION,**

We can easily see the negotiation of affective flow in relations between people; interpersonal relations are an excellent indicator of affective connectivity. As Deleuze (1978/2020) illustrates, to see Paul draws him affectively towards interaction, to see Pierre

pushes him away. As silly as this example may seem, it is an excellent starting point for a discussion of the ‘stickiness’ of affect (Ahmed 2010, 2014); we can ask ourselves what precisely it is about Paul and Pierre that makes their affective presences so dissimilar (Deleuze, 1978/2020). Is this repulsed instinct, this caring attachment, something *just* Deleuze (1978/2020) is feeling, or does this set of affects say something about the world writ-large? Is this a personal attribution, or an illustration of how the alignment of certain affects to certain bodies maintains social systems and hierarchies more broadly (Ahmed, 2014, p.4)?

I return briefly to our “palimpsest” from earlier in this work (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p.2): there are layers of affective buildup underneath new experiences and presentations thereof. Affect is residual, remains in the body after the original encounter, can be felt still (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). As such, we can say that the evocation of certain affective responses is not so natural or spontaneous as it may seem. Over time, like water running over rock forming channel and then river, certain affective responses deepen and form flowing lines. An affective “refrain” is formed from the cyclic repetition of this affective association (Bertelsen & Murphie, 2010, p.139). We are being trained, our feelings honed, towards certain positions and political impulses (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p.12). Here again we see how a structure of feeling, subtly, takes its larger form (Williams, 1977).

This starts out, as all politics do, on the small scale. Paul and Pierre, for example, may be personally loved or hated by our good friend Gilles (Deleuze, 1978/2020), but perhaps *everyone* dislikes Pierre on sight. Perhaps very few actually know his name, but still have something to say about him. Perhaps there is something about the way he walks, or talks, or, or, or... Perhaps there is something we sense in him or see on his skin that makes him instantly recognizable in an

affective sense. Pierre is *different*, in some major and distinctly negative way, from Paul. He is repulsive, affectively. Must be avoided. Why? How did he come to be so?

As I have argued, in affective sensation there are no boundaries between objects.

However, through the *experiencing* of affect, we often to come view this sensation as a cause-and-effect byproduct of our interaction with such others. We feel, relationally, and then come to understand our feelings about this interaction as tied intrinsically to our affective interlocutors.

Ahmed elaborates that:

Such an argument clearly challenges any assumption that emotions are a private matter, that they simply belong to individuals, or even that they come from within and *then* move outward towards others. It suggests that emotions are not simply “within” or “without” but that they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds. (2004, p.117)

As we see here, through the negotiation of the affective, differentiating lines can be drawn.

Affective responses to the objects (in this instance, people) around us come to mean something, delineate the precise qualities of their experiencer(s). So, as we feel and name these feelings, we come to differentiate the subject and object of this sensation (Ahmed, 2014). One is cause and one is experiencer. In many cases, this categorization is not neutral. Boundary walls seldom are. No matter their literal closeness, this reaction to affect creates some distance between subjects.

In both the literal and figurative senses, “We move toward and away from objects through how we are affected by them.” (Ahmed, 2010, p.32); we become more inclined toward connection with some other than ourselves, and averse to the acceptance of other others. How we feel in an interaction changes how we view the ‘others’ within it (Ahmed, 2014, p.28). As this happens, we become grouped or dislocated by the flow of affect. This inclination is of course driven by the perceived positivity or negativity of the sensation. You do not generally feel the

need to spend more time in the presence of that which troubles you. You are more likely to turn towards something that feels connecting.

If experienced in close enough proximity with enough frequency, these affective responses become attached to specific objects. Affect accumulates on the surface of things as it is circulated around them, and as this occurs it becomes increasingly easy to ‘feel’ these objects as the source of the sensation (Ahmed, 2004, p.120). Objects, previously value-neutral, come to imply certain emotional, practical, and political realities as they collect affective weight and gain a felt meaning (Ahmed, 2004). Of course, these affect-object ties—though they can be—are not just localized attachments; the strength of these particular affective connections makes it easy for other objects near the ‘inciting’ one to become attached as well (Ahmed, 2010, p.33).

On a grander scale, we can see how particular people, archetypes, histories and locations become tied by association to other others we have deemed ‘similar’ through our feeling of them. A particularly apt and concerning example of the directing of affect is in the analysis of alt-right nationalist, white supremacist, and otherwise bigoted systems of political rhetoric (Ahmed 2000, 2004, 2010, 2014; Berlant, 2010; Bertelsen & Murphie, 2010; Highmore, 2010, 2017; Ioanide, 2015; Massumi, 2010). As we know, many communities—who still face much adversity today—have been aligned throughout history as variously threatening, lesser, or otherwise negative beings. Though this theorization is apt for the discussion of all manner of bigotries, such as homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, religious discrimination and so on, in this next section I will be focusing on the example of racism specifically, before returning to more broad language later. Assume here that the specifics are unique, but the affects and emotional responses at play are distinctly not so.

Affectively speaking, racialized people have become the ‘object’ from which white supremacist subjecthood is differentiated (Ahmed, 2004). The sensation of racial prejudice comes to be through the ‘sticking’ of negative feeling to certain bodies over time (Ahmed, 2004). A repeated invocation of object-tied feeling has led to the development of a common “affective refrain” here (Bertelsen & Murphie, 2010). This refrain invokes all manner of negative feelings, which lead to a great many negative ideological patterns and material actions.

Perhaps obviously, hatred and fear are primary feelings here. Generally, “[...] fear is an emotion that is often characterized as being *about* its object [...]” (Ahmed, 2004, p.124); something is hated, *specifically*, because it is the ‘cause’ of a particular affective response. Racialized fear responses are not understood to be negotiations of historically-organized sensation, but as natural felt responses to the evocation of affect from an external other (Ahmed, 2014). Through the alignment of negative feelings with certain people, the relationship between different groups—the formation of these groups in the first place—is ensured. “Through fear not only is the very border between self and other affected, but the relation between the objects feared (rather than simply the relation between the subject and its objects) is shaped by histories that “stick,” by making some objects more than others seem fearsome.” (Ahmed, 2004, p.128); groups come into focus through the relative strength and meaning of the affective set pushed upon them.

Fear makes separate bodies, entrenches a sensory divide between bodies as it “[...] brings them together and moves them apart through the shudders that are felt on the skin, on the surface that surfaces through the encounter.” (Ahmed, 2014, p.63). From this sensory description comes another important reminder about the nature of affect: it is moving in both figurative and literal ways (Ahmed, 2014; Deleuze, 1978/2020). If negative affects are border sensations, then so too

are they distancing sensations (Ahmed, 2014). The approach of the affective other is felt, bodily. And bodily, the feeler responds. Through the approach of one other to another, the line between them is solidified, often spatially, but in this context especially affectively (Ahmed, 2000; 2014).

This phenomenon would bear noting all on its own, but there is something especially dangerous in this transmission. The highly fluid motion of affect, and the loose (incomplete) attachment of it to material objects, ideas and people mean that it is likely to change in form and function. Simply, because affect is not tied down to any one thing, it can grow beyond its perceived source (Ahmed, 2004, p.125). Most obviously we see this in intensity; what is felt is felt, to put it gracelessly, more loudly over repetitions.

It is perhaps best to just state that our responses to affect are highly malleable. This has been the central argument of all the above, which I have danced around in various ways to this point. In the above examples, we see this mostly in how negative affects build and twist our senses of community, threat, and the futurity of our group realities. But where I have not elaborated sufficiently is the slipperiness between differently *identified* affective experiences. It is perhaps logical to assume in the border-making of racialized affect that “Pulling back, bodies that are disgusted are also bodies that feel a certain rage, a rage that the object has got close enough to sicken, and to be taken over or taken in.” (Ahmed, 2014, p.86). Here, disgust and rage are connected. This seems to make sense. There is, though, a possibly stronger—and at least equally dangerous—connection to be made between the affective sensations we feel are positive and these violent, racializing affects.

Ahmed argues, “Some bodies are presumed to be the origin of bad feeling insofar as they disturb the promise of happiness [...]” (2010, p.39). As I have established, hate is constructed as emerging responsively from the presence of bodies outside of the self (Ahmed, 2004, 2014). As

this occurs, hatred towards others is reframed internally as a response to the encroaching affect of another. The line of thinking here is that without *their* presence there would be no bad feeling, and in fact there would only be *good* feelings (Ahmed, 2014). Under our historic structures of colonial white supremacy, the construction of whiteness as goodness and racialized identity as badness has already been formed, and affective manipulations have only affirmed this. So, it is easy to infer that white affect would expect its own positivity and frame the lack of it as a taking-away by those that have had all this negative affect stuck to them (Ahmed, 2014). These white supremacist feelings—nominally, love and care affects—serve the inverse function to constructed negative affects; while rage, disgust, and fear push certain people away, these sensations provide an alignment with a particular group (Ahmed, 2014, p.124). “Fear does not bring bodies together” (Ahmed, 2004, p.126), primarily it divides them, freezes them, leaves them affectively immobile and impotent. Love, though, moves us, brings us closer to each other, makes us crave further affective sensation. If the language of hate can be transferred into the language—the feeling—of affectionate affects by a certain group, then they have effectively reformed their own affective potential. It is through such translations that groups justify and motivate their extremism, and their deep hatred of those they consider to be other (Ahmed, 2004; 2014)

We come to understand the deeper implications of Deleuze’s “[...] one idea chases another, one idea replaces another idea for example, in an instant.” (1978/2020); a feeling after a feeling makes an idea after an idea, and all these affects in their subjectivity are condensed to form particular meanings. As groups come to be formed by their feelings, experienced as “collective and social experience” (Highmore, 2017, p.2), alignments of certain feelings come to identify certain groups sensory recognition of the similar and dissimilar affective others in their

midst. You come to associate yourself with positive feelings, at the expense of another group's alignment with the negative ones (Ahmed, 2014, p.123).

Ahmed argues further to this point: when fear is presented as love, certain bodies come to "[...] occupy more space through the identifications with the collective body [...]" (2004, p.130). Affectively diminishing sensations are thus no longer immobilizing, but rather become the connecting force that moves affect and people to take up more space. White people—affectively and practically speaking—are allowed to take up more space and move in broader registers than racialized peoples. Simply, "Fear works here to expand the mobility of some bodies and contain others precisely insofar as it does not reside positively in any one body." (Ahmed, 2004, p.135). How you move through the world and interact with it affectively is regulated by histories and the sensations they organize. The allowance of a particular group to move is political; as always in history and increasingly now, certain group freedoms to move through the world are harshly reinforced at the expense of others (Ahmed, 2014).

The spaces you and I move through have been (depending on the particulars of our subjecthoods, I suppose) affectively organized for our comfort; though the feeling of a place may feel like happenstance, great histories of work have gone into the making of those sensations (Highmore, 2017, pp.8-9). Highmore (2017) argues therefore that people feel structures of feeling differently, even as they are lived alongside each other (p.24), and that feeling practices are affectively regulated—unwillingly—by the mood work of the marginalized peoples upon whom the practical, economic, social and emotional consequences of 'upper classes' lie (p.6). A silent zeitgeist moves us as it immobilizes certain others. "In other words, within societies structured around an uneven distribution of resources, forms of prejudice, bias, and unequal

opportunity will constantly fashion the structures of feeling in constitutive ways.” (Highmore, 2017, p.25).

There is, therefore, a relative degree of privilege to affective positivity (Berlant, 2010); structural inequalities shape the way we feel and further affirm these barriers through the reproduction of oppressing affects. What are considered negative affects here are remodeled into more mobilizing (connecting) sensations and/or pushed from the body onto other bodies, who then have to bear these weighty affects and their resulting acts of bigotry. Otherwise put, when affects are released from the body by one subject onto another, affective “dumping” occurs, enhancing the affect through motion (Brennan, 2004). While this externalization *can* be a positive one, as we see here, it certainly also has its risks; “Frequently, affects deplete when they are introjected, when one carries the affective burden of another, either by a straightforward transfer or because the other’s anger becomes your depression” (Brennan, 2004, p.6). It is clear to see that the problem with these negative sensations—before even addressing their associated bigotries—is that with them comes a compulsion to spread the feeling in a variety of ways (Highmore, 2010, pp.124-125). These groups are not immobilized, really, but are rather pushing these sensations onto others.

As we have established, through the distancing of themselves from these immobilizing sensations and the displacing of these affects onto other communities, certain groups identify themselves as the bearers of positive sensation (Ahmed, 2004, 2010, 2014; Berlant, 2010). As they come to be more and more invested—consciously and subconsciously—in their positive affective milieus, they become less and less likely to recognize negative affects their own. Or, really, as we have addressed regarding privilege (Berlant, 2010), feelings that they deserve to or ‘should be’ feeling.

It is perhaps more often than not the destabilizing of our invisible networks of affective regulation than the emergence of any ‘new’ political reality or sensation that leads to a novel feeling of affect. In the above instances, racialized populations are blamed for their structural and affective realities precisely because of this sticking of immobilizing affect to their bodies. Racist arguments that integration and inclusion would be possible if these groups would ‘just stop producing and talking about negative sensations and situations’ they would no longer exist compound these feelings (Ahmed, 2010, p.48; 2014, p.138). Silence and complicity allow the uncomplicated flow of white affect, and the thinking runs that it is the presence of marginalized peoples and their speaking of realities that causes these affective harms, *not* that structural inequalities have shaped these very imbalanced structures of feeling.

When these privileged populations are made to brush up against the boundary-making affects that they are organized away from, they often blame those who have been established as the bearers of these affects for the harms of the world and withdraw, without engaging meaningfully with this sensation. Emergence is not oft questioned, but rather followed to the natural conclusion of withdrawal, hate, corresponding and protecting love, neutrality, and again, again, again. But to be clear: it is not the existence of marginalized populations or their pointing out of harmful structures that causes these affective sensations to emerge; the feeling was already there, hanging thick in the air. Their integration in more comfortable privileged affective communities makes the expression of negatively structured sensation *feel* particularly punctuating, particularly confronting. This is not because any one of these feelings are new, or because (as some seem to think) these affective realities are being weaponized by marginalized groups against the privileged. This feels new to some because they are not experienced in managing the more burdensome political affects. The rest of us, really, just lived here all along.

The above is generalizable to the experiences of other marginalized groups too, and so I return to a more general discussion of racism, queerphobia, sexism, xenophobia and a variety of other marginalizations to make my final point in this section: certain groups are constantly operating in a dissonant state of affective mismanagement (Ahmed, 2004, 2010, 2014; Berlant, 2010, Brennan, 2004). The emotions and politics through which we circulate are largely imposed upon marginalized communities, who become both negative-emotion-scapegoat and pressure release valve on the affective tensions among the privileged. Oppressive realities are managed by oppressive affects. We often find ourselves trapped within other people's affective boundaries.

Additionally, refusals or inability to conform to (or disappear within) dominant affective frames are *not* managed particularly gracefully by dominant groups. Ahmed's iconic feminist killjoy, for example, "[...] is an affect alien: she might even kill joy because she refuses to share an orientation toward certain things as being good because she does not find the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising." (2010, p.39). Certain people cannot or will not make themselves small or uncomfortable in the name of affective continuity among others. They are not the summoners of such depressive affects, but neither are they capable of staunching the flow of it across their bodies and into the body politic. Their capacity to feel and be felt is mitigated by structural inequality. While some others are privileged to feel the world without obtrusive or otherwise negative affects, other others find themselves within oppressive structures framed by the sort of feelings that make us feel small, frozen, and marked. The dominating group, unused to the negative sensations they have pushed away, often react with hostility to the naming and addressing of these feelings by their others.

**ON FREEZING,**

For a year, myself and two friends lived in a small apartment building in a part of the city that is, relatively speaking, a safe place to be, and pretty overtly queer-friendly to boot. A midnight walk was likely uneventful, and could only be made all the brighter by the backlit pride flags in windows and ‘I heart Alberta teachers’ or ‘don’t pull the plug on public healthcare’ or ‘NDP’ signs visible through the shrubbery in front yards. A bunch of upper-class leftists, and then the broke and hungry university students living between them. This is undoubtedly a place with a cultivated atmosphere. Safe (from what?). Comfortable (for who?). The three of us: me, a queer so visible I’m practically clear on satellites, my lovely cishet female friend that we’ll call J, and D, a cis gay man of relative het-passability. All of us had been in what I would call affectively-oppressive living spaces before—whether at home or with prior roommates—and so the neighbourhood and the company seemed to be a great opportunity for the last few years of our respective degrees. Well. On the first night all three of us spent in that apartment, we experienced a hate crime.

*I’ll call the cops on you, you cocksucking, motherfucking, faggot.*

First, there was a truly horrific banging on our apartment door. We didn’t have a peephole. There was no way to know what was going on. You truly don’t understand the horror of a closed door until it is shaking in the frame and there is shouting from the other side. You won’t get it until you realise the only way to make it stop is to open it. D eventually opened the door, bravely, and was hit with a wall of screaming and threats. Our downstairs neighbour, who functioned as the building’s caretaker, had apparently caught on to the rampant homosexuality of the apartment’s residents, and had snapped badly enough to shout his rage in our faces, and threaten police action against us (for what?) at a moment's notice. Cocksucking faggots. After he

left, the door—which had already been loose in the frame—sat at an odd angle. We had to fix the doorknob because he pulled it so hard it almost fell off.

I didn't even catch the slur, really. I felt it in my whole body, though, frozen and panicked on the sofa. It's the sort of sickly feeling you register in the base of your lungs and the lining of the stomach before your brain catches up to the actual language. But still, by the time J turned to me, wide eyed, and asked if she'd heard that right, it was echoing in my head. We were all shaking. I was crying, I think. D and I are rural; we'd been the victims of hate before on numerous occasions. We both were familiar with the particular types of violence people like us face. J is American. She'd thought he had a gun. I think we all thought we were gonna die. What if he'd had a weapon? Did he call the cops? What if he came back?

Eventually we calmed down a bit, called our parents, texted friends. I joked that I'd cross stitch Cocksucking Motherfucking Faggots into a pillow in big letters. We contacted the landlord, thought it'd all work out. This was under a month into our lease there. I could not have predicted how deep of a pit we'd fall into over the next eleven months.

Our downstairs neighbour did not stop. He hit the ceiling at odd hours, screamed at us through the walls. Tried to break down our door on numerous occasions. When I would leave for campus at 7:00 every morning, he'd be standing in the hallway to watch me leave. He tracked our footsteps in the kitchen, and hit the floor below our feet. The building management did nothing. We lived with a monster in the basement, literally. And we were alone.

The air in the apartment seemed to get thicker every day. What had been a dark old building with charming quirks and old-timey energy became a haunted house. We were the ghosts, and the haunted. D sat on the sofa with his feet pulled up off the floor for hours of every day, reading articles on his phone. J flinched whenever someone took a creaking step, and looked

panicked if anyone talked or laughed too loud. I sat in my room and lost time to a sinking feeling that made it hard to breathe and left my fingers numb. It was a horrible place. We could not move, in the literal sense. But there was also an immobilization beyond this. It became harder to get out of bed, but also to sleep. Thinking was a foggy act. Our conversations with each other stuttered and died. We didn't have friends over. It was such a lonely place, there with them. Stuck in our fear and the knowledge that we were trapped.

Around the time our apartment became the least safe space in our lives, D started to go down what I feel most of us know as the 'alt-right-pipeline'. I suspect this had been a turn in his behaviour prior, but this is when everything really fell apart. He started with Russophobia, then a deep-seated hatred of Palestinians, then transphobia and sexism, then outright genocidal racism. I could track it by the month, if asked. It was another nightmare I never really thought I'd find myself inside of. I had thought I had the skills to help someone like him. I'm a political science and gender studies student *and* an activist, for Christ's sake. I thought I was good at this, and I hated myself for letting him rot up inside like that. But the problem was that he wouldn't—I think now, couldn't—listen. And as J and I tried to help him, he got worse. He threatened to hurt my friends if I brought them near him. Hit J a couple times. Started doxing and calling the cops on exes of his that weren't white. Pushed me over in the halls. Beat the shit out of someone in the kickboxing class he took up because the man had a Russian name.

I stopped wearing my clothes with political patches or my keffiyeh in the house. I'd get changed in the hallway every morning as I left and every evening when I came home. That was until I started spending eighteen hour days on campus, and didn't have to risk him being awake when I was there. The apartment became a looming thing, another battle to fight every day.

Sleep wasn't safe either, because our bedroom doors didn't lock. J woke up one day to D standing over her. I always had a knife tucked close to me.

J and I were in hell. There was not a space where we felt truly safe. Either from our downstairs neighbour, or from a roommate we had trusted so deeply before, we were always at risk. I can't speak for her, but I can confidently say that that year was one of the most suffocating in my adult life. There was a low-level hum in my ears for the whole of it. When someone would ask how I was doing, I'd freeze up. My hands shook when I spoke about politics in class, an occurrence I'd thought I grew out of after first year jitters. I cried in front of my professors. Slept in the library because it was the only place I felt safe. Smoked cigarettes and put on YouTube as background noise because I couldn't be alone in the silence. I lost myself in long days of classes and the feeling eating its way through my organs that I couldn't name or grab onto long enough to process.

I almost wished either of them would actually hurt me for real. I sometimes fantasized about being hit with a bat or pushed down the stairs. I hoped that someone would make their knuckles bloody on my nose. At least, I thought, that would be a way out. At least then I'd have something to attach all these feelings in me to. At least then whatever was buzzing under my skin could be excised and addressed. Then I could move. I was sensory-seeking for some sort of flashpoint violence to get me out of the affective and literal depression I had fallen headlong into. This is an extremely dangerous pattern, I know. And not one I'm proud of. But it is just so hard to sit around waiting for the next worst thing that's ever happened to you to fall in your lap. When you can feel danger sitting over your shoulder, just out of eyesight, you start to hope it will jump out at you so you can at least fight or flee.

It didn't end up coming to that, thankfully. The winter semester ended, I very rapidly

found myself a nice one bedroom apartment, and then literally fled the country for three months. J also moved out at that time, and we were free.

I found out from the apartment manager at our final walkthrough that the caretaker had built some sort of bludgeoning weapon out of wood and loose nails, specifically to hit the ceiling and if it came to it, us. He did not seem particularly shy about this in conversation with the manager. *What he did to you kids was illegal. I'm sorry.* And that sorry was not good enough. He taught us a new kind of fear. I cut contact with D completely, and aside from a few threatening interactions on campus the next year, managed to avoid him until he graduated. I found out later that he had gone on long, very public rants about how badly he wanted to gun down or otherwise violently harm Palestinians, various other marginalized (mostly, racialized) peoples and the activists who promote their rights. He lives in Israel now, I've been informed. The fact makes me nauseous. J and I still sometimes flinch when we make noise in our respective apartments. We still don't have people over a lot. When we see someone in public that looks a little too much like D, we freeze up. I still shake when I talk about radicalism and about global affairs in my classes. I've cried several times, alone in my current apartment and two years out of that place, because I can't make myself believe I'm actually safe now.

The feelings of that year hung heavy over me, made it hard for me to do anything. It still freezes me now, sometimes. This was beyond a bad turn into a bout of depression. The problem was not necessarily that I had been driven into mental illness through trauma, but that the particular situation I was in was so haunting that it got into my brain and my bones. There was something so distinctly sensorily pressing about waking past D's bedroom door. Mentally preparing myself to turn the key in the lock. Of driving around with J in complete silence for hours. Making sure not to hit the boards that creak in the kitchen. The mood was miasmic, more

than a truly cognitive state. Though there were very specific people responsible for this year of harm, the pain they caused went beyond their actions and words and into the very foundations of the spaces they occupied.

### **ON THE AFFECTS OF OTHER OTHERS,**

I must make it clear at the outset of this section that I am fundamentally opposed to the idea that marginalized populations are necessarily ‘better’ at managing negative affects and their potentially immobilizing effects. To make this claim would be, plainly, to miss the entire point of the theory of affect, and furthermore to skirt a little too close to the bio-essentialist line for my liking. The central argument is that affect is subjective, and not contained in any object in a particular way (Ahmed, 2014; Bertelsen & Murphie, 2010; Deleuze, 1978/2020; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). This said, it is true that we are trained towards and away from particular sensations (Ahmed, 2014; Bertelsen & Murphie, 2010). The “emotional habitus”—the affective ecosystem of a given group—is made up of a set of resonances and sensations that shape their affects and subsequent sensations (Gould, 2009). Some have become more aligned with a given affective set, or have aligned themselves politically with a group under the *expectation* that there will be certain emotional implications to this attachment.

As I have alluded to before, certain activist movements and social theorists argue that affective sensations elsewhere deemed immobilizing or withdrawing can in fact be productive and community-developing (Cvetkovich, 2003). Conventionally, grief, sadness, and other such negative feelings have been shunted into the realm of the ‘private’ (Cvetkovich, 2003). Of course, this also implicates the sort of affects considered ‘negative’ or ‘withdrawing’. As personal and isolating as these sensations may feel, though, they are still deeply intertwined with our group political realities. As Highmore argues,

To claim that moods and feelings are social is simply to say that at some point they are collective. At times this seems to go against how we experience certain feelings, especially those that seem to bubble up from within, casting us into isolation and social withdrawal. Yet even those intensely isolating feelings like grief and lost love hurl us into a world already marked collectively by shared moods, by common experience and by cultural convention. (2017, p.14)

These feelings themselves are not intrinsically isolating, rather our social customs surrounding these emotions marks the direction their affective pull is felt. Feelings come to be dividing as they are internalised, given words, and aligned (or, misaligned) with our socio-political positions.

Pain is an excellent example of this. In the discussion of bigotry above, affect translated as pain is mobilized as community-building precisely because it is a line-drawing sensation; one's affective experiences withdraw them, and they respond by cutting themselves (and their communities) off from the groups they deem to be the source of the pain (Ahmed, 2010). On the inverse, activist movements often use their feelings of pain to mobilize themselves towards a collective goal. Activists during the AIDS crisis, for example, mobilized through grief at the loss of their friends, family, and community members, forming collectives around the feelings they were told to keep to themselves and were expected to be frozen by (Cvetkovich, 2003; Gould, 2009). Here, pain is not just *practically* a moving emotion, but *literally*: the community forms and moves because of a shared attachment to negativity, not despite or against it. The important distinction here is not between felt affects—which we know are ultimately the same—but on social and political position.

Ahmed, alternatively, argues that social movements surrounding pain and grief are ultimately at their most efficient when community members do not attempt to force connection across affective withdrawals (2014, pp.31-39). For her, where the difference between 'othering' and community building pain lies is that the former attempts to attribute material characteristics (often, types of people) and universality of feeling to these depressions, and the latter

understands that what is truly shared is the *disconnection itself*; ineffability of affect is the universal under which we form empathic connections (Ahmed, 2014). It is precisely the inability of one to articulate their affective position that gives their movements weight. Emotions here are unifying because they are not reduced by sameness.

In sum, this section argues is that there are different ways to mobilize around affect, all of which are tied to collectivity, to shared but differently-held histories, to organizations of space, place, people, and the meanings thereof (Ahmed, 2014; Highmore, 2017). In many cases this mobilization is not—or at least not singularly—positive in sensation or externalization (Ahmed, 2014; Cvetkovich, 2003; Gould, 2009). In all, though, we come to be through the shared affect. And while I must once again emphasize that we cannot reduce affective sensation to generalized tropes, it is certainly clear that certain modalities and manipulations of affect lead to certain types of connection. Social and political communities—here, activist groups—maintain and build their communities through a shared *affective receptivity* that is honed through the framing and interacting of emotional sensation. The political is felt as affect, made feeling, condensed to politic, brought into group feeling, and again and again. This differs from the mobilizations of radical movements in that the former seems to open doors to others, sensorily, and the latter bars the gates.

### **ON MOVEMENT (OR LACK THEREOF),**

I have been, admittedly, wont to glorify the politics and practices of group formation on the political left. I identify very strongly with the values these movements make their spaces for, and so I *feel* it is only natural that my inclination is to see ‘my side’ as engaging with and evoking the ‘good’ sort of affects. There have been some tensions in this thinking as I have delved deeper into the world of affect theories and the politics of feeling.

While certainly it is the case that certain responses to affect—those of our aforementioned alt-right and bigoted groups, par excellence—direct sensation towards structural and material harm of others (Ahmed, 2014), it is not *just* my proclaimed political opposites who allow their feelings about affects to effect their political lives in detrimental ways. This has been an incredibly frustrating revelation, and certainly not one I am the first to address.

In Audre Lorde's *Uses of Anger* (1997), anger is once again at centre stage, and its utility in political action is tied specifically to feelings of Black women as they move under racist and sexist socio-political realities. Anger burns at the core of this piece, a shouted demand to *move*, to make change, to not sit idly by while women of colour face the brunt of feminized violence. And the response from interlocutors, as Lorde (1997) illustrates, comes not as unifying affect, not a call back, but a disheartening immobility. Where there should be motion from the white women to whom she speaks, we find only absence.

This affective absence is what we would call guilt. For Lorde (1997), the guilt of white women when faced with Black women's experiences of racism is materially useless. She states "I have no creative use for guilt, yours or my own." (Lorde, 1997, p.283), there is nothing that can be done with this feeling that is materially useful in general, but especially in political contexts. When one is guilty—responds negatively to their engagement in affective flows—they are not moving towards their fellows or acting, they are cutting themselves off. In the end, there is nothing much that can be done when one is guilty aside from leave them to the side to stew in their affective depression and practical immobility. They either get over it and grow or make themselves a problem by externalizing these feelings onto those they blame their emergence. Much as we have seen, people and groups often manage negative affect by pushing it onto others and redefining the meanings of their feelings (Ahmed, 2004, 2010, 2014). Alongside these

repressive sensations, political guilt holds people back, and makes them turn in and away from (Lorde, 1997). This is not a sensation Lorde (1997) can waste her time addressing—and certainly no one else should be, either—in the white people experiencing it; this would be yet another act of labor *for* privileged groups performed *by* marginalized and especially Black and feminized groups to keep them comfortable. Once again, the emotional habitus of those at the top would be maintained at the expense of those onto which negative feelings are dumped (Ahmed, 2004, 2010, 2015; Berlant, 2010; Brennan, 2004). Lorde proclaims:

I cannot hide my anger to spare your guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger; for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it becomes no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness. (1997, p.282)

Guilt makes us impotent. The language of “increase-diminution-increase-diminution” utilized in affect theory (Deleuze, 1978/2020) almost feels too neutral here. When one is politically impotent, not only are they immobile, but so too are they blockades of change. The diminution here is not just lack of receptivity or movement back from; there is an unsurprising reification of ideological and emotional negativity. Pointedly, the messages comes that “guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we will all perish, for they serve none of our futures.” (Lorde, 1997, p.278). I agree with this emphatically.

Lorde's (1997) analysis is applicable outside of the women's movements from which it emerged. In their analysis of shame (which in my opinion is towing a razor-thin line with guilt, definitionally, and will thus be used interchangeably), Sedgwick and Frank (2003) argue that this is an especially significant affective set. While other affects move you—your capacity to move increasing as the feeling increases—shame is uniquely capable of cutting affective increase down

at its knees (Sedgwick & Frank, 2003). There is an abrupt end to the capacity to move. Plainly, put, shame is a line-drawing sensation (Sedgwick & Frank, 2003) in much the same way that anger or fear may be (Ahmed, 2004, 2010, 2015; Berlant, 2010; Brennan, 2004). Sedgwick and Frank posit that “Perhaps along with contempt and disgust, it [shame] can be a switch point for the individuation of imaging systems, of consciousness, of bodies, of theories, of selves—an individuation that decides not necessarily an identity, but a figuration, distinction, or mark of punctuation.” (Sedgwick & Frank, 2003, pp.116-117). Bodies come to be divided from others through their engagements with shame.

For Ahmed, some differentiation occurs, as she argues that while other negative affects are directed outwards, shame is most frequently self-directed (2014, p.103). Disgust, anger, fear, and contempt are pushed out onto others, while shame folds in within an individuated self. With this distinction we may find the impulse to write off shame, then. So what if people shove themselves into an affective hole of guilt? In the case of activist spaces, is it not better for us if the people who cannot move to help us just stay shut up in that feeling? It is a fair line of questioning, I suppose. There are however, unfortunately, many risks in marking these affective modulations as insignificant.

First and foremost, as with other affects, shame is highly relational. One does not feel shame alone, even as it is a self-centred emotion (Ahmed, 2014, p.106). Simply, you can only shame me because I care how you are feeling about me. We are moved away from collectives by shame, not necessarily for the better; “The very physicality of shame—how it works on and through bodies—means that shame also involves the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social spaces, as bodies ‘turn away’ from the others who witness the shame.” (Ahmed, 2014, p.103). There are idealized versions ourselves and our communities that we wish to mobilize

towards (Ahmed, 2014, p.106), much as we reach for our cruelly-optimistic fantasies (Berlant, 2010). Shame is felt when we are made aware of our inability to ‘match up’ with the established positive ways of being (Ahmed, 2014, p.106).

Second—and logically extending from the prior point—comes the fact that shame is a deterrent, but not necessarily a completely immobilizing one (Ahmed, 2014). While affective depression does mean that one is no longer capable of acting (Deleuze, 1978/2020), shame itself is more of a chastising sensation than a completely freezing one. Conventionally, networks of shame and shaming are used to police behaviour; one is shamed, becomes withdrawn, and responds by changing their behaviour to match whatever the normative standard from which they shamefully deviated was (Ahmed, 2014, pp.106-107). Here, shame is especially community building, because it incentivises us to respond to the building of walls by reinforcing them against the shameless others who did not move closer to the group at the feeling of their own shameful inadequacy. The act of moving relieves shame through the differentiation of the cause of shame—or the shameful other—from the ideal body (Ahmed, 2014, p.107). In this case, shame operates in much the same way as rage, fear or disgust responses to marginalized peoples; the negative emotion is felt and attributed to a group outside of the self in the name of recovery to positive affects.

The third possible problematic here is that since shame *feels* so highly individuated, it is—I suppose as are most affects are—very easy to dissociate from the material realities of its emergence. “Despite its recognition of past wrongdoings, shame can still conceal how such wrongdoings shape lives in the present. The work of shame troubles and is troubling, exposing some wounds, at the same time as it conceals others.” (Ahmed, 2014, p.102). When centred in group and nation-building projects, for example, shame operates very well to present personal

expressions of shame as a shared narrative of community; the inciting force of the shared reaction is negated in favour of the elevation of the shame *itself* as the collectivising event (Ahmed, 2014). *We* feel shame together, but do we understand the reason we feel it? Have we moved towards the sensation, or merely moved back from it together?

The final risk here is that guilt and shame are, as all emotions are, not practical responses to their perceived or actual causes. We feel in response, in significant ways, but this ultimately means nothing without action. In the case of guilt, particularly that guilt that emerges from lack of political action for our more marginalized peers, or the shame at having been either an active participant or passive actor in their oppression, this nothingness is often a harm in itself. As Lorde (1997) observes, white women are not responding to their guilt by turning towards the Black women that call them to act. White women step back, make excuses, draw lines in community building and affective tone with their guilt and hostility at being called to improve their behaviour (Lorde, 1997). Similarly, white people often mobilize group shame as the collective and nation-building response to the material circumstances that *result* in shame, rather than address the root causes themselves (Ahmed, 2014, pp.108-113). Shame becomes absolution for the very cause of this affective turn (Ahmed, 2014, pp.108-109). Rather than a drive to do more, be better, form community and take action against the negative affect causing social and political realities we brush against on a daily basis, shame becomes a replacement for responsibility (Ahmed, 2014, p.119), and therefore “[...] it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness.” (Lorde, 1997, p.282), as we saw above. Shame does not move the body, but is unjustly taken into the body as a wound to the *self* that prevents accountability to and action for the *collective*.

**ON HATING,**

There are some memories that I return to quite often. For me, memory is a worry stone, you see. Reaching into my pocket, grabbing hold, and running a thumb along it over and over and over again. Memorizing the texture and the feeling. Really, this is not an apt metaphor. For me or anyone else. It is more like this: you are taken by idle thinking, and, as is often the case, turn to the situations that *feel* the most. Maybe a more accurate illustration would be grabbing something you don't expect to be sharp, and then squeezing tighter instead of dropping it. The point I am trying to make is that most moments in time aren't affectively flat, and this remains true after they've passed you by. Probably you can't actually think of a mostly-neutral day, or a time you were exceptionally bored, but certainly anger or joy or fear or grief call themselves back up when you pass over the histories of them. In sum: the important thing for memories is the feeling of them.

This is probably why I am so captivated by the teenaged me in particular. I've had an obsession for at least the last few years with acts of *becoming*, and so am, alongside my idle reflecting on memories, always trying to pinpoint moments of change. Probably this is neither productive nor bound to reveal any strong answers to when and how I got to my current personhood. What this exercise has been good for though, is figuring out precisely *how* I tend to change. And I certainly changed a lot in (and now, from) my high school years. So, the memories:

A classmate—with whom I had been known to get into exceptionally long-winded political debates—said something racist and dehumanizing (and yes, what he said *is* verbatim engraved into the sense-memory of my brain, but I'll save you the bullshit), and I felt my entire body flash warm with hate. I had never been particularly fond of physical violence, but I felt the

urge burning its way from the centre of my chest into my fingertips. I did not realize that I was sweating, or that my hands were shaking, until long after I'd stopped shouting at him. Angry leftist indeed. This memory still burns. I still get angry when I think about it, still feel my lungs expand and my fingertips pinprick with energy.

I confessed to my closest friends that I always felt like the skin on my back didn't fit right, and like there was a tingling, stabbing *something* between the top few layers and the muscle beneath. My body did not fit into the world, and the feeling of it got worse around other people. This was true without being accurate. I spent years trying to name the discomfort that I carried with me through all my interactions, across the school parking lot with eyes following me, in the classroom, into hangouts with peers. I did not figure out what this feeling was for years, but probably the best descriptors were *you don't belong here* or *outsider*. The problem is that the environments I moved through were designed to be hostile to people like me (were designed to be hostile to even more people than just the ones 'like me'). I did not know it at the time, but Christ did I feel it. This feeling is harder to draw back up, luckily. It is not a good thing to feel the places you occupy as sensationally hostile to you. Still, though, I sometimes leave places and conversations trying to shake the feeling off of me. It clings to my skin like the self-loathing that drove me into it.

I was at a bush party and made a *spectacularly* problematic joke, and immediately felt the urge to throw myself bodily into the bonfire a few feet behind me. Embarrassment is not the right word. Guilty, perhaps. Shame-filled, certainly. These are feelings I was deeply familiar with in my teen years, but mostly self-directed. When you realize that you have been externalizing something that you do not like about yourself, it is different than the private feelings you are used to. People have seen you, have seen the shameful worst of you, and the feeling presses

down on top of you. I will full-body pause when I think about this night. What's worse than remembering it, though, is how much it makes me want to curl into a ball and never do anything again. This is a weakness in me, to be held captive by what should be a lesson. I feel shame like nothing else when my impulse is to withdraw from my wrongs rather than move forward with them.

There are many more memories I could turn to here. I will spare you a run-down of the rest of my hellish (both because of me and in spite) teenaged years. For brevity, I can identify some through lines. First, my defining moments are often political. I mean this both in the sense that everything is political, and in the sense that these examples, at least, are all distinctly political moments. Second, it is the feeling that makes the experience memorable. If I had no attached sensation, these would not have been significant moments to me, let alone ones I consider foundational. Third, these feelings all moved me, in some way. The living of affective experiences enforces a trajectory—or many, plural, trajectories.

The first story is, I think, most obvious in this regard. Anger is a particularly useful feeling, in that it burns you to *move*, to do *something*, to scream and make change and hit and try. You want to go forwards, to move towards. Your trajectory is outwards, here: you want to move towards the feelings, bring more of them into you, and act. The other two are equally moving, despite their appearances. The difference is that both involve a movement *away* from other people; namely here, my communities. This is a physical withdrawal (I can't be around them) and an internal emotional one (I should not be around them). Both feelings turn you inward, make you freeze up and close up. Affectively speaking, there is an urge to remove oneself. You feel, and you want to be away from whatever drew up the sensation. You want to get it out of you.

A sensation takes hold and changes the way the world around us looks, and we reject it even as it makes itself at home in us. We feel the compulsion to run away, but we can't escape from these feelings. The more we try, the more they capture us. The harder they hold. Our consumption by affective immobilization at least in part relies on our impulse to let ourselves lie in it. My emotions here—like all of ours in withdrawing—feel safe to wallow in. It seems almost imperative to dull ourselves to match what we feel. It is easy to find new ways to draw these feelings up, pull the blanket sensation of them over our heads, dig in and down and refuse to make them ours as we are consumed within them. But this is not sustainable. And the more we run away, the farther into the woods we are going.

#### **ON TRANSLATING AND MOVING WITH,**

All this is to say that our emotional states are far more significant in the building of (and interacting with) our political realities than we are currently admitting. And, even within such bodies of theory as affective and emotional politics, we are woefully bad at engaging with the sorts of emotions that do not 'feel nice'. There seems to be some conflation here between what is *nice* to feel, and what is *important* to feel, as well as an assumption that only so-called moving feelings necessarily produce cohesive affective—and therefore political—connections. We are not, at current date, well equipped to move past the sort of feelings that twist us up, hold us hostage in our politics, and prevent us from getting up and moving into more 'productively' emotional politics. There are no real solutions to be found.

I am not happy to leave with what I have here. I would love to have an easy answer, would be overjoyed to come to my concluding section with, well, anything resembling a conclusion. But it is only fair that I remain as honest as have tried to be in thus far in my self-reflection and analysis. I wanted, so badly, to end with solutions, with directions, with some

hard-hitting advice—political or otherwise—on how to best get through and work with the affective sensations that immobilize us. What I have done instead up to here is a good job of explaining that we all have a big political feeling problem that is rooted in the sheer variability and subjectivity of affective sensation. I have pointed to something and told you to look at it, and now I am going to walk away (or, will in a few pages).

This failure is perhaps an inevitable one, at least within the body of affect theory. Perhaps the lack of clear and concise points is emblematic of the theoretical body itself; I am inclined to self-apologize by arguing that the sheer ambivalence and subjectivity of affect make it impossible for any solutions-based work to hold water. This is not necessarily unfounded. To come to any strong conclusions would be to assign significance to affect, and as we know, it “represents nothing, strictly nothing” (Deleuze, 1978/2020). There are no strong words that can adequately capture what we are working with here.

I am furthermore hesitant to offer any concrete answers at the risk of valorizing particular emotional pathways from affective sensation. As illustrated above, there is a habitual path we follow towards feelings we are most comfortable within. While variable in their definition, feelings like love or hate (Ahmed, 2010, 2014), like burning anger (Lorde, 1997), or grief (Cvetkovich, 2003), are all moving, and therefore relatively easy to attach oneself to. We want to attach ourselves and our communities to ‘good’ feelings, sure (Ahmed, 2010). But more to the point, by the nature of affect, we are more inclined towards the feelings deemed connecting—be they necessarily good or bad—over those deemed withdrawing, and affectively immobilizing (Deleuze, 1978/2020). And so to make any grand claims that we *should* think this or we *should* do that with our affect would be at best reductionist and at worst missing the entire point of the theoretical approach. Perhaps even this would be a contribution to the problem.

Still, I think hope is not lost. There are, if not grand solutions, then at least some ways of thinking with and through affective sensation that may prove to be helpful. We can see that affective capacity is negotiated for better or worse in all manner of political spaces (Ahmed, 2004, 2010, 2014; Berlant, 2010, 2011; Brennan, 2004; Cvetkovich, 2003; Gould, 2009; Highmore, 2017). So perhaps the solution lies not in a fundamental change within the theory, but in continuing to do what we have already been doing, but more consciously, carefully, and intentionally.

To make any sort of meaningful change in our relationships with affective domains, we need first to be aware of where we are standing within them. This is harder in some cases than others. While it is simple enough to understand our relationship with affective flow when it becomes particularly punctuating, we may have a harder time grasping the significance of affective experiences when they feel normal to us. We cannot afford to think only of the affective in the moments where it becomes most obvious to us. The banal feelings of the everyday, quiet and inobtrusive, are just as critical to the development of our political worlds as the louder feelings (Berlant, 2022; Highmore, 2017). Further, it may be precisely *because* of the lack of intensity that such feelings come to hold so much meaning; the affective position of neutrality is another affective refrain to which we are tied (Bertelsen & Murphie, 2010), and it is one that is effectively moving precisely because of how unmoving it feels.

As articulated previously, the maintenance of some people's "emotional habitus" (Gould, 2009), relies on the "dumping" of affect onto other communities so that they may escape their 'negative' sensations (Brennan, 2004). This position of affective comfort is a regulated state. Emotions have been "stuck" to certain groups (Ahmed, 2010) in such a way that others do not have the great displeasure of finding themselves frequently entangled with these affects. The

same is true for any feeling that we do not acknowledge as really *feeling* any sort of way; there is a great deal of privilege in feeling *nothing*, because this nothingness has been produced by a lot of “mood work” that is specifically ordered to construct this emotional absence (Highmore, 2017, p.9). In our political worlds—which is to say, all of them—attempts are being made to control and tame our affective capacities (Bertelsen & Murphie, 2010, pp.147-148), and by and large this attempt goes unnoticed. Even feeling neutrally depends on affective movement, and the banality does not negate the effects.

So, my first recommendation is to pay closer attention to how we are feeling even when our affective state is not notable. This is crucial, because to do otherwise would be to de-historicise and decontextualize both our affective habitus and the sort of feelings that *become* notable. The big feelings do not have meaning separately from their emergence from everyday little sensations. Here, we become conscious of the cruelly (or otherwise) optimistic, the neutral, the mobilizing, and the (dis)connecting narratives into which we are so seamlessly folded. We gain the capacity to question just how natural our feeling in the world is; is this neutrality or this good feeling actually ours? Or has it come from elsewhere, been managed to allow us to feel as though it is our own?

Berlant (2010) argues that we are not doomed to attach ourselves uncritically to the historied affective flows that have shaped us. Our attachments to affective realities may be deep, but still, for Berlant (2010, p.105)—with regards in this case to critical poetry/storytelling—much potential change can be found:

But analytically this singular lyric opens up an opportunity to learn to pay attention to, have transference with, those moments of suspension in which the subject can no longer take his continuity in history for granted but feels full of *something* ineloquently promising, a something that reveals, at the same time, a trenchant *nothing* general about conditions of optimism and cruel optimism.

Her storyteller here (the poet John Ashbery) is poking at the flaws in his historied time from within it, thereby becoming discontinuous with the everyday, ‘normal’ feelings that surround him (Berlant, 2010). His confident awareness of the structure of his reality opens the door to seeing outside of it, or at least from within it with a critical eye (Berlant, 2010, p.105). It is clear here that it is possible to stand up to our chests in the water, dig our feet into the sand and push against the affective undertow, rather than let it pull us off our feet and into it. There may be no sense in trying to drown it *out*, but certainly we can avoid drowning *in* it. There is something there, we can see something, another option or another affective path for ourselves (Berlant, 2010), and first step is as easy as noticing that we are feeling in the first place.

This awareness is crucial, most simply because we cannot address a problem if we do not know it is there. Of course, this solution does not really make change by itself, and so we must be capable not only of noticing, but of moving past this awareness into active interaction. We must be aware that the difficult task of noticing does not imply movement or change by itself. It may be difficult, even scary, to turn awareness into action. We may find we do not want to disconnect, or struggle to do so even as we critique our structure, because “[...] emotions are ‘sticky’, and even when we challenge our investments, we might get stuck.” (Ahmed, 2014, p.16). But crucially, “There is hope, of course, as things can get unstuck.” (Ahmed, 2014, p.16). Given the high variability and subjectivity of affective sensation (Deleuze, 1978/2020, Seigworth & Gregg, 2010), no particular attachment can be said to be permanent, or unstick-able.

My second recommendation thus flows naturally from this first set of considerations: as we pay attention to the affective realities we find ourselves within, we must make the conscious choice to *engage* with these sensations. We cannot be unstuck if we do nothing. The solution to feeling our politics and having strong emotional responses to our affective movements is not to

attempt better repression. We can see that the affective is present whether we ‘feel’ it or not, in the loud good or bad, or the quiet nothing of every day (Deleuze, 1978/2020; Highmore, 2017; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). So, cutting ourselves off from it—even claiming that to do so is possible—is materially useless to us. A far better approach is to increase our capacity to be affected by leaning towards the sensory, rather than allowing ourselves to dull our emotive and actional capacities (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010).

As Lorde (1997) articulates, withdrawing from her feelings has been a withdrawing from education: “My fear of that [my personal/political] anger taught me nothing. Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing also.” (Lorde, 1997, p.278). Simply, pulling away from what is felt strongly in our bodies and minds is pulling away from potentially useful information and paths to better movement. Importantly to Lorde (1997), pulling away from other people’s feelings is just as—or likely more—damaging to our ability to learn and grow within feeling worlds. Lack of receptivity to our own emotions leaves us uncritical and emersed in affect without consideration, and lack of receptivity to other people’s emotions halts learning, movement, and the building of more productive political communities.

So, the suggestion becomes: be receptive to your own emotions, and other people’s. This is not to say that we should let ourselves be subsumed by the affective flow of one emotional set over another, but rather that we should allow ourselves to consider feeling, and the changing of our feelings relationally, to be bodies of knowledge in their own right. In speaking to white women about their feelings of guilt and hostility when called out for their racism, Lorde says, “If in your dealings with other women your actions have reflected those attitudes, then my anger and your attendant fears, perhaps, are spotlights that can be used for your growth in the same way I have had to use learning to express anger for my growth.” (1997, p.278). Feeling is not

something to be avoided by these women, but leaned into, and interrogated, and transformed into new knowledges and actions. The act of feeling is not a weakness, but a form of “corrective surgery” (Lorde, 1997, p.278) for their prior behaviours and, importantly, feelings. The solution to feeling bad is not to feel less. It is to feel more. It is to lean into and learn from the flow of affect.

“*Everything can be used, except what is wasteful. You will need to remember this, when you are accused of destruction [emphasis original].*” (Lorde, 1997, p.280) she proclaims to the women in her audience; to her, their anger at injustice is not wasteful, frivolous or aimlessly disruptive, but materially helpful in making political and social change. We should take this claim more seriously. All our feelings—even the emotions we do not like, the ones that make us feel immobilized and impotent—are useful, so long as we do not waste them. Let ourselves waste away in them.

It is by taking on this perspective that we may see the value of our affectively withdrawing emotional sets. Following Ngai’s (2005) work, I vehemently oppose the idea that our more minor and “ugly” feelings cannot do major work on us or only do disabling work. I furthermore want us to conceive of ugly feelings as useful to work *with*. Ngai says that the emotions she is interested in are “[...] explicitly *amoral* and *noncathartic*, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release. In fact, most of these feelings tend to interfere with the outpouring of other emotions.” (2005, pp.6-7). This is an interesting approach to the analysis of affective immobilization. While the larger body of affect theory agrees that affective withdrawal is not, as we would say, cathartic, it notably frames the feeling of these sensations as a cutting off from the *ability to feel catharsis at all* (Deleuze, 1978/2020; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). Affect theory frames these withdrawing feelings in

perhaps more dooming ways than Ngai (2005) does here; “noncathartic” is not the same as ‘cut off from’. To not feel catharsis is a different thing entirely than to not feel at all.

So, it is important to see negative affects as adding an element of “noncathartic” sensation rather than as a taking away of affective potential (Ngai, 2005). The feeling is still there, even if you do not feel it moving you. To have not felt the flow of affect as motion through and out of the body is perhaps a more obvious presentation of affect, but negative sensations, as trapping and freezing as they may seem, still need to be conceptualized as further engagements with the affective that have yet to ‘go anywhere’. To be held by these “ugly feelings” is not to have escaped or moved yourself outside of affective connection, but to have become stuck within it (Ngai, 2005). Simply, then, it can be said that withdrawing after the feeling of an emotion does not mean we are affectively dislocated, but rather that we have become unactionable. Not absent feeling, not feeling without significance, but certainly when left in this state without further interrogation, horribly wasteful.

Affects do not have to feel intrinsically connecting to be so. Even as you are withdrawn, you are still in an affective conversation with all that is around you (Seigworth & Greg, 2010, p.2). The danger is, as we have seen above, that we tend to work harmfully with feelings we approach as harmful, and work wastefully with affects we deem wasteful. The lack of catharsis in racist fear is mutated into externalized hate for the other, and internal love for the same (Ahmed, 2004, 2010, 2014). The lack of catharsis of guilt leads also to hate of the other and the purging of negativity within the white body (Lorde, 1997). We can see that there is a dangerous tendency towards the production of further withdrawing feelings when experiencing negative affects (Ngai, 2005). We feel strangely disconnected from the world by our sensations, and so our impulse is to cordon ourselves off further from feeling as best we can.

Even still, we cannot be cut off, and moving away does not mean getting rid of. Even when we feel ourselves as outside of the affective flow, we are still foundationally tied to our affective realities. The trick is to recognize this connection, even in instances where we cannot or do not want to exist within it, and prevent the mutation of our feelings into more destructive sensations and actions.

Dissociation, for example, though felt as a disconnection from our shared realities, is *not* a state of discontinuity with affective and historical realities (Berlant, 2022, p.120). Even when we feel isolated emotionally from our political worlds, we are necessarily attached to them, especially as dissociative states emerge *in response to* the very places, spaces and people we are connected to (Berlant, 2022). So, in cases where we find ourselves disassociated from our affective networks, we have not lost out on affective connection, but felt our continuity broken, and the normative attaching sensation of affect disrupted (Berlant, 2022, p.123). ‘Not feeling’ is not a lack of feeling, but the place where sociopolitical emotion that was ‘too much’ has come to rest (Berlant, 2022). Importantly, this state is not, as we would come to expect from such an affectively withdrawing sensation, intrinsically immobilizing. “The tone [of dissociation] emerges from the internal frictions of being in life without wanting the world. *Life proceeds as the world recedes as an object/scene for desire* [emphasis added].” (Berlant, 2022, p.122); movement still occurs, because despite a lack of felt connection to the world, life itself must continue. Further, “Life in the ellipsis of politicized dissociation is not identical to giving up; it’s a condition of giving out that leads to feeling out [...]” (Berlant, 2022, p.145). Though the feeling itself makes us feel external, we are still inside of our political worlds. We need not give up just because we have given in to ‘bad’ feeling.

So, dissociation is a “life-affirming world loss” (Berlant, 2022, p.124) that allows the experiencer to keep being and keep moving as they are taken over by their affective contexts. There is a desire, however far away it may feel, to remain attached to our feelings and the realities that draw them up (Berlant, 2022). Here is damage, defeat, passive sensation, aversion, and negativity, but also a deep desire (Berlant, 2022). Even as withdrawal occurs, within us there is want; for a somewhere else, for a something else, for different political and social worlds and their accompanying affective currents. We can see even in the most withdrawing feelings a desire to engage meaningfully with the affective and political, and so there is still hope to work from within them.

My final suggestion then is to not attempt to push such affects out of us, as this inevitably pushes it onto other people or into the mortar of our emotional walls. Rather, I suggest that we work with our ‘uglier’ feelings and make them helpful tools. Clearly affective sensation can be translated and reconfigured into new emotional trends endlessly, so why not continue this work? We need not let the *feeling* of disconnection and pulling away materially influence our political and social connections. It is clear that any number of felt responses to affect can come to mean something important, and that to be affectively immobilized is not to be politically immobilized. So, though it may seem simple or too pop-psychology for the moment, the solution to finding ourselves trapped within our wasteful feelings is to continue to feel them, and make use of them how we can. This may not always be easy, it may not feel good, but it may be all we can do.

Be aware of how you were taught to feel. Choose to engage with it as a tool. Understand that even in your most disconnecting feelings, you are implicated in the politics of the worlds around you. And perhaps most importantly, get up, and do something with it. Change emerges from the little feelings that grow into stories, into times and histories (Williams, 1977). Do not let

feeling off push you out of the flowing, changing, incredible world around you. How you feel is important, it is yours and it is telling you something, but do not let it tell you that what is best for you and the world around you is to be frozen away from new sensations and politics. Be affected, because it may lead to a great many positive effects, if only we use it well.

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