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Unfeeling. Affective derealization and the ecological crisis

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ABSTRACT

Collective unfeeling is a socially supported and structurally scaffolded impairment of affective responsiveness. We develop this concept to explain why widespread acknowledgment of the ecological crisis among affluent populations so rarely translates into action. The wealthy continue to build on coastlines as if immune to rising sea levels; carbon-intensive lifestyles continue unabated; and sustained forms of climate activism remain scarce. We argue that understanding these behaviors requires attention to the affective structures that enable affluent individuals to evade the reality of the crisis and, in consequence, lead to its affective derealization. Unfeeling, as we theorize it, is both synchronic and diachronic. It expresses an impaired sensibility that embeds longstanding relations of racial violence and histories of colonial oppression, and is actively sustained by what Brand and Wissen call the imperial mode of living and other infrastructures of racial capitalism. Drawing on affect theory, philosophy of emotion and Black critical theory, we trace how these dynamics of unfeeling are reflected in, and further deepened by, the steady proliferation of sacrifice zones. These sites of extraction render certain populations disposable and normalize death as a consequence, usually along racial lines. We conclude that responding to the crisis requires dismantling the structural conditions of unfeeling and cultivating the collective affective attunement the crisis demands.

1. Introduction

In his 2016 book *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh asks how the climate catastrophe is being taken up in politics, history, and storytelling, and how human societies respond to devastating tsunamis and floods and to the mounting threats they pose. Looking at structures under threat in South East Asia, Ghosh notices surprising race- and class-related divisions. On the Nicobar Islands, struck by a large tsunami in 2004, wealthy neighborhoods had been built close to the coastline despite the exposure, while impoverished Indigenous populations lived in the islands' more protected interiors. This arrangement, Ghosh argues, reflects a bourgeois expectation of being shielded from harm whatever the circumstances, an expectation rooted in colonialism and the emotional and material privileges it has long afforded. Building by the sea for the view, in apparent disbelief that the ocean could ever harm them, the wealthy expressed a confidence underwritten by a colonial-capitalist order that has reliably spared them the harms borne by the less affluent. As Ghosh writes, "in settling where they had, they had silently expressed their belief that highly improbable [catastrophic] events belong not in the real world but in fantasy" (Ghosh, 2016).

Beyond South East Asia, affluent societies sideline the climate catastrophe even though its effects are no longer abstractions. Alongside annual heat records, the catastrophe has become palpable through wildfires, floods, droughts, and early blossoms. The systems on which human survival and flourishing depend are changing dramatically and irreversibly; the evidence is incontrovertible. Yet in the Global North, affective and practical responses proportionate to the ecological crisis are lacking. Affluent populations continue to build on coastlines as if immune to rising seas; carbon-intensive activities such as flying continue unabated; collective, sustained climate activism remains scarce. A fuller understanding of this, we argue, requires attention to affect; to the way it lets affluent populations evade the full reality of the crisis, and specifically to the collective modes of "unfeeling" that make such evasion possible.[1]

Combining critical social theory with insights from the philosophy of emotion and cultural affect theory, we frame unfeeling as a socially-

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[1] Throughout, we distinguish the *ecological crisis*—the broader, system-level breakdown spanning many interlocking dimensions—from the *climate catastrophe*, its most palpable manifestations: deadly heat waves, floods, droughts, water shortages, soil erosion, and the like. The climate catastrophe is the acute edge of this broader crisis.

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shared and structurally-scaffolded capacity to remain insensitive to the reality of developments whose significance for the collective is hard to dispute. Unfeeling gets systematically produced and upheld in order to shield problematic practices and modes of living from awareness, scrutiny and transformative initiative. It has synchronic as well as diachronic aspects: it expresses an impaired sensibility that embeds longstanding relations of racial violence and histories of colonial oppression. Drawing on Black criticisms of the Anthropocene (e.g. Ferdinand, 2021; Karera, 2019), we show how modes of unfeeling vis-à-vis the ecological crisis are specific to European modernity. In particular, we highlight how dynamics of unfeeling among those who occupy a privileged place within a capitalist-colonial order are reflected in, and further enabled by, the steady multiplication of sacrifice zones (Miller, 2023): areas of eco-social devastation that the ruling episteme considers to be beyond redemption. This theoretical perspective offers a critical vantage point for understanding the complacency among citizens of the Global North in view of the ecological crisis. Moreover, this perspective shows what structural transformations are needed to encourage collective forms of affective attunement proportionate to this unfolding catastrophe.

2. Reality, evasion and affect

Denialism, the old adversary, has faded into the background. Yet, as the catastrophe deepened, the stewards of business as usual moved the goalposts of public non-response: from denying the facts to shrugging them off. This diagnosis is widely shared. In his book *The Exhausted of the Earth*, Ajay Singh Chaudhary states that "climate-denial in its simplest form […] is, even in the United States, its chief global home, largely now a non-issue" (Chaudhary, 2024, 23). The attempt to undermine climate science, which has been a project of oil corporations from the 1970s onwards (Malm and Zetkin Collective, 2021), is no longer the biggest source of concern for the stakeholders of the fossil status quo, as several studies show (Gounaridis and Newell, 2024; Stoetzer and Zimmermann, 2024). Kari Norgaard has distinguished between more explicit and implicit forms of denial vis-à-vis the climate catastrophe, and sees the problem more in how people choose (or choose not) to act, knowing that conditions are changing, than in whether they "believe" in the facts that constitute this change (Norgaard, 2011). Neither ignorance of the crisis's causes nor of its solutions is primary here. Fossil fuel companies as well as political leaders constantly adapt their decision-making to changing circumstances. The ecological crisis is a crucial part of a reality to be accepted, adapted to and acted upon. Affluent societies fail to treat this reality as *real*. This failure grounds a *politics of unreality* in many states and societies around the globe. In this text, we will analyze this failure and begin to probe what we call affective derealization and its consequences.

The concept of unfeeling is not rooted in any particular theoretical tradition, but has been informed by articulations within cultural and literary studies as well as continental philosophy (Berlant, 2015; Butler, 2009; Feldman, 1994; Yao, 2021). Our gloss on the concept combines various approaches to evading disturbing feelings and social defense mechanisms against material realities. Unfeeling is an under-studied dimension of affectivity, as important as manifestations of affect that are fitting and proportionate to their objects (Szanto and Tietjen, 2025). As a concept, unfeeling helps to analyze the affective social techniques that are available in affluent capitalist societies to evade the urgencies manifesting elsewhere and the violence of exploitation that these societies are built upon (Kohpeiß, 2023). Social techniques of unfeeling prevent the formation of a social order grounded in an accurate sense of reality. Instead, they facilitate modes of governance that rely on the evasion of reality and on the downplaying of matters of collective concern: a politics of unreality, in short.

Unfeeling takes many shapes, from economic policies that postpone climate measures again and again to the blatant push for ideological "solutions" like electromobility, no matter the cost (from water shortage around a Tesla plant in Brandenburg to lithium mining in the Atacama desert). Unfeeling might manifest as a delusional depiction of the future, committed to the expectation of unlimited economic growth. Moreover, as we will explain, unfeeling plays a role in the racist segregation of environments that results in the exploitation or total neglect of some regions of the world and the people living there; regions designated as *sacrifice zones* (Juskus, 2023).

Affective derealization also results from the organization of everyday life in the affluent societies of the Global North, which are built on an "imperial mode of living" (Brand and Wissen, 2021). This mode of living includes high-throughput consumption, individual mobility and alienating modes of production. Collective expectations of comfort and habits of affluence (Slaby, 2025) can fasten individuals' attention on many possible objects in such a way that their gaze never reaches the unfolding global catastrophe. An apparently comfortable life in a world of commodities makes for an apparatus of distraction.

What has been described as "climate anxiety" (Thompson, 2021) might be a secondary effect of the social conditions of late capitalism, linked to a perceived lack of social and political concern for the catastrophe constantly pushed to the background.[2] Climate anxiety, in its diffuse forms, is a symptom of uncanniness; a hunch of what is coming when the world of fossil capitalism in the Global North collapses. Unfeeling, in contrast, describes socially consolidated techniques and behaviors that support a society in its refusal to register the self-perpetuating forces of destruction it has itself given rise to.

Unfeeling must be studied not only to understand the material capitalist interests that sustain ongoing inaction on the ecological crisis, but also to appreciate what motivates affluent societies to fail to address it despite full knowledge of its effects. To date, climate activists have operated with all kinds of drastic images and actions, drawn on sentimental registers by reminding people of their children's futures, and put themselves at risk to prove their sense of urgency is authentic.[3] However, it is as if people are deeply suspicious of a politics that does not know how to help itself other than by such measures, since these drastic depictions do not seem to alter people's sense of reality and fail to crack affluent society's armory of distraction, projection and resentment. Understanding unfeeling as a social technique is a key step toward developing a shared sense of reality in which the crisis can be acknowledged and acted upon collectively.

3. Steps toward a theory

Despite an abundance of information on the extent, causes, and outlook of the climate catastrophe, and despite the growing readiness of people to admit, when pressed, that it is real and concerning, we rarely see collective affective responses proportionate to the matter. Many in the Global North live their lives as if anthropogenic global warming was a minor issue. It appears as something distant in time and space, not impinging upon their spheres of homely concern, and thus also rarely a matter for political engagement. If such nonaccidental, sustained

[2] A substantial literature examines climate anxiety specifically and climate emotions more broadly (see, e.g., Hickman et al., 2021; Davidson, 2024). Our concern runs in a different direction. While much of this work foregrounds the presence of climate-related affect, we attend to its structured absence. These two angles are connected. A broader societal non-responsiveness can intensify the anxiety, dread, and anger of the minority who remain acutely attuned; the global survey by Caroline Hickman and colleagues (2021) records just this among young people, who report both alarm and a sense that those in power dismiss their concerns.

[3] On the communicative dynamics of urgency and catastrophic imagery, we have learned a lot from Susanne Moser (2020); on the limited efficacy of a fear-based framing in activist contexts, see O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole (2009). In stressing how little affective uptake such actions achieve, we do not question the legitimacy or democratic significance of climate disobedience, which we take to be considerable; see Celikates (2023).

collective unfeeling shall become a topic for the philosophy of emotion, conceptual tools are needed to theorize not only manifest emotions and their conditions of elicitation, but also localized absences of emotion, including stunted, paralyzed or otherwise deficient modes of affective awareness. It is also crucial to theorize the processes and practices that generate and stabilize these absences and deficiencies even in plain view of appropriate emotive occasions. What is it that prevents the manifestation of certain affective engagements, such that a selective, filtered and buffered affective outlook on reality is able to take hold?

The following assumption from affect and emotion scholarship guides our inquiry: any perspective on reality that is not anchored in affect is fated to remain abstract, detached, and merely theoretical. Affect is a key component in a substantive sense of reality, as it helps transmute the mere possession of information into a matter of existential pertinence, which is a precondition for understanding (Ratcliffe, 2008, 2025). Accordingly, if knowledge about causes and consequences of global warming shall become tangible and effective, it has to be integrated into the dynamics of relational affect (Slaby, 2019). Yet, as the following discussion will show, that alone is not enough, as the vicissitudes of socially shared affectivity have ways to let certain issues wane from active consideration. As much as the affective arrangements of sociality can confer a sense of what is real, they also have the power to render an issue de facto unreal. Such affective derealization, if brought about collectively, is what we call unfeeling.[4]

In this section, we sketch elements of a theoretical proposal that can illuminate societal unfeeling. In order to do so, it is important to secure a plausible starting point. When we talk about unfeeling, and unfeeling of the ecological crisis in particular, we do not mean that individuals are always or even just frequently unaffected by the looming disaster, or that they remain numb to the historical root causes and the injustices in the balance between those most responsible for, and those most affected by, global warming.[5] Many individuals, on a range of occasions, do in fact feel dread, anxiety, grief or anger in relation to climate-related disasters and environmental alterations, and in view of the lack of collective action with respect to what they see as a civilization-scale problem. However, such individual responses can go together with a notable disaffectedness, lack of urgency and apathetic inaction on the collective level. There is a peculiar *societal* unconcern: an absence of response and lack of affective resonance when it comes to collective orientations. As we will show, this socially-shared affective formation tends to overshadow and dominate individual orientations. Of course, individual attitudes and emotive orientations on the social plane are entangled: we consider the core of the issue of unfeeling to lie at the point where societal trends and orientations intersect with individual attitudes.

Collective unconcern, as a majoritarian structure of unfeeling (Berlant, 2015), is such that it can neutralize individual affective responses by isolating and devaluing them. Without stabilizing and resonating with a collective—without "uptake" (Whitney 2018)—individual emotions tend to remain fleeting, lacking in force to remain active and consequential for longer periods. Just as in the case of speech acts, uptake is a condition for the integrity and stability of affective orientations in a social collective.[6] That is why the starting point for a theory of unfeeling has to lie on the collective level, and in particular at that level of the social which most determines people's routine affective and practical engagements (and disengagements). This brings us to the practices and orientations of the "everyday" as they have been analyzed in practice theory, which has informed work in affect studies (Wetherell, 2012). Practice theory does not deal with the social in the sense of constituted social groups, organizations or other self-aware collectives. Rather, it deals with the social in the sense of clusters of loosely connected social practices, comprising material and communicative engagements that make up quotidian social life at particular sites and settings.

In line with this framework, we use the term "domain of practice" as the conceptual starting point for our proposal. A domain of practice is a tangle of practices, materials, equipment, symbols, agents and media that functions as an arena for meaningful activity at a specific site of social life. It can be things as mundane as homes, street corners, cafeterias, workplaces, sports venues, educational settings, and much else.[7] Affect is part of such domains of practice from the outset: relational dynamics that energize and enliven these sites, tie the elements together and imbue them with a characteristic affective tone and pitch. This is reflected in notions such as *affective arrangement* or *affective assemblage*, which theoretically capture the affective dynamics of quotidian sociality non-individualistically (Slaby et al., 2019; Buchanan, 2026). Affect is here understood as a matter of local confluences of practical and interactional dynamics at specific sites, with the affective dispositions and affective capacities of individuals figuring as just one factor among many in these relational configurations.

Just as the activities at these sites are potent in kindling, generating and sustaining affective dynamics, and in instituting and manifesting repertoires of emotion, these same arrangements are also instrumental in preventing affective responses from arising or from stabilizing into robust orientations. Domains of practice are powerful selectors of affective prevalence. Not everything matters equally for a given practice. As sites of communication and mediatized interaction, domains of practice are open to the wider communicative, discursive and symbolic environment, thus becoming sounding boards for publicly pertinent issues. This imposes a powerful dimension of selectiveness upon topics that will come up during regular practice.

In her ethnographic study of climate denial in small-town Norway, entitled *Living in Denial*, the sociologist Kari Norgaard presents striking

[4] We cannot enter into the intricacies of the phenomenology of unfeeling, but it is important to stress that unfeeling can manifest either as a lack of feeling or as feelings that lack touch with reality. There are distinctive feelings of unreality as when the world appears strangely distant, diffuse, as "not quite there", for instance in cases of derealization or traumatic detachment (Ratcliffe, 2008). Moreover, there are affective modes of stunted vitality and low intensity, such as *affective stasis* (Bernhardt and Slaby, 2023). It is increasingly the case that individuals stare blankly at images of destruction in the wake of climate-related disasters, not quite grasping what has hit them.

[5] What we describe as unfeeling overlaps, to an important extent, with what is elsewhere discussed as environmental "numbness" (see Gordon, 2025), and such apparent numbness is itself an affectively charged and perhaps even actively defended stance rather than a simple absence of feeling (Lertzman, 2015).

[6] The notion of uptake that we draw on here figures in current debates on affective injustice. Originating in speech act theory, and pertinent in debates in politically engaged strands of philosophy of language and philosophy of action (Kukla, 2023; Mühlebach, 2025), uptake is currently discussed in relation to the resonance an individual's emotive responses find in relevant social venues. Shiloh Whitney explains this notion of affective uptake in terms of the intentionality of emotions. Whether an affective episode has intentionality at all, and what its intentional object ends up being, is in part a matter of others' responses to the state in question. For example, whether an emotional reaction comes off as anger—with a proper target and focus, appearing intelligible and warranted in context—partially depends on the way that initial state is taken up and responded to by relevant others, who make sense of it (or refuse to make sense of it) in the given context. Affective intentionality is thus not an instantaneous affair, and not an individual mental act, but a matter of longer sequences of mutual responding in socio-material interactions (see Whitney, 2018, 2023; Slaby, 2023 for discussion). In the case of societal unfeeling, attention has to be paid to the ways in which certain emotional episodes that might be interactionally stabilized in small-scale interactional settings ("in private") fail to find uptake in broader society and thus will be unlikely to register outside a narrow circle, let alone with the public at large.

[7] We build this practice-theoretic framing on Schatzki's site ontology (2002), elaborated philosophically by Rouse toward the constitutive normativity of practices (2007) and, in a more sociological key, by Reckwitz toward their affective dimension (2012).

examples of this practical-discursive effect (Norgaard, 2011). For instance, Norgaard's informants—mostly adult inhabitants of an unnamed Norwegian small town, interviewed in 2001—would often individually voice concerns about the environmental crisis, but at the same time insist that the topic is too serious and too negative to bring up during casual conversations and leisurely encounters (Norgaard, 2011, 102). In the school classroom, a presumably fitting venue for education about the ills of the current epoch, the ecological crisis is considered too depressing a topic to merit much airtime. Norwegian educators, although personally among the most concerned and knowledgeable, state that the purpose of education is to instill hope in children instead of burdening them with the bleakness of climate realism (Norgaard, 2011, 101). Political gatherings, another apt site for pondering civilizational developments, remain focused on local, small-scale themes, leaving the issue of climate breakdown for politicians at the national and international level (Norgaard, 2011, 99). Like a hot potato, the topic is thus pushed further and further away from the purview of local interactive practice. Under these conditions, many individuals tend to think twice about bringing up the issue or expressing their anxiety, in order to avoid being seen as misfits who threaten to poison the communal mood. What Norgaard's study reveals are those tacit normative bans in effect at various sites of social life. Each of these venues of social life is in itself rather unremarkable, but in the aggregate they have the potential to institute and uphold collective unfeeling.

The result of such localized efforts at regulating topics of conversation and other forms of interactive practice is that emotional responses to the ecological crisis are either prevented from arising or are significantly toned down. Where such expressions do occur, they are likely to remain isolated, with little uptake in interaction, and are thus prone to fade and vanish sooner rather than later. Over time, such filtering of issues and policing of expressions is likely to sediment into more enduring habitual dispositions. A *structural apathy* can thus take hold in a collective (Slaby, 2023). Such routinization of everyday practice and interaction shows how social collectives can come to exist in a state of near-unresponsiveness even with regard to matters of gravest concern that are manifestly there for all to see. The "elephant in the room" goes collectively unseen (Zerubavel, 2006). These covers hold because social and psychic factors reinforce each other in producing them, which makes unfeeling at once more stable and less conspicuous. Here our account shares common ground with Sally Weintrobe's psychosocial study of a "culture of uncare": Weintrobe reaches the same terrain from the side of the psyche and its defenses that we approach from the side of collective practice (see Weintrobe, 2021).

Granted, Norgaard conducted her fieldwork in the early 2000s; much has changed since then. Ecological breakdown is now far more visible and publicly discussed, and unfeeling has taken on new forms amid the polarization of climate discourse and an intensified and much-refined denialist politics. However, we insist that Norgaard's diagnosis as such is not dated. That Western affluent societies have perfected socially organized modes of not-knowing, not-seeing, and not-feeling—by drawing on mechanisms largely indifferent to the quantity of information in circulation—is as pertinent today as it was 20 years ago, likely more so. Norgaard's work remains the most incisive ethnographic account of these mechanisms. Recent research on climate emotions in Norway documents the persistence of these mechanisms under transformed conditions (see Marczak et al., 2023).

Several details have to be filled in to consolidate this account. The basics are clear: understanding affect in terms of the selective disclosure of salience and significance within domains of practice provides a frame for a theory of societal unfeeling. The interactional dynamics within domains of practice institute patterns of salience and meaning so that a range of issues is collectively attended and responded to with apt emotions (Szanto and Tietjen, 2025) while other matters of deep importance remain outside the ambit of emotive concern and attention, at least as far as public social encounters and interactions are concerned. Such locally-instituted and supported affective "mattering maps" (Grossberg, 2010) characterize social collectives, social milieus and domains, setting the stage and forming the backdrop for individual affective engagement and emotional orientations.

Practice theory, with its focus on action in its mundane, regular and routinized form, can also help account for the simultaneous occurrence of two tendencies that are seemingly at odds with one another. On the one hand, it can be observed that collectives actively and intentionally de-thematize unwelcome issues. Even large, dispersed, anonymous collectives can exert a form of concerted agency when it comes to regulating what is and what is not to become an issue of collective concern. This is notable, for instance, in many cases of collectively committed atrocities, such as genocide and crimes against humanity (Cohen, 2001). Many small acts at various social sites coalesce to disqualify a topic from common purview, effecting its "derealization" (Mitscherlich, 1967). On the other hand, the very same activities and routines that make up day-to-day practice can coalesce to assume the character of unquestionable givenness; a near-static atmospheric hue that imbues social life as a whole. Such affective atmospheres—collective, spatially distributed affective conditions (Anderson 2009, on their specifically climatic register, Verlie 2019)—immerse and enthrall individuals, instilling a sense of passivity before what appears as a pre-given, ready-made world. Individual acts that do not align with this prevailing tone and sentiment can seem futile from the get-go. Practice theory nicely squares this phenomenological sense of atmospheric givenness with activities and intentions that are distributed through a larger social body.

With this framework in place, we are in a good position to address the interplay of collective orientations and individual comportment in systematic terms, before applying it to the case of collective unfeeling. Collective forms of practical and interactive sociality do not constitute a separate ontological sphere over and above individual mindsets and dispositions. Instead, in domains of practice, individual acts, orientations, and collective manifestations of feeling are closely entwined. The social, in practice-theoretical terms, is best thought of as a *modality* of individual comportment, where many individual acts and orientations align to form recurring patterns that exert a normalizing force. Domains of practice prescribe or even "script" a range of individual acts, expressions, displays, gestures, on whose proper or normal enactment by individual participants these domains depend (Eickers, 2023). The social and the individual are thus mutually constitutive. Social actors bring the social into being by adhering to social roles and performing standard acts that conform to whatever is socially appropriate in a given venue. This goes for affective engagements and displays as well. Individual comportment in the social mode is thus mostly a matter of adherence to structured practical domains. Such an approach refuses to reify the social into a monolithic entity that precedes individual actors. It still grants collective patterns of comportment priority over individual orientations and self-relations, in temporal as well as normative terms. Individuals, in turn, are beholden to formative social milieus, domains of practice and collective discursive spheres; they depend on and are implicated in these formations, even as they actively help constitute them. This beholdenness lends itself to easy dismissals of personal responsibility, as "one" can always point to the anonymous mass of "others" whose myriad conforming acts pre-exist and overwhelm one's own minuscule contribution.[8]

If we break this down for the case of unfeeling, we understand why it

[8] See Heidegger (1962, 127). Our approach to sociality is distantly informed by Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Likewise, Heidegger's understanding of affectivity, what he terms *Befindlichkeit*, informs aspects of our approach to unfeeling. Not only do we see affectivity as a matter of orchestrated sociality, but we also agree with Heidegger that an "evasive turning-away" is more central to affective intentionality and more likely to occur than a direct form of affective engagement with the concern at issue. See Withy (2024) for a helpful new take on Heidegger's understanding of affect.

is that individuals can, to some measure, be affectively attuned to the looming climate catastrophe in private, while robustly aligned with societal unfeeling in their public lives. Note that "public life" here, in the social ontology native to practice theory, must be understood broadly; it encompasses much more than the occasional appearance of actors in marquee venues of the public sphere. It also refers to the default mode of intelligible comportment in practical domains: the warp and weft of all our days. Against this prevailing sociality of day-to-day commerce, individual affective deviations are, for the most part, islands fated to drown in a sea of routine.[9]

If we zoom into the phenomenological texture of societal unfeeling, we will notice that socially instituted selectiveness of affective responses can manifest as a seamless, matter-of-fact proximity and salience of certain matters, and as a remoteness and nonobviousness of other matters. The social world is divided into zones of salience and urgency and into shadowy provinces that are seemingly out of reach of mundane coping. Also, as Norgaard's fieldwork has shown, there can be an acutely felt unseemliness, on social occasions, to bring up certain topics, such as global warming and the disasters it threatens to cause. Such felt unseemliness shows that the normative organization of default sociality is itself effected through affectivity. Affect, when it plays this meta-role, becomes a de facto enforcer of social conformity.

Sometimes, a troublesome issue has already been sidelined so much that it only dimly impinges upon collective awareness. In such cases, a manifest disregard can go together with an almost lighthearted unconcern for the problem in question. While knowledge of the topic remains—there is, after all, no shortage of reports, stories or personal testimony about the repercussions of a warming planet—all this has been pushed aside so resolutely that the theme does not cut to the quick of affective awareness and sense-making. Social life proceeds undisrupted and with little attention to what is going on; a collective condition that may well amount to collective denial and perverse disavowal (Zupancic, 2024). Unfeeling, at this stage of entrenchment in societal sense-making, is an overlooked modality of political affect, as it pre-selects political issues long before any explicit thematization, discussion or debate can ensue.

When we speak of gaps or lacunae in collective affective orientations and repertoires of emotion, we do not assume the utter absence of emotive responses. Rather, for the most part, other felt episodes will materialize *in place of* the affects and emotions that have been pushed aside. The gaps in question are immediately filled by substitute orientations and attitudes, especially when the occasion that is collectively unfelt is too salient and recalcitrant to be just silently glossed over. These affective substitutes include the affective withdrawal into, and focus on, private spaces when things seem overwhelming, but also more aggressive stand-ins. We see two main varieties of such substitute emotions: *Surrogate emotions*, which are superficial displays of broadly apt affect directed at objects of genuine significance, but that lack a substantive grounding in practice, and *compensatory emotions*, which are emotions that are inapt for the occasion and which instead home in on a substitute object.

Compensatory emotions serve to preserve affective intensity while projecting it onto the wrong object. Surrogate emotions are spurious displays of virtuous affect disconnected from serious practical engagement, such as public displays of empathy after natural disasters in the absence of any measure to tackle the root causes. A striking and widespread instance of a compensatory emotion is the aversive response directed toward climate activists who protest publicly. Instead of directing their concern toward the climate catastrophe, members of the public take issue with the actions and attitudes of the protestors: ire is directed at instances of trespassing, street blockades or other acts of civil disobedience on the part of activists. Compensatory emotions often adhere to characteristic templates such as "shoot the messenger" or victim blaming. In the case of surrogate emotions, many of the emotive displays at issue amount to virtue signaling.

Surrogate and compensatory emotions are often actively evoked in political communication; indeed, their deployment is a staple in the toolbox of political campaigning. Such emotions occupy discursive space, binding individual and collective resources, so that a deeper engagement with the root causes of the ills at issue becomes less likely.

While it might be tempting to resort to critical rebuttals, it would be misplaced to dismiss all instances of surrogate emotions as superficial or morally reproachable. Tragically, these emotions are often the first and only realistic public response to objective misery and injustice that people have at their disposal. In a societal landscape marred by a scarcity of reality-disclosive emotional orientations that are practically consequential, publicly accepted instances of feeling in view of societal ills might be the only available articulation; the only intelligible and acceptable display of care in face of a troubling issue. After all, who can say that such orientations might not make for initial cracks in the *cordon sanitaire* that society has erected around a troublesome theme? Yet still, it is more likely that surrogate emotions, like compensatory emotions, succeed in the other direction: diverting and dispersing affective energies and masking the underlying issue so that it remains unrecognizable as a cause of a social grievance. In a pernicious way, these emotions clutter the space of public attention.

4. The racialized condition of unfeeling

Emerging structural apathy, the ignorance of affluent societies, and surrogate emotions are situated in a field of feeling structures shaped by particular histories. Unfeeling manifests notably in everyday interaction, but it does not originate there. Rather, it is an effect of longstanding relationalities and their reproduction (Ferdinand, 2021; Ferreira da Silva, 2009; Karera, 2019; Opperman, 2019; Pulido, 2016; Yusoff, 2018). As we will explain further, unfeeling results from a stratification of social feelings in alignment with capitalist and (neo-)colonial interests.

Having presented affective derealization as a social process that depends on subjects' participation in practices of unconcern, we now shift our focus to the historical and social conditions that enable these dynamics. Therefore, it is important to stress that the kinds of evasion we have described above are neither universal nor are they mere exceptions. They concern aspects of reality that are being derealized in order to maintain what is understood to provide a coherent and unthreatening experience of the world for those who can afford to look away from impending threats.

In this section, we will examine the extent to which denial and evasion are elemental capacities of European modernity. As endowments of the capitalist world, they are employed extensively to uphold the quotidian realities of an imperial mode of living (Brand and Wissen, 2021). Much of the historical and present-day suffering caused by this ecologically destructive mode of living must be systematically obscured in daily contexts to maintain a pretense of innocence for its beneficiaries.

The link between the dynamics of unfeeling and the specific historical conditions in which they unfold can be illustrated with regard to so-called environmental *sacrifice zones* (Juskus, 2023). The concept has initially been used in a pragmatic and normatively neutral way—first by US authorities designating land for nuclear testing and mining, later in agricultural contexts—until it was adopted by critical discourse and humanities scholars, who have drawn on its multi-layered, partly theological character. Sacrifice zones are sites where ecosystems have been permanently damaged or destroyed by extractive activities such as mining or permanent contamination through waste disposal. Often, the human population living in these places is both affected by the destruction of the environment and ignored in their suffering. In

[9] This is particularly so in societies whose social fabric has endured longstanding neoliberal assaults: the dismantling of communal life and neighborhood bonds as well as local organizing in favor of market-driven atomization (see Putnam, 2001).

studying the genealogy of the concept and its transition into public discourse, the following question arises: Did "sacrifice zone," this unfortunate official utterance, explode across the West because it better represented what was at stake than a more objective term?

Sacrifice zone is a concept used to describe "a relation between the human and non-human world and between different human societies under various colonial regimes, a relation that has been fundamental to capitalist extractivism" (Miller, 2023, 1625). It has been used by farmers for the patches of land damaged by livestock, and by officials to refer to sites of devastation, where the wellbeing of ecosystems and people has been sacrificed for the supposedly greater good; in most cases, for access to resources for economic growth. The label of a sacrifice zone resembles a death warrant in scientific terms (Crosby, 2021). To look at its implications helps to shed light on the (non-)relational and racialized dynamics regarding ecological devastation, which amount to an acceptance of the suffering of entire communities, including premature death in polluted areas, or simply the production of "disposable lives" (Juskus, 2023; Souza, 2021). The concept describes places that because of their hostile conditions resulting from pollution and extraction, are deemed uninhabitable by governments, municipalities or other authorities.

Yet, this verdict does not automatically include measures to protect the local communities from what is already a very bad situation. Sara L. Crosby (2021) testifies to this point: she learned about the sacrifice of her hometown in Louisiana when reading the *New York Times*. Crosby noted that "Grand Isle, my family's home for over 200 years, had been filed among 'communities that… May not outlast the people who currently live there' and our fate summed up with the tagline: 'the question is less whether it will succumb to the sea than when—and how much the public should invest in artificially extending its life' […]." (Crosby, 2021, 1556). Grand Isle is an island at the coast of Louisiana and severely threatened in its very existence by rising sea levels—just like other Islands in the area. Crosby reflects on the difficulties of bringing this situation to the public's attention, let alone to receive the necessary governmental support to mitigate the destruction occurring yearly. The lack of interest, even from an economic rationalist perspective, is striking: "[N]either reasoned arguments about economy and security nor appeals to environmental concerns have yet generated the necessary national commitment, and the state is left scrambling through near bankruptcy to cobble together funding itself. Why?" (Crosby, 2021, 1557). Her answer is that South Louisiana is so eligible for the neglect it experiences because it is seen as not quite American, "set […] apart from a clearly legible, white, Protestant vision of the nation" (1559). Shaped by slave trade and home to a Black majority, the sacrifice of the region must be seen in the context of the racial divides of the country. The barely mitigated aftermath of hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon disaster provided earlier examples for this.

The term sacrifice zone has been criticized on the grounds that it seems to implicitly express approval of the devastation it describes (Miller, 2023, 1628). At this point, it is mainly used as a critical concept. To speak of a sacrifice zone addresses the "crisis in dwelling" (Fernandez Velasco, 2024) that is one of the main effects of anthropogenic climate change. The term sacrifice zone captures the ways in which unfeeling is enacted through the designation and treatment of land and by omitting the life forms that are present. Despite the manifold constellations of sacrifice zones (Holifield and Day, 2017; Karam and Shokrgozar, 2023), their severe effects are distributed along lines of coloniality and racialization, as analyses of different sacrifice zones demonstrate (Germanaz et al., 2023; Lerner, 2012). Ecosystems and communities that are being damaged without any prospect of recovery, whether it be villages located close to landfills (Bullard, 2000) or extraction sites for rare earth in the context of the green energy transition (Meehan et al., 2025), are often marked by histories of colonization and segregation.

Charles Mills makes sense of necropolitical acts in which, as Skorstad puts it, "not just human populations but entire ecosystems have been sacrificed" (Skorstad, 2023, 102), by pointing toward the historical production of disposable lives (Mills, 2001; Opperman, 2024). Against the ideological rhetoric of inclusivity, Mills foregrounds "the embarrassing reality that for centuries in the United States, blacks themselves have been thought of as disposable, an excrescence in the body politic, and thus part of the problem" (Mills, 2001). Mills addresses the story of Blackness on the American continent as one of neglect and murder, reincarnated in environmental politics. According to Axelle Karera (2019), this is a historical pattern linked to the yet-to-end event of chattel slavery (Hartman, 2002): "Africa—and therefore blackness—remains the disposable trash container of the world par excellence; a case of instrumentalization in its most primitive execution" (Karera, 2019, 44). When Blackness is being contextualized as the qualifier for disposability initiated through the slave trade, it is important to consider how this relates to other histories of racialization. What Black critical theory continually emphasizes is that racial subjugation did not end with the formal end of slavery and colonial government, but rather keeps unfolding through social relations and relations with non-human life and land. One crucial aspect of a violent modern ontology is the conflation of racialized bodies with the environments in which they live. Genocidal violence against Indigenous communities, enacted through the destruction of land and all life on it, constitutes a deep history of sacrifice zones as a means of colonization (Liboiron, 2021; Niheu, 2019).

Being "close to nature" (as European colonizers have often thought of the people they encountered on their conquests) opened up techniques of violence that killed populations by destroying the resources they needed to survive (Ghosh, 2016). These genealogies are evident in the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, which left at least 97 people chronically ill after it was ignored by authorities for 18 months (Pulido, 2016). There is abundant evidence of a normalized and ongoing environmental racism that is gaining more traction with the increased density of environmental crises (Bullard et al., 2008; Hage, 2017; Opperman, 2019; Tuana, 2008). The discrepancy of engagement and public gestures of care when global responses to different environmental catastrophes are compared along the lines of racialization is striking. So too are the unequal conditions under which different populations face such catastrophes which are not adequately understood and historicized. There is no unified "we" facing the global crisis but there are infinitely differentiated realities that determine people's experiences of it and survival in it.

The violent progression of sacrifice zones and its justification in the context of green energy transition (Karam and Shokrgozar, 2023; Meehan et al., 2025) or real estate projects (Niheu, 2019) is one of the most violent sites of the dynamics of unfeeling and its racist character. Given these long histories, any analysis of denial and indifference toward climate change must attend to the onto-epistemological order of Western modernity (Ferreira da Silva, 2007; Wynter, 2003). Nancy Tuana argues that the "construction of illegible lives" (Tuana, 2019, 3) is so fundamental to the modern world that the violence of indifference toward these lives is inscribed in much of the available concepts of supposed climate justice, like "Green New Deal" or "energy transition." Sacrifice zones are locations in which the disregard of certain populations is being realized and justified. The political discourse around climate fails to address longstanding structures of injustice and "apartheid" (Tuana, 2019) when the ecological crisis is imagined as a unified event that an abstract and harmonized version of humanity is facing together.

The misrepresentation of the history and reality of ecological

destruction is an integral part of collective unfeeling. Sacrifice zones are tangible material instances of environmental racism. They normalize the exclusively extractive relation to certain areas as well as a non-relation to their inhabitants.[10] The readiness of governments and societies to refuse responsibility and entirely give up on a place is the most extreme articulation of unfeeling in political life. At the same time, the steady, barely noticed multiplication of these places gives rise to the idea that they are inevitable; that ecosystems fail and that little can be done about it. Or worse, it encourages the idea that victims of sacrifice zones are to blame for them. Images of plastic waste being burned at Kenyan landfills might lead European spectators to question why Africans would engage in such an obviously environmentally damaging and hazardous toxic activity[11] without them pausing to consider how masses of waste ended up in Kenya in the first place. This distribution of attention and patterns of thought amounts to a distraction. While there is nothing wrong with questioning actions that increase pollution, the entanglement between global mechanisms of exploitation—including the establishment of landfills in the Global South—and the root causes of climate change must be studied, as this example shows (Liboiron, 2021). Sacrifice zones invite the gaze to first fixate on the spectacle of devastation in awe and then drift away from it, convinced that nothing can be done there.[12]

In line with these perspectives, we consider sacrifice zones as active engines of discursive production in the global present, and thus components of an affect and emotion theory that encompasses both the historical and geographical entanglements of its objects of study. Violence is normalized through its assignment to certain zones, and such ascriptions can function as an affective tool to distance the observer—who is not (yet) at the center of environmental disaster—from its unfolding. Sacrifice zones are real places affecting real people, whose suffering, along with their potentials, capacities, aspirations, hopes, and joys, is squarely disregarded, misread, or misstated in racial capitalist orders. Yet these same places have become integral to a media ecology of distraction and misattribution. Framing these spectacles of disaster as regrettable but ultimately negligible environmental losses is a key part of what it is to unfeel the threatening progress of the ecological crisis. Sacrifice zones function as anchor sites of projection; as an "elsewhere" that stirs the stalwarts of quotidian, consensual reality (situated as these figures are in editorial offices, broadcast studios and, not infrequently, university departments) to amazing flights of fancy. Through the workings of an affective and discursive magnetism of racial violence bred in European modernity, these locales invite a plethora of attributions, projections, and judgments that bridge enormous geographical and cultural distances with apparent ease. A lack of understanding and care is seamlessly transmuted into discursive inventions that fit a longstanding script of racial abjection, victim-blaming and differential assignment of human status (Weheliye, 2014). Accordingly, these regions have not only become dumping grounds for the toxic remains of capitalist modernity, but also dumping grounds for abject attributions that racialize and dehumanize; disposal sites for "affective waste" (Whitney, 2018, 499).

This place-bound discursive production warrants a more detailed analysis than we can provide in the space of this paper. From the vantage point of philosophical affect and emotion theory, it is important to appreciate the ways in which a geographical and geopolitical zoning of world regions can also come to function as an epistemic and affective structure, one that assists in the continuous invention, iteration and recharging of tropes of racial abjection.[13]

5. Outlook: varieties and continuities of unfeeling

With the racializing backstory of prevailing repertoires of emotion in view, it will be less tempting to reduce the problem of unfeeling to a psychological condition, such as individual overburdening or group pressure. The racial and economic segregation of modernity has long allowed for modes of unfeeling to go about unsanctioned because they are part of the unquestioned condition of a shared mode of living (Brand and Wissen, 2021) and of being (Wynter, 2003). The ability to deny, ignore, and suppress awareness of the destructive foundations it rests on, is a defining feature of European modernity, enabling subjects to continually adhere to its rules and structures. By locating the capacity to evade reality on the socio-political plane—in effect, the "public sphere" of modern capitalist nation states understood in a broad sense—the affective derealization of the ecological crisis is addressed at its proper level: that is, not as an issue of individual mental acuity nor a moral problem of complicity (Knowles, 2021), but as a political problem of a state-sanctioned structural evasion of reality. Obviously, individuals are implicated (Rothberg, 2019) and often actively involved in these structures—aligned with and attached to them in open and tacit ways (Slaby 2025)—but that does not make the problem any less of a structural, collective issue.

Indeed attempts to individualize responsibility and culpability for unsustainable modes of living have long been a staple in the repertoire of climate evasion in the name of corporate interests, as witnessed in the introduction of individual "carbon footprints."[14] Instead of merely deconstructing such (neo)liberal ruses that mask the reach of capitalist extractivism one by one, we situate the concept of unfeeling at the systemic level: it is part of a mental infrastructure that is as ubiquitous, robust and functional as freight trains, container ships and retailer warehouses, yet versatile enough to permeate the fabric of everyday life in many places. Unfeeling has become a routine endowment of life under capitalism, a fluid armory of mental gadgets that reach into the remotest corners of present-day living.

One major task for a social philosophy of societal unfeeling will be to stay up to speed with the many varieties of unfeeling that keep springing up in society and public discourse. To mention one salient trend of recent years: the celebration of technological fixes or the "visionary" exploits of putative Mars missions or large-scale solar geoengineering endeavors (Malm, 2022, 2023) are exemplars of an attitude of evasion that works not through denial of the scientific facts about global warming, but by leaping ahead of a troubling reality into the realms of futuristic fantasy. A *New York Times* reporter described such forms of technological optimism as an attitude that amounts to "engineering oneself out of reality" (Tavernise et al., 2023) and thereby hints to the role of technology in capitalism as an aspect of unfeeling, or, in a more traditional idiom, of ideology. Unfeeling might manifest as a delusional depiction of the future, committed to the expectation of unlimited economic growth—if not on this expirable Earth, then on other planets.

Another angle to take toward social unfeeling and how to adequately respond to it would be to take seriously the effects that observable

[10] "Non-relation", as we use it here, is a shorthand term for the different modes of deficient or absent affective relations mentioned above. The spectrum of non-relations ranges from utter unrelatedness (indifference, apathy, sheer blindness, utter disconnection) to various modes of surrogate or compensatory engagement as discussed in the last section. Conceptually, it is adjacent to Ferreira da Silva's concept of "affectability" (Ferreira da Silva, 2007, 2009).

[11] One goal of burning electronic waste is to retrieve valuable material like copper from it.

[12] Romy Opperman (2019) offers the helpful term of racist environments in distinction to environmental racism in order to emphasize the world-making force of racial violence and to think through the equiprimordial character of racism and environmental damage.

[13] The idea that affective markers and affect-shaping attributions circulate globally is by no means new (see Ferreira da Silva, 2007). However, it has made relatively slow and tentative inroads into the main discursive strands of philosophical emotion theory. Recent work on affective injustice is beginning to change this picture (Whitney, 2018, 2023).

[14] In 2004, the British oil giant BP introduced the notion of individual carbon footprints and the practice of "calculating" them. See Solnit (2021).

ecological damage and destruction could have on people's emotional sanity. Such a response would favor grief over denial and develop ways to adapt to what seem to be unstoppable changes, an approach that manifests in discourses of ecological grief (Cunsolo and Landman, 2017; Fernandez Velasco, 2024; Frantzen, 2021). Yet it is clear enough that dealing with the losses brought about by the ongoing destruction of ecological systems is more urgent to some than to others. This ties the condition of unfeeling to social positionality and privilege. As Joshua Trey Barnett reflects, "some of us are better able to forget, disregard, or deny ecological and earthly losses in our day-to-day lives" (Barnett, 2022, xi). Participation in such privilege makes for an orientation that will not pause to reflect on loss, but will always prefer manic forward movement over hesitant pause and reflection: "Rather than sitting with such losses, we turn quickly to the work of fixing what appears to have been broken in hopes that we might soon be able to forget again the destruction, the transformation, the loss" (Barnett, 2022, xi). The overwhelming sense of loss looming behind the unfolding catastrophe might be one explanation for the depth and rigor of attempts to distract from it.

In addition to a crooked optimism toward future technologies and the distractions offered by everyday life in affluent capitalist societies, the repression of experiences of loss and negativity constitutes a further dimension of unfeeling; its deep structure. Individuals' defense mechanisms against realities that threaten their psychic survival are examined in a psychoanalytic register through concepts such as denial, repression, resentment or simply defense.[15] These analytic instruments help relate damaging behaviors back to a root cause, where an aspect of reality—a loss, for instance—appears so unacceptable to the subject that it cannot be integrated into its sense of reality and must be repressed instead. In the case of the climate catastrophe, this unacceptable loss is experienced collectively and lingers in a different stratum of society, mostly unacknowledged. Psychoanalytic theory and practice can serve as a reminder that the affective disclosure of reality is hard, and might be too much for the subject—setting them off in pursuit of a fantasy, making compensatory or surrogate emotions appealing, and encouraging them to cling in zealous desperation to the boons of excessive consumption and lifestyle thrill-seeking, or to the nihilistic pleasures of online trolling. Psychoanalytic theory also refines the horizon beyond societal unfeeling, which is not a replacement of the structures of derealization by universal susceptibility, or simply *feeling more*. As Freud puts it in *Mourning and Melancholia*, the goal remains that "respect for reality gains the day" (Freud, 1957, 244). To achieve that in society might imply giving space for grief, but it certainly begins with a survey of the current predicament in words and deeds.

The considerations offered here regarding the manifestations and workings of quotidian unfeeling in society present an opportunity to reexamine these psychoanalytical notions and their discursive surround with fresh eyes. In a new theoretical and diagnostic guise, psychosocial mechanisms that interweave the individual psyche and its cultural context can lay the ground for further work on the consolidation and naturalization of collective unfeeling.

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Henrike Kohpeiß: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Jan Slaby:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

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[15] We lack the space here to engage with the rich psychosocial and psychoanalytic study of climate non-responses by Sally Weintrobe (2021), whose account of a "culture of uncare" sustained by "neoliberal exceptionalism" is a cousin to what we call unfeeling. Also relevant are the essays collected in Hoggett (2019). These approaches proceed mostly in a mixed register of cultural studies and psychoanalysis; our own emphasis falls on collective practice and the material infrastructures of racial capitalism. Yet these two lines of inquiry are natural allies, we think, and we hope to explore their convergence further in future work.

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