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THE NEW KEY CONCEPTS IN AFFECTIVE SOCIETIES

This volume offers a comprehensive rethinking of how affect and emotion shape contemporary social and political life. Against the backdrop of global crises, polarized publics, and media-saturated environments, this book positions affect not as a mere supplement to reason or discourse, but as the connective tissue between self and society, the intimate and the institutional.

Drawing on over a decade of interdisciplinary research at the Berlin-based Collaborative Research Center *Affective Societies*, the contributors develop a rich conceptual toolbox to understand the affective dynamics at play in governance, media, care, protest, and everyday life. From affective polarization and outrage politics to infrastructures of feeling and institutional affect, this collection identifies new key concepts that serve as both diagnostic tools and theoretical interventions.

Bridging affect theory with empirical inquiry, it demonstrates how affect and emotion are central to how we relate, resist, dwell, and imagine. This is a carefully curated volume that will appeal to scholars and students interested in the affective and emotional foundations of contemporary societies from a range of fields: sociology, cultural studies, psycho-social studies, anthropology, political science, media studies, religious and theological studies, philosophy, and performance studies.

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Routledge Studies in Affective Societies presents high-level academic work on the social dimensions of human affectivity. It aims to shape, consolidate and promote a new understanding of societies as Affective Societies, accounting for the fundamental importance of affect and emotion for human coexistence in the mobile and networked worlds of the twenty-first century. Contributions come from a wide range of academic fields, including anthropology, sociology, cultural, media and film studies, political science, performance studies, art history, philosophy, and social, developmental and cultural psychology. Contributing authors share the vision of a transdisciplinary understanding of the affective dynamics of human sociality. Thus, *Routledge Studies in Affective Societies* devotes considerable space to the development of methodology, research methods and techniques that are capable of uniting perspectives and practices from different fields.

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Edited by Jan Slaby, Christian von Scheve, Tamar Blickstein, and Polina Aronson

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PREFACE

To embark on the journey of editing a second, entirely new volume showcasing the *Key Concepts* of almost 12 years of research on affect and emotion at Freie Universität Berlin (and elsewhere) has been an endeavor as obvious as it has been challenging. It has been obvious because the feedback we obtained on the first volume, published in 2019, has been overwhelmingly positive. We have received comments from researchers across the globe and from various disciplines who were enthusiastic about the volume, telling us how the concepts assembled therein inspired their own theoretical and empirical research. Embarking on this journey has also been obvious because the research that has been carried out at the *Affective Societies* center since the publication of the first volume has produced a broad range of new and groundbreaking concepts that deserve to be published in a carefully curated, consolidated, and interconnected manner to reach a wide and interdisciplinary audience. And a third reason why this journey has been obvious to us is that the world has changed at an unprecedented pace since 2019, plagued by various crises and disruptions: the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian war against Ukraine, subsequent economic disruptions and global inflation, Israel's Gaza campaign, the political and economic turmoil and cultural regressions following the re-election of Donald J. Trump, the continuing rise and acceptance of authoritarianism and the retreat of liberal principles, and, of course, the ever mounting consequences of climate change. These crises and disruptions constitute major attacks on societies' social, political, and moral orders and ways of life. It is certainly no exaggeration to say that the world is fundamentally not the same anymore as it was in 2019. These are not only changes to and disruptions of the social and ideological, but likewise of the affective and emotional fabrics of society. And affect and emotion are increasingly marshaled to bring about—or to defer—these changes. *The New Key Concepts in Affective Societies* will help to better understand these developments.

The endeavor of editing *The New Key Concepts* has been challenging because it is not your usual edited volume. All the chapters follow a carefully developed format and style, one that we successfully implemented already in the first volume. Stylistically, the entries sit halfway between encyclopedic entries and research chapters in the humanities or the social sciences. Editing for compliance and clarity, therefore, takes more time and effort than it

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does in a more traditional edited volume. Since the entries are significantly shorter than a typical chapter, we were able to include 28 of them, which is a challenge not only from the viewpoint of stylistic editing, but also in terms of composing and arranging the book. Given these challenges, the editorial team that had consisted of Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve in the first volume was expanded for the present volume to include Polina Aronson and Tamar Blickstein, whose contributions—from unparalleled editorial skills to fresh perspectives on the field—significantly shaped this book. We are grateful for the collaborative spirit that energized this volume.

This project would have been impossible to realize without the dedication of all our contributing authors, their willingness to engage with the somewhat unusual format of the chapters, the trust they put into the entire project and us as editors, and, most importantly, their endurance and sense of compliance when confronted with our nitty gritty comments and requests for revisions, more often than not communicated in a state of heightened affect. We also wish to thank the editorial team at Routledge for their continued and enthusiastic support they already showed for the first installment of the *Key Concepts*, in particular Emily Briggs and Lakshita Joshi. Most importantly, however, we wish to thank Paul Nicolas Möller, our editorial assistant at the *Affective Societies* center. Paul managed the entire editorial process, monitoring the chapter pipeline from submissions of initial drafts to final copy editing, handling most of the communications with our contributing authors, assigning tasks to the editorial team, keeping an eye on deadlines, and on countless to-do lists. Thank you, Paul! Without your hard work, dedication, and attention to detail, this would not have been possible.

Countless others helped us with their expertise and energy throughout the editing process. Sam Nimmrichter provided valuable editorial assistance on several chapters, chiming in with poignant advice on content and crafty recommendations on style. Valuable last-ditch feedback on the Introduction was provided by Susanna Li and especially Michal Givoni, who sacrificed parts of a sunny weekend to engage with our material. Already throughout the process, Michal supported us at various points with her straight-shooting assessments. Jandra Böttger and Henrike Kohpeiß read earlier versions of the Introduction and kept our writing on track with their careful reading impressions.

We heartily thank the fantastic office crew at the CRC *Affective Societies*, spearheaded by the tireless Franziska Lesak and diligent Markus Lange, for their assistance throughout. We also thank the Members of Governing Board of the CRC *Affective Societies* for their trust and support, and notably the initiative's speaker, Hansjörg Dilger, and co-speaker, Doris Kolesch, whose collegial leadership is key for fostering the unique working atmosphere at our center, marked by enthusiasm and camaraderie.

On a final note, we would like to dedicate this volume to Birgitt Röttger-Rössler, now retired, but still one of the series editors of the *Routledge Studies in Affective Societies*. Birgitt has been the heart and soul of the *Affective Societies* Center from 2015 until 2022, from the very beginning to the end of the second funding round. Without you, Birgitt, all this would not have happened, thank you!

Berlin, July 2025
The Editors

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AFFECT AND EMOTION: SOCIAL THEORY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve

In this opening chapter to *The New Key Concepts in Affective Societies*, we position affect and emotion as guiding concepts for a social theory that seeks to better understand social and political life at the current juncture, a quarter of the way through the 21st century. At the time of writing in mid-2025, wars and conflicts, ecological and political crises, are shaking up the world, sending shock waves through societies and putting people and institutions under duress. A new era of power-politics, often in disregard of international law, contests the Western liberal order. At least nominally, this order had been committed to peaceful coexistence, human rights, and a striving for progress through collaboration. In view of new wars, violence, displacement, extractivism, and ecological devastation—and blatant breaches of the written and unwritten rules of international coexistence—this order is sharply deteriorating.

This volume starts from the assumption that affect and emotion, especially as amplified and modulated through new media, play a central role in the regressive developments that mark our times. In the political sphere, it would be difficult to make sense of the rise of authoritarian populism and new styles of political contestation without giving weight to their emotionalizing and affectively polarizing qualities. This affective polarization, appearing in many forms, threatens liberal democracies. Surging religious but also ethical and cultural conflicts across the globe strikingly attest to the driving role of anger, rage, offense, and indignation in prolonged conflict. Capitalist economies and social inequalities are impacting not only people's cognitive and bodily capacities, but also their feelings and emotions. In turn, these feelings and emotions are commodified and mined as resources, while also being exploited as liabilities. The ubiquity and attention-grabbing reach of social media comes with intensified articulations of affect. These affective dynamics are frequently addressed at individuals or groups in a hostile or violent manner, creating an atmosphere of belligerence that fosters isolation and mistrust, and leaves people feeling exhausted, afraid, and without hope.

All these phenomena demonstrate the stakes of affect and emotion for personal, social, and political life in the global now. Understanding these stakes requires an approach to affect and emotion that goes beyond disciplinary boundaries. This theme-focused introduction

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outlines the overarching promise of affect and emotion research as a pathway toward understanding the imbrications of the personal and the social, the intimate and the political. It brings together and consolidates the different ways in which affect and emotion have been investigated at the Berlin-based Collaborative Research Center *Affective Societies* over the past decade. The chapter offers a newly integrated understanding of affect and emotion and discusses how these guiding concepts can be put to use in two different ways: as essential elements of an affect-based social theory for the 21st century, and as diagnostic tools that help us analyze the transformations and challenges of contemporary societies.

Affect, Emotion, and the Politics of Relationality

There are far more approaches to affect and emotion than one can reasonably cover in a single chapter. Indeed, as Carolyn Pedwell and Greg Seigworth (2023) quip in their introduction to the *Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures*, combing through the myriad affect-centered approaches can feel like an inverted game of musical chairs, where each time the music stops another chair is added so that the panoply of perspectives keeps multiplying. In view of this embarrassment of riches, it can seem hopeless to try to condense affect theory into any single formula or message. This, at any rate, is what many introductions to the field suggest when they begin with emphatic invocations of plurality and variance. But is it really credible to presume no single throughline behind the surface variance? Why then all the fuss about affect as *this one thing* that many are so excited about?

How about this: affect, emotion, and feeling—the three conceptual pillars of the affective universe—present the vital connecting tissue between the self and society, and therefore between the intimate and the political, the individual and the collective, the most deeply personal and the most ruthlessly public. The promise of affect is that it constitutes the pulse of how people are situated in their surroundings and relate to the world, both near and far: how connections to others, to social practices, to the world at large are made and sustained, but also how they are prevented, fended-off, denied. Affect, emotion, and feeling make up the substance of social relatedness, and their myriad entanglements present uniquely potent inroads into what matters for collectives and individuals. These lived relations are power-inflected, and prone to distortion, bias, and manipulation. As such they overshoot all too easily into extremes, and—given their existential weight and practical pertinence—become paramount objects of contestation in human affairs. Affect and emotion are where life is on the line, where the social gets spicy, where meaning and mattering are fought out and lived at the same time. Lived, that is, with all their inherent distortions, biases, and extremes, some of them long-standing and formative for troubling social and political formations. This is evident, for instance, in the ongoing legacies of conquest, poverty, social inequality, oppression, dispossession, violence—along with their myriad affective afterlives (Blickstein, 2019; Ferreira da Silva, 2009; Kohpeiß, 2025; Palmer, 2017, 2020; → *Colonialism as Affect*; → *Property as Affect*; → *Qadma'*; → *Unfeeling*).

Ironically, in its world-disclosing potency, the affective also takes the place—or rather, has always occupied the place—that the Western Enlightenment tradition has accorded to reason. Is "reason" just an academic gloss on what is, in fact, the main business of affect and emotion: revealing the world to situated actors in such a way that values and needs are balanced with the facts? We tend to think so. When it comes to affect, things "get to us" (Withy, 2024). We are affected by what goes on; the vibe and atmosphere of our

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surroundings touch us and reverberate through our embodied sense of ourselves and our circumstances. Accordingly, there is *truth* in emotion and affect: a sense for what is happening, what we must accept to be the case if we want to cope with or change a situation. There is *wisdom* in emotion and affect: the capacity to align personal significance with broader, shared frameworks of meaning. And it is for this very reason—the intelligence, attentiveness, and wisdom in the affective sphere—that affect and emotion are the supreme battleground of politics, large and small. If you are in the business of convincing people of a certain vision of reality, if your goal is to establish a shared understanding in order to ground a political movement or to build or dismantle an institution, you have no choice but to pay utmost attention to emotion and affect. Politics, at heart, is affective politics (Bens et al., 2019; Massumi, 2015). Political orientations are grounded in political emotions (Koschut, 2020; Szanto & Slaby, 2020). So, at its core, affect and emotion are about staying reasonably attuned to what is happening and what matters—so that meaningful collective action becomes possible. It is against the backdrop of this positive and intelligent vision that the distortions, exaggerations, and manipulations to which affect and emotion are prone should be analyzed and, if possible, amended.

We do not claim that scholars will have an easy time spotting the distortions, biases, or blind spots of individual and collective affective lives. On the contrary, it is often hardest to find fault with our own, or our society's, most cherished affective orientations, as these tend to feel like second nature, true and self-evident (Stodulka, 2019; Röttger-Rössler, 2019). But then again, the business of sorting out what ought to be done, all things considered—what the Western tradition glossed as Reason writ large—has never been straightforward. The point, rather, is that focusing on affect and emotion gives us a shot at getting to the heart of the matter: where the fate of human collectives is bound up with the deeper recesses of people's everyday orientations. Affect and emotion are reason in the flesh, meaning as sensed, embodied, lived. Start here, and you have a good chance of taking your scholarly tools to whatever presently matters most to individuals and collectives. This requires insight into the tendencies and pitfalls of affective phenomena and a well-honed receptivity to affective dynamics in one's surroundings, as well as a familiarity with prevalent modes of "emotional reflexivity" (Neckel & Sauerborn, 2023; → *Emotional Reflexivity*). This situated expertise—an affective and emotive literacy—is what the contributors of this volume strive to provide on the following pages.

Part of the fun—and the mess—in researching affect and emotion lies in how boundless and unconquerable they are. No affects, emotions, or feelings simply fall from the sky—or pop into our brains and bodies—ready-made; nor do they ever remain fixed and final. They always receive their shape and form dynamically as they unfold—in the cultural and structural circumstances of society, in performative, expressive, and discursive interaction. There is a *perpetual* self-constituting dynamic to affect-formation. This dynamic is insatiable in its tendency to incorporate ever new expressive and articulative resources: all kinds of terms, notions, expressions, gestures, enactments, postures, displays, styles, contexts, media, technologies, material scaffolds, and what have you enter into affective comportment as it takes shape, morphs, and transforms. The sense that scholars dealing with affect, in particular when working empirically, are trying to hunt a mirage, capture a ghost (→ *Haunting*), or nail the proverbial pudding to the wall, is much to the point. The exasperated sense of always coming a little too late, always only dealing with a stale, reductive, artificially arrested image of the "real thing," is an all too familiar experience for scholars

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of affect and emotion. This is where cultural affect theory has an advantage over the more categorically consolidated strands of emotion research. By embracing affect's fleetingness, the open-textured and incessantly dynamic nature of affect, affect theory faces up to affect's perpetual condition of being in-formation, forever nascent, never finished. And in fact, such formative dynamics even pertain at all times to the seemingly consolidated, categorically bounded "classical" emotions, where the formative processes are just slower, somewhat lagging, proceeding for the most part within well-trodden paths of consensual sociality, drawing mostly on conceptual resources already widely in use (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019; see also Frevert, 2024). But here too, these processes are never without a difference, however minor, never without making new and nascent inroads, even if slow and miniscule initially (Campbell, 1997).

We reiterate this here not because we want to add yet another defense of cultural affect theory, but because we want to suggest a way forward that does justice to the full spectrum of affect, from the most fleeting to the most consolidated. What we have elsewhere described as a relational and cross-culturally sensitive version of constructivism with regard to emotion (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019) applies to affectivity across the board. Affective phenomena evolve dynamically out of structural, discursive, and expressive resources, incorporating cultural repertoires, and thus might be approached from the vantage point of a socio-cultural constructivism. Such an approach does not omit the embodiment and physiological groundedness of affective behavior (Barrett, 2014), but indexes the bio-psychological basis of the affective with contextual factors and articulative capacities, in the spirit of new materialism (Röttger-Rössler & Markowitsch, 2009; Wilson, 2015). The point is not to assess the extent to which a given affective phenomenon might be dynamically open or categorically bounded, but rather to understand that situated dynamics of expression, enactment, articulation, and reflection are always at the heart of affective and emotive processes (Wetherell, 2012). This includes a heightened sense for the potential of affectivity to spearhead social and cultural transformation, for better or worse. Affect-powered transformation is always possible, but never assured. After all, affect can also engender stubborn attachment to the status quo (→ *Affective Stasis*), often supported by social techniques that help prevent emotive responses from arising or gaining momentum (→ *Unfeeling*), and become ossified within inert institutional arrangements (→ *Institutional Affect*) or long-standing socio-historical formations (→ *Colonialism as Affect*).

And so, after this opening salvo of promise and theory essentials, we turn to our current political moment. Obviously, the perspective sketched thus far could be applied to every topic under the sun that involves affect, but a substantial interest has developed over the past decades in applying affect to the realm of politics, broadly construed. The conflicts in this tension-riddled arena run deep and are of the highest consequence. This is particularly the case in contemporary societies in which transformation is rapid, crises abound, and disruption is high on the agenda of many political actors. To illustrate what we have in mind, we turn to a recent episode that unfolded under the beaming spotlight of international media.

Affect Runs the Show

For fans of linear TV news, Christiane Amanpour is the face of international conflicts, which she has covered for CNN since the first US-Iraq war in 1990. To say that she has seen

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a lot is an understatement. Yet, on the afternoon of February 28, 2025, Amanpour stared at her screen in disbelief when she watched J.D. Vance and Donald J. Trump dress down the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, in the Oval Office on live TV. CNN posted a split-screen image showing a wide-eyed Amanpour, mouth agape, glaring in shock at a still of Trump arguing with Zelensky. The deacon of legacy media was having a melt-down witnessing the US president wreaking havoc on the transatlantic order. That CNN posted this reaction shot of its illustrious personality soon after the event itself shows the extent to which affect has become newsworthy in itself. Amanpour's expression is deployed to convey the gist of the scene. The incredulous look on the face of this anchor, who is an epitome of journalistic integrity, reveals all one needs to know about the disruptive impact of Trumpism in early 2025. Her reaction is, on the face of it, proportional to the glaring violation of what she, and perhaps by extension Western publics at large, cherishes as the rules and decorum of public political engagement. The Oval Office, in particular when broadcast live, should not be a place of insult, depreciation, and bullying. However, it is evident that affect itself has become the point here, both of Trump's and Vance's performance in the Oval and of this legacy journalist's instant reaction. Amanpour presents as credibly shocked in view of the takeover of raw affect in the most important office of the world—an imbecile shouting match in place of a high-stakes diplomatic exchange. Trump, as per usual, deadpans frivolously: "This is going to be great television. I will say that." It can count as a measure of success of Trump's shock and awe politics that CNN runs an image of a most respected journalist as clickbait minutes after a presidential press conference. Even a famed anchor known for searing analysis can't help being made complicit by posting a reaction shot that satisfies (and further amplifies) Trump's intent to overwhelm. The anchor's exasperation in the face of Trump's and Vance's theatrics is instantly converted into the currency of present-day affective politics: one more image to stir up the liberal status quo and "flood the zone."

Amanpour's facial expression in that image, the swiftness with which it was made into the story on CNN, is a telltale sign of our times. The image shows how affect has become a central messaging device in today's news media. In a slot machine-like attention economy (Hayes, 2025), the crystalline intensity of the emotional expression (and the affective image at large) is a major commodity. Amanpour's emotion, distilled into a pathos formula of the internet age (Schankweiler & Wüschner, 2019), travels instantly and achieves a reach that matches those of her journalistic analyses.[1] Contemporary culture has re-positioned affect from the margins to the center of the public sphere; affect mutates from embellishment and entertainment to the main act, on stage and in the engine room, at once message and medium. Affect tells the story, and affect runs the show.

This encapsulates a broader development. For one, the status of affect in public and political discourse has shifted, as have the rules that govern affect in various forms of political engagement. Further, for many, this forceful eruption of affect into the public sphere inevitably raises the question of what is going on beneath the surface. There is a long-standing tradition in the Western world of regarding affect in stark opposition to reason and rationality. This tradition idealizes a form of political decision-making that is only sound when void of affective turbulence, and that is embodied in a culture of considerate rational judgment. It is no wonder that, in view of recent displays of vile in the political arena, many public commentators jump to one drastic conclusion: affect and emotion have replaced considerate judgment as the holy grail of political decision-making. Even more than that, they are seen as evidence that the principles of liberalism and Enlightenment that have been

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the aspirational standard of Western publics since WW2 have eroded. Principles such as upholding a shared set of binding epistemic criteria to govern political decision-making and deliberation; accepting the force of argument; and recognizing the legitimacy of institutions like science, the law, and a free and impartial press. Arguably, fact-based argument and procedural diligence have been on the retreat (Börzel et al., 2025), but Amanpour's reaction reveals that many, deep down, still fundamentally assume—and value—some version of Enlightenment rational proceduralism as the proper currency of governance and institutional integrity.

This view does not perfectly align with political divides, but most of us will probably agree that, currently, liberals and moderate conservatives alike see themselves as guardians of the principles of well-reasoned judgment, whereas populist and authoritarian rulers are the entrepreneurs of affect and polarization. Trump and his allies are on a mission to deal blow after blow to these Enlightenment assumptions. Daily displays of vile, hatred, and disregard for legality are meant to beat the remnants of the liberal mind like a drum. Everything in this is calculated, the putative chaos fully intended, and it even has a name: "owning the libs" (e.g., Marcotte, 2018). However, seen in this light, Amanpour's display of shock reveals the omnipresence and ambivalence of affect. The enlightened mind, of course, is not void of affect, and public discourse has never been an idealized zone of affective neutrality. Amanpour's outrage matches the severity of Trump's and Vance's violation of the rule-based order. By capitalizing on her affective demeanor, the news network inevitably plays into the hands of the populist polarization entrepreneurs. Amanpour's shock is commodified into a meme signaling exactly the intended message: the liberal order is dying, disruption reigns, and a new era of populist politics and authoritarian statecraft has arrived.

Affect is thus situated at a crossroads: its honest expression, attuned to what actually goes on in the political arena, is freezing in place to become a commodity and a marker of disruption. When the game of public affect is played under today's conditions of frenzied networked media, the calm, considerate, fact-based, reasonable take on a situation likely loses out. But there may be no real alternative. The global media ecosystem is now geared almost exclusively toward these rapid-reaction displays of affect, spreading contagiously across platforms and into people's homes and phones. Amanpour's shock image epitomizes the liberal mind in its death trap. With the path of reason blocked, have we entered a post-rational public spectacle, left with only a hapless participation in an onslaught of affective messaging?

At any rate, this is the path we are on. This episode, featuring Christiane Amanpour and its conflicting positioning of affect at the center of attention, is exemplary for the current standing of affect and emotion in public and political life. When affect runs the political show, when affect is message and medium at once, a tendency toward exaggeration and intensity is likely to overwhelm more carefully attuned experiences and orientations. Authoritarian and populist performances are attacks on more nuanced, hesitant, and well-calibrated sensoriums, despised as the emotion regimes of the liberal political establishment. The public sphere is challenged by chainsaw- and sledgehammer-wielding political operatives. Unhinged pundits and hot-take artists shout down considerate statements and throw out every inkling of balance and restraint in favor of polarizing, maximum-impact addresses. Affect is not going to leave the stage any time soon. Which may be why the liberal incumbents and leftist progressives have yet to develop an emotional antidote to authoritarian affect mongers, a way to acknowledge and advertise the affects of emancipatory politics.

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Under these conditions, what is a worthwhile and realistic task for affect and emotion research? Part of the answer is straightforward: when affect and emotion have indeed risen to such prominence in public life, then expertise on this topic is all the more called for. And as with all expertise, its strength is to be able to inform a stance that goes beyond the surface phenomena to probe deeper into what is going on. This includes a well-honed capacity to identify the underlying stakes of affective quarrels and displays (→ *Contested Emotions*), and of orientations, dispositions, and biases. It includes a sense for the many ways in which the new designs and formats of networked media calibrate the public sphere; inform practices of communication, political action, and governance; and set up new infrastructures of feeling (Coleman, 2025 → *Infrastructures of Feeling*). The workings of public institutions—in sectors such as education, health, state administration, or the law—come to be seen as deeply dependent on the affective orientations and practices of institutional actors, while also drawing on affect-imbued cultural imaginaries in their time- and place-bound iterations (Churcher et al., 2023; Dilger & Warstat, 2021; → *Institutional Affect*). Affect-themed expertise also informs a powerful critical stance that can help observers to look beyond the surface clamor to the tactics and strategies of various polarization entrepreneurs of today's political publics (→ *Emotional Politics*; → *Outrage Politics*; → *Affects of Critique*). In all these efforts, the guiding orientation is to stay true to the insight that affect and emotion are not, in fact, opposed to a situated stance of reason—or to reason's role in informing considerate judgment and legitimate institutional procedures. On the contrary, affect and emotion epitomize reason's promise to balance what goes on (the factual) and what matters (the evaluative) in order to motivate and guide collective action.

We think that a good way to stay true to this orientation under today's vexing conditions is to bring theoretical and methodological expertise on affect and emotion to bear on a diagnostic stance on contemporary societal developments. To elaborate, we will now delve into one major area of contemporary concern, namely that affect and emotion have come to constitute a political battlefield in their own right. They have become highly contested matters in public and political affairs, a veritable "Streitsache" (fighting matter), to use a fitting German term (→ *Contested Emotions*). Emotions, as inherently normative, are by default subject to critique, because they might be out of step with their occasions, not fitting to their objects or disproportionate to the (in)significance of what has stirred them (Szanto & Tietjen, in press; von Maur & Slaby, 2024). But over and above this default contestability that emotions share with other reason-responsive attitudes such as belief and desire, the last years have seen a notable rise in much more fundamental quarrels about affect and emotion that far exceed this default normative contestability.

Consider, for instance, climate activists in Europe who push for acceptance of scientific findings about global warming and its consequences for societies. Such activists often call out the putative apathy and unfeeling disregard of political and business elites, as well as the complacent majority (Slaby, 2023). In response, climate activists are often derided as hysterical, irrational, naively sentimental, or overly panicked, while their push for a rapid and radical transformation of society is deemed reckless and irresponsible. "The Greens cannot feel poverty," the German Left Party politician Jan van Aken was recently quoted as saying. This is a case in point, since he—or, at any rate, the tabloid BILD in which his quote appeared—framed this presumed lack of feeling as a rebuttal against a political faction that prioritizes climate mitigation.[2] This accusation targets a group's very capacity to experience specific emotions. It illustrates the hard-fought battle about societal priorities in

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times of economic pressure and ecological peril, but also conveys an undertone of moral accusation that shoots straight at the identities and self-understandings of a political party's members and constituency. Such disputes indicate the extent to which affect and emotion have become a major battleground for a number of pressing issues, such as the orientation and direction societies should take, their political strides and collective ethos, and—even more fundamentally—about the basic parameters of reality that social collectives face. Accordingly, a timely approach to affect, emotion, and feeling in the public key must probe these quarrels and their underlying stakes.

It is no coincidence that such principled disputes play out as quarrels about feeling. Both the contents and the quality of these confrontations reveal that the affective is considered to be decisive in determining what it means to exist responsibly in the present times. Other examples readily come to mind. The disputes over refugees, asylum-seekers, and "irregular" migration in both Europe and the US often play out as a conflict about character-defining emotive attitudes such as empathy, conscience, or the lack of it (variously called "coldness," "heartlessness," "no conscience"). Meanwhile, humanitarian volunteers who support arriving refugees or conduct life-saving missions in the Mediterranean have been accused of radicalism, called lunatics or ridiculed as "snow flakes," to mention only the less severe labels. In early 2025, tech entrepreneur and billionaire Elon Musk told podcaster Joe Rogan "We have civilizational suicidal empathy going on."[3]

These fights, which have come to dominate large segments of public debate, force individuals to take sides in a culture war. The underlying clashes of ethico-political orientations, as well as the disputes about determining what counts as real for society at a given time, accordingly warrant careful consideration. What has become clear even from the above snippets is the depth and vigor with which conflicts about emotions touch the roots of the self, on the part of both human individuals and of groups and communities. The stakes in these debates have risen considerably. Brandishing protestors as "anger citizens" (*Wutbürger* in German), humanitarian volunteers as "Gutmenschen," or student activists either as "snowflakes" or—sometimes the very same groups—as "domestic terrorists" does not aim at correcting insufficiently warranted attitudes, but condemns others, placing them outside the sphere of what the accuser deems reasonable and ethical practice and discourse. At this level of contestation, criticizing another's emotion amounts to condemning them or condescending to them. The accuser points to another's moral or intellectual deficits, and deems them a liability for the collective. Criticizing emotional attitudes here equals an attack on the person: the other is presented as corrupt, feeble, reckless, heartless, or intellectually lacking. From there, it is but a small step toward character assassinations, hate speech, and group-based discrimination. And today, this might put us on a path toward irregular removals of staff and elected officials, and potentially toward political persecutions, extra-legal arrests, or even disappearances. These troubling tendencies are certainly not mitigated by the polarization, messaging style, and lack of nuance in much of today's networked media and the adjacent culture of online outrage and alarmism.

That affect runs the show in public life—through battles over reality and over the ethos of our societies—confirms the pertinence of our initiative's title *Affective Societies*. Affect and emotion are at the forefront of social and political life, with major effects on the form and content of social interaction and public debate. The salience of affective matters in society is not a new development. But it has reached new heights and crossed the threshold to a dominant cultural mode. And we can now better glean some of the implications of this

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long-evolving sea change, such as a more polarized, more personalized, much less nuanced public, drifting further and further away from aspirations to procedural fairness, rule of law, equity, objectivity, and rational debate.

In light of this, the title *Affective Societies* takes seriously the affective and emotional substance of contemporary societies, their lines of conflict, stylistic trends, ideological trajectories, and aesthetic tastes. It does so by probing the affective workings of public institutions (in sectors such as education, health, state administration, and the law), the templates and infrastructures of (new) media, and the affective and emotional vicissitudes of politics and political communication. And it considers the many informal sites and settings of social life, where contemporary existence is organized and meaning produced, negotiated, and fought about in myriad large and small acts of affecting and being affected.

Affective Relationality: Backbone of the *Affective Societies* Approach

The wager of this *New Key Concepts* volume is that scholarship on affect can weave together longstanding insights from interdisciplinary affect and emotion research with a diagnostic take on the present moment. If successful, affect and emotion scholarship will do justice to the ubiquity and centrality of affect and emotion, approaching their present manifestations with a contemporaneous sensibility (→ *Affective Contemporaneity*). Such scholarship engages directly with core issues and quarrels about how human lifeworlds should be shaped, and how institutions responding to global crises are to be designed, reformed, or abolished.

The boom of affect theory and emotion research in the past three decades has been apt and timely when one considers it in relation to its historical context (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Pedwell & Seigworth, 2023; Scarantino, 2024). These approaches have tracked a notable societal development. The rise in social value placed of all things affective has been accompanied—and often driven—by expert discourses and programs for the assessment, training, therapy, and management of emotions. The ascent of affect and emotion as focal frames for the interpretation and commandeering of social life has run in lockstep with other developments. These include the refinement and dissemination of knowledge about emotions; nuanced vocabularies; emotional granularity; sharpened awareness; and novel forms of expertise deployed to train, cultivate, channel, and regulate the affective lives of people and to design and refine affective niches (e.g., Neckel, 2014; → *Emotional Reflexivity*). In the domains of politics and public discourse, for instance, this has led to the monitoring—and policing—of discourse with regard to hate speech (now in itself a contested concept) and what some discredit as "political correctness"; the surveying of societies with regard to how much they are "affectively polarized" (Bakker & Lelkes, 2024; Röllicke, 2023); the examination of the emotionalization of political debate in parliaments and on social media; or the development of programs of awareness and mindfulness in the political sphere. These developments are inextricable from the advent of therapy culture and the capitalist valuation of affectivity. These range from emotional labor in the workplace and affective displays or performances in popular culture, to the commodified affective experiences that drive the service economy, such as fine dining, romantic holidays, and dating apps (e.g., Illouz, 2007).

This emotional reflexivity is a further indicator that affect and emotion have become a prime medium of societies' self-understanding. Discourses, practices, and scientific insights into affect and emotion present the contemporary articulation of life and meaning in today's

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societies. When it comes to scholarship on affect and emotion, the many manifestations and materializations of emotional reflexivity must figure prominently among the objects of study. This is reflected in the methodological orientation of our research. When studying affect and emotions, scholars deal with situated, articulated, culturally formed, and refined phenomena. When affective phenomena are relatively stable in the form of dispositions, habits, and repertoires, one might speak of a layer of cultural artifice that has sedimented within contemporary lifeworlds. When they are more dynamic and fleeting, one deals with ongoing processes of interactive and interpretive shaping. Accordingly, affect and emotion research requires a versatile constructivist orientation as well as local expertise and familiarity with the domains in which affect and emotion have become drivers of practice and behavior. To contend with this complexity in the object domain, we are helped by a concept of emotion that stresses the socio-cultural embeddedness as well as the discursive and practical shaping of emotive orientations in various settings. Therefore, *Affective Societies* researchers understand emotions as parts of domain-specific yet mobile *repertoires of emotion* (von Poser et al., 2019). Such repertoires, while individually embodied, enacted, expressed, and articulated, are prone to travel, and capable of informing emotional engagements and practices in other domains and at other places and times (*pathos formulas*; see Schankweiler & Wüschner, 2019). The dependence of individual emotions on these repertoires—and on their continual refinement and reinterpretation—means that changes in collective emotional practices and understandings have significant consequences. This cultural dynamic impacts the depth, quality, and range of what individuals are able to feel and express, as well as the emotional performances they are compelled to enact in different social settings (Hochschild, 1983; Reddy, 2001; Röttger-Rössler, 2002; Wetherell, 2012).

To tackle this ever-evolving topic, the researchers in the *Affective Societies* center have combined a social theoretical perspective on affect and emotion with a diagnostic stance on societal developments. The initiative's title is meant to convey this dual orientation, at once a firm grounding in social theory (affect as the prime mover of sociality from micro to macro) *and* a diagnostic angle in the guise of a time-bound, locally concretized "theory of society" (the patented German *Gesellschaftstheorie*). Together, these researchers forged a potent analytical toolkit for assessing new larger developments as well as finer variations of affective social life, spanning domains such as politics, media, communication, the public sphere, the economy, and other key institutional sectors.

On the conceptual level, a founding impulse of the initiative has been to approach affect and emotion from the vantage point of a social theory centered on *affective relationality*. This concept emphasizes the ways affective relations shape human sociality, social practices, and its consolidated patterns in institutions, organizations, and other paramount sites of social life. We understand affective relationality from the outset as a modality of *power*—a dynamic efficaciousness that either creates, shapes, and endows, or, conversely, that constrains, obstructs, or destroys.

As a social theoretical concept, "affect" figures doubly in this perspective. On a basic level, it is the conceptual starting point, anchoring the perspective in terms of an ontological approach to affective relationality. In this generative sense of the term, "affect" designates a fundamental relationality between entities of all kinds: a dynamic, efficacious, and formative force that inheres in all human practices, interactions, and domains. We understand such affective relationality as dynamics of power: affective relations either enhance or diminish the capacities of the entities involved, in ways that can be enabling and

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productive, or constraining and destructive (Slaby & Mühlhoff, 2019). This connects our approach with a perspective that stresses the productive and relational manifestations of power within the social fabric, transposing Foucault's insights on formative power and the power/knowledge nexus into affect theory (Mühlhoff, 2018; Mühlhoff & Slaby, 2018). Ideally, this orientation will sensitize scholars of affect to the uses and abuses of power within the myriad relations, positionings, and interactions of everyday life.

This abstract level of relationality is only a starting point, an anchor for a thought style, and a generative principle for the development of many more situated concepts that can be put to work in empirical research (Slaby & Mühlhoff, 2019). Accordingly, scholars and researchers at *Affective Societies* also use "affect" in a pragmatic manner, as a mid-range concept that pertains to empirically observable relations of affecting and being affected, and the capacities these relations engender, tied to specific domains of practice, variously shaped and crafted in recurring interactions, framed by technology, mediatized and much-elaborated by discourse, symbols, and imaginaries. Affect, in this understanding, pertains to situated relations in social encounters, manifesting as, for instance, "atmospheres" (Riedel, 2019) or forms of "attachment" (Scheidecker, 2019; see also Kasmani, 2019), and modes of "belonging" (Mattes et al., 2019; see also Dilger et al., 2018, 2020). Individuals experience affect in the form of "feelings" (Thonhauser, 2019), while affect coalesces on the plane of the social into "social collectives" (von Scheve, 2019) or dynamic and transient "affective communities" (Zink, 2019). Building on the foundational notion of affect and on an approach to affect as "immersive power" (Mühlhoff & Schütz, 2019), various derivative concepts have been introduced that facilitate a nuanced understanding of the varieties of situated affectivity: "affective resonance" (Mühlhoff, 2019a), "affective disposition" (Mühlhoff, 2019b), "affective arrangement" (Slaby, 2019), "affective practice" (Wiesse, 2019), as well as more specific forms of affective practices such as "affective witnessing" (Richardson & Schankweiler, 2019; see also Givoni, 2016) or "writing affect" (Fleig, 2019). Downstream from these articulations are concepts such as "affective economy" (Lehmann et al., 2019; see also Ahmed, 2004), "affective publics" (Lünenborg, 2019), and "affective citizenship" (Ayata, 2019) that emphasize how affect operates in institutions and in fields such as media, the economy, state bureaucracy, health care, and the law. These also often epitomize local manifestations of "political affect" (Slaby & Bens, 2019). Political affect, in turn, plays out as a back and forth between forms of affective governance and open or latent forms of affective resistance, for instance as part of movements and protests that engender so-called "Midān moments" (Ayata & Harders, 2019). Relatedly, "affects of racialization" (Blickstein, 2019) spotlight the misuse of affective attributions and affective governance to exclude, constrain, police, and often dehumanize groups of subjects that do not match a hegemonic template of personhood. Alongside this perspective on power, governance, and resistance, other scholars at the center have studied aesthetic uses and misuses of affect, reviving concepts such as "pathos formula" (Schankweiler & Wüschner, 2019), developing a notion of "poetics of affect" geared to audiovisual media and art forms (Kappelhoff & Lehmann, 2019), studying "audience emotions" (Kolesch & Knoblauch, 2019), and using performances of immersive theatre as a test case for studying affect in situ. Art-based forms of inquiry and expertise have enriched our conceptual perspective in many ways, which has also been reflected methodologically (see the contributions in the *Affective Societies* methods volume; Kahl, 2019).

Unlike much work in cultural affect theory, the *Affective Societies* approach does not prioritize affect one-sidedly over emotion. Instead, our approach has led us to consider an

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integrative understanding of emotion alongside the dynamic-relational approach to affect (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019), leading us to propose a novel notion of emotion repertoires, which reflects the productive tension between individual embodiment and the mediatized formation and circulation of emotions (von Poser et al., 2019). In so doing, *Affective Societies* incorporates many insights from the various strands of emotion research that have emerged over the last decades. In particular, it combines a socio-cultural constructivist perspective with notions of performativity, mediatization, and embodiment, also drawing on phenomenological and analytical approaches from philosophy (e.g., Colombetti & Krueger, 2015; von Maur, 2021) and on theory and research from the sociology of emotion (Hochschild, 2024; Illouz, 2023). By revitalizing a notion of longer-lasting, socially stabilized emotive attitudes which underwrite normative orientations, namely "sentiments" (Bens & Zenker, 2019), as well as a timely performative understanding of "audience emotions" (Kolesch & Knoblauch, 2019), scholars at the center have brought new impulses to interdisciplinary emotion research. These lines of work show that a dynamic-relational approach to affect can enrich scholarship on emotion, and helps bring out the strengths of both new-materialist and post-humanist approaches to affect and key legacies of emotion theory and research in fields such as sociology, (social) psychology, philosophy, social and cultural anthropology, as well as strands of history, media, and communications theory, and film, performance, and theatre studies.

Affect Theory for the 21st Century: Main Perspectives and Outline of Chapters

The first volume of *Affective Societies: Key Concepts* (Slaby & von Scheve, 2019) was the conceptual kick-off for the interdisciplinary initiative. Accordingly, the book developed concepts that constituted the groundwork for the shared approach. Contributors did not stray too far from the conceptual roots in the guiding notions of affect and emotion. As can be expected, in this *New Key Concepts* volume, published seven years after the first one, authors build on much-diversified approaches and set their sights on a broader array of topics. What hasn't changed since 2019, however, is our shared understanding of concepts as methodological tools—much like Herbert Blumer's (1954) *sensitizing concepts*. Instead of conceiving of concepts as narrowly circumscribed and reductively defined, we understand concepts as richly situated and grounded in their domains of application, while also inextricable from the experiential and practical sensorium of the scholars and writers that work with them, which is why authors' viewpoints and voices are crucial to concepts in our understanding (Slaby et al., 2019).

The overall goal of the *Affective Societies* initiative, which sets it apart from many other approaches to affect in cultural studies and the humanities, is to make the concepts of affect and emotion productive for theoretical as well as for empirical research. The empirical research carried out at the *Affective Societies* center is characterized by a keen interest in concrete social and political issues, in situated and embodied activities and practices, at particular sites and places, in specific archives and discourses related to affect and emotion. If affective relationality is the overarching perspective of the *Affective Societies* center, the concepts assembled in this *New Key Concepts* volume are those that zoom into focus and accentuate these particular sites, practices, constellations, and discourses. They are both outcomes of empirical research and, at the same time, guiding tools and magnifying lenses for reflecting on those outcomes.

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The range of concepts assembled in the present volume contributes to five distinct and original themes (Parts I–V) through which readers can come to terms with how affect and emotion characterize the contemporary social and political landscape. A sixth section (Part VI) offers three *Perspective* chapters that interrogate some of the present developments in the broader field of affect and emotion and offer perspectives for future avenues of research inspired by the concepts assembled in this volume.

The notion of *Affective Societies* has always implied two different analytical perspectives: one that emphasizes, from a social theory standpoint, affect and emotion as foundational for social life, and a second perspective that hints at the different ways societies themselves become preoccupied with affect and emotion, often in a reflexive manner. Various contemporary discourses, media, and technologies are geared toward monitoring, documenting, negotiating, and managing citizens' affects and emotions, from health apps to stock market indices, sentiment mining and analyses feeding social media algorithms, automated facial expression recognition systems, research initiatives that monitor society's levels of affective polarization and hate speech, up to political and civil society actors campaigning for more emotional awareness and less emotionalized forms of debate. Societies' preoccupation with individual and collective emotions is of course no coincidence, but is driven by the widespread belief, backed by scientific insights, that emotions fulfill important psychological and social "functions," that they are resources people can put to work to achieve individual and political ends. Likewise, this almost inadvertently leads to the normative framing of affect and emotion in culture and disputes about particular emotions and their intensities, their general status in social and political affairs, and the legitimacy of their utilization and exploitation. The six chapters of the volume's first theme, *Governance, Reflexivity, Contestation*, all address the different ways in which societies more or less reflexively attend to affect and emotion.

Emotional reflexivity is a concept that stresses how emotions inform thinking and sensemaking, and how feelings become objects of conscious reflection. Elgen Sauerborn's chapter extends this concept by, first, exploring how institutions explicitly refer to emotions and render them objects of public and political negotiation and discourse, and, second, examining how the social dimensions of emotions, in particular norms and ideals, are integrated into the reflexive process. Christian von Scheve's chapter introduces the concept of *contested emotions*. Going beyond views of emotions as drivers of conflict or modes of debate and negotiation, the concept emphasizes how emotions themselves become focal points of disagreement in contemporary social and political conflicts, exploring how emotional responses are increasingly subject to normative and discursive contestation. Jonas Harbke and colleagues then develop a conceptual framework for *emotional politics* based on three essential ingredients—campaigning, polarization, and governance—and outline how emotions mobilize support, shape perceptions, and influence political decision-making. In the subsequent contribution, Michal Givoni argues that *outrage politics* has come to characterize practices of critique and protest, becoming a tool of public communication that inverts the expression of political impotence, and that ultimately stems from obstructed, rather than vitalizing, feelings. *Affective mobilization*, developed by Hansjörg Dilger and colleagues, focuses on three essential criteria of mobilization: the role of bodies and sensations, the resonances and conflicts within and between social movements and institutions, and the different outcomes of collective mobilization. The final contribution of this first theme by Gesa Jessen introduces the concept of *reading relations* as a new way of analyzing

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literature as a socially embedded practice. Jessen emphasizes how the seemingly solitary act of reading is shaped by social belonging, ethical attitudes, and political positions, and the implications for the broader reception of literature across professional criticism and user-generated content on platforms like social media.

No human life is untouched by the orientations, decisions, and quarrels of grand-scale politics, yet much of people's day-to-day existence unfolds outside the limelight of the big political stage. Life is lived locally, in the immediacy of quotidian practices, interactions, and rituals in their settings and arrangements. It is a strength of the approaches belonging to affect theory that they take scholars beyond the big picture of discursive formations and collective action into myriad domains of mundane dwelling. Scholars with such local expertise possess a sensorium for the minutiae of embodied sensuous existence. Ethnographically trained scholars of affect embed themselves in various locales to partake in the lives of "normal people" in their homely environments. Somewhere "over there," at a remove from politics writ-large and big-picture media discourse, people live and die, love and hate, thrive or languish, seek treatment, turn to each other for care and consolation, engage in religious and popular rituals, draw on available technologies and media to get in touch with one another, entertain themselves, and partake in what they understand to be their present historical moment. Theoretical and diagnostic perspectives on social life strive to get at these experiences, at "how it is" to exist here and now. No approach to affect and emotion will meet its objects when it does not get in close touch with such modes of mundane dwelling in all of their richness, ambiguity, contradictions, and interpretations. However, such "going local" presents challenges of its own. To prevent the myopia of the too-deeply immersed, it is helpful to tie the ethnography of local affective relations back into the study of institutional arrangements, distributions of power, and discursive formations.

Institutions are where the mundane meets the systemic. The arrangements, protocols, and choreographed practices of institutions provide the frame of reference for affective experience, as well as its symbolic and material infrastructure. Accordingly, the study of institutions has become a focal point of our research. Here, emphasis is placed on modes of embodied dwelling and affective experience within the material, social, and technological arrangements of institutions. Affect, it turns out, is always *institutional affect*, since its manifestations largely unfold under the jurisdiction of—and sometimes in opposition to—one institutional arrangement or another. Meanwhile affects are also shaped by larger-scale and global institutional orders that reverberate through society in discourses and practice—such as legal frameworks, or the norms of gender, family, and kinship.

This is why the next two thematic parts of the volume combine inquiries into the sensory texture of embodied dwelling with perspectives on the affective lives of institutions. In some instances, both dimensions intersect closely, for instance in the study of affective practices such as psychiatric and hospice care (→ *Sensory Care*), forms of self-care and digital self-treatment (→ *Affective Treatment*), or contemporary digital media practices (→ *Affective Media*; → *Infrastructures of Feeling*). The key concepts that anchor these two sections are *sensory care* and *home feelings* on the side of the ethnographic perspectives, and *institutional affect*, *affective media,* and *infrastructures of feeling* on part of the institution- and technology-oriented approaches.

The chapter on sensory care by Max Müller and colleagues condenses findings from a multisensory ethnography of caregiving in Vietnamese communities in Berlin. It shows how care—in psychiatric clinics and hospices—emerges locally through atmospheres, bodily

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textures, and sensory cues, and how culturally insensitive practices can occasion affective dissonance, discomfort, and alienation. Gregory Gan's chapter on *Home Feelings* outlines how the terms "home" and "feeling" come to be inextricable when considered phenomenologically. The home as a physical space and as a subjective site of profound attachments anchors material and sensorial relations that hold the deep texture of worldly dwelling. The concept of home feelings thus transcends the research sites of ethnography. It signifies the affective bedrock of being-in-the-world as such. The other chapters in the part on *Senses, Belonging, Care* foreground more specific perspectives. İlke İmer, Claudia Liebelt, and Mayıs Tokel develop the concept of *Olfactory Affect* by drawing on comparative ethnographic research in urban settings in Berlin and Istanbul. They show how the sense of smell is implicated in modes of affective governance that apportion belonging and non-belonging in processes of racialization and othering. The text shows how sensory modalities are recruited into institutional arrangements, while it also focuses on practices of resistance and contestation. Taoyi Yang's chapter on *Affective Treatment* highlights an emerging socio-affective practice of digital capitalism: situated in the unmarked space beyond medical therapy and psychological emotion regulation, affective treatment encompasses various do-it-yourself practices of reflexive self-care and self-treatment that draw on digital technologies and media content to transform modes of dwelling in conducive and innovative ways.

Part III is entitled *Institutions, Economy, Media*. As hinted earlier, the contributions to this part align with the ones in the previous part on *Senses, Belonging, Care*. The chapter on *Institutional Affect*—by Millicent Churcher, Sandra Calkins, Jandra Böttger, and Jan Slaby—explores how staple institutions in late-modern societies rely on affect to ensure their functioning. The authors argue that affect is inextricable from institutions' material settings. Affect shapes powerful imaginaries behind the institution's avowed mission, and the way it governs the conduct and demeanor of its functionaries and addressees. All of which highlights the coercive, exclusionary, and oppressive effects of key state institutions (such as law courts, schools, or hospitals), and the centrality of affect for critically analyzing the authoritarian takeover of democratic societies.

Jonas Bens's chapter—*Property as Affect*—reconstructs how Western understandings of the institution of property operate as an affective relation that profoundly shapes the hierarchies of modern life. The chapter revisits the colonial life of property in the context of emerging capitalism and modern statehood, and suggests ways for seeking out alternative modes of affective relationality that are less hierarchical and violent. Besides property and the law, economic markets are a central institution of the global present, whose effects ramify widely through contemporary societies. Markus Lange's chapter on *Market Affects* discusses the affectivity that markets and market relations both require and help produce, especially in view of a persistent uncertainty about the future, characteristic of capitalist markets. The chapter expands the purview of the Berlin-based affect theory framework by explicitly dealing with staple segments of the capitalist economy. Lange shows that markets are affectively configured domains of power that both impact and respond to social and ecological environments.

The following two chapters chart a much more familiar terrain native to affect theory: the intersection of affect and contemporary (mostly digital) media. Bernd Bösel's chapter on *Affective Media* discusses a double quality of media. On the one hand, media fixate and arrest affect into nameable episodes, for instance, in practices of affect tracking or affective computing. On the other hand, media dynamize and mobilize affect in interactive arrangements

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such as gaming, social media, and the ubiquitous use of smartphones. Well-aligned with this perspective, Ana Makhashvili and Margreth Lünenborg draw on Rebecca Coleman's (2018, 2025) concept of "infrastructures of feeling"—a play on Raymond Williams's (1977) classic "structures of feeling"—to analyze how the set-up and design of media formats and digital platforms create affective affordances. Features such as emoji reactions on Facebook or Instagram, filters on Snapchat, or duets on TikTok, as well as the algorithmic curation that prioritizes highly interactive content, all modulate users' emotional expression and their affective interactions. These infrastructural aspects of digital media represent a thus-far under-theorized aspect of how networked publics are created and modulated, and help us see both the benefits and problems of affect's fluidity within today's digital media landscapes. Part III concludes with a nuanced affect-analysis of a more classical media format: the archive. Kerstin Schankweiler's innovative approach highlights the archive as a meeting ground of affect and history. By no means neutral and static repositories of documents or artifacts, affective archives are described as living, embodied phenomena where affective experiences are preserved, reactivated, suppressed, and often fought-about—dynamic arenas of negotiation and contestation over how societies feel about their pasts and imagine their futures.

The affective archive segues us into the volume's more explicit dealings with the temporality and historicity of affect and emotion. Part IV, *Echoes, Hauntings, Prefigurations*, collects work on different temporal layers of affective formations. Although affect theory has long surpassed some of its earlier tendencies to portray affect as a matter of synchronic relations and dynamics in the present (Baraitser, 2017; Berlant, 2011; Riley, 2019; Sharpe, 2016), there is still a noticeable lack of reflection on the deeper temporal recesses and historical remainders that inform affective arrangements, affective dispositions, and affective practices. Scholars in the *Affective Societies* center have increasingly homed-in on affective aspects of time and history. As in most scholarship on the temporal dimension of cultural life, manifestations of historical time are thematized together with the experiential dimension of lived time—the durational exigencies of historical experience; of anticipation and prefiguration; as well as modes of enduring, stalling, or speeding-up the time of an extended now. In line with this, thematic Part IV of the volume brings together texts that focus on the affective manifestation of the temporal modalities in their respective entanglement with historical time. The four chapters of this part resonate closely with one another as they explore complementary modes of temporality: how past, present, and future intersect in uneasy, often disavowed or repressed ways, derailing linear and normative conceptions of history.

In a collaborative project between literary studies and theatre studies, Anne Fleig and Matthias Warstat develop the concept of *Affective Contemporaneity*. This notion is meant to convey the co-presence of distinct trajectories of temporal experience and historical consciousness in a mediatized world marked by unequal yet temporally parallel forms of life. Pushing beyond notions of chronological simultaneity, the authors argue that contemporaneity is affectively negotiated—produced through embodied practices and artistic representations that render time tangible and make history felt. Literature and theatre are shown to be art forms well suited to craft affective modalities that structure temporal belonging, while also conveying a searing sense for the tensions, fractures, and antagonisms that the simultaneity of distinct strands of historical belonging are likely to engender. In his chapter on *Haunting*, Fabian Bernhardt revitalizes a productive line of poststructuralist work on the marginal yet often quietly insistent claims of unresolved pasts. Drawing on Avery Gordon

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and Tony Morrison, among others, Bernhardt explores the shadowy space between the tangible and the intangible, analyzing haunting as a structure of feeling marked by latency, atmospheric charge, and temporal recursion. Unseemly revenants from the past disturb linear notions of time, sabotage the calming recourse to composed normative postures, moving afflicted subjects bit by bit to the limits of what they can bear or control. The chapter also touches upon the affective valence of the figure of the ghost as a surprisingly tangible intruder into sanitized lifeworlds beset by repressed legacies of violent conquest.

Theresa Schütz and Doris Kolesch focus on the converse temporal direction, showing how the performing arts make possible worlds imaginable, by creating future scenarios and generating new ways of feeling. With the concept of *Prefigurative Aesthetics*, Schütz and Kolesch characterize aesthetic strategies in contemporary dance and performance that creatively anticipate future worlds. Against the backdrop of a heightened sense of crisis and catastrophe—ecological, political, and social—the performing arts become a laboratory for producing futures—in all their uncertainty—and anticipating sensibilities and subjectivities-to-come. The contribution emphasizes the nonlinear temporality of prefigurative aesthetics, drawing on notions such as crip time and horizontality in order to envision the affective texture of a counter-modern futurity. In the fourth and final chapter of Part IV, Paola Ivanov and Laibor Kalanga Moko develop a critical understanding of colonialism as a time-imbued affective formation that reverberates through the global present. *Colonialism as Affect* interlaces an understanding of colonialism as an ongoing oppressive formation with a focus on affect as a historically charged dimension of colonial power. The felt experience of colonialism is centered in a critical effort to understand the reach and depth of dispossessive violence, taking into account non-Western ontologies pertaining to the status of objects, possessions, and ancestry. The authors tie this perspective to decolonial efforts by elucidating the stakes of current debates about the restitution of colonial collections in European ethnographic museums, drawing on the lived and felt experiences of the colonized.

The final main thematic part foregrounds what is already evident in many of the previous contributions: how the affective fabric of contemporary lifeworlds always entails tensions, conflicts, and modes of resistance. As the chapters in Part I have shown, affect and emotions are modalities of politics that usually involve both open and manifest conflicts and less tangible, latent, often repressed tensions, quarrels, and disagreements, some of which only appear in the guise of vague premonitions or intimations of discord. In Part V, *Friction, Stasis, Suppression*, authors highlight several ways such tensions and subtle conflicts become manifest, are explicitly thematized (in affective modes of critique or forms of affective engagement), or remain latent within social or individual formations that suppress, deflect, or otherwise curb affective energies in favor of affective stasis or societal unfeeling. This returns us to the beginning of this introduction and to the chapters in Part I dealing with the affective and emotional vicissitudes of current politics. Power-inflected social formations can be analyzed as amalgamations of manifest and latent conflict, and organized sociality in the Global North often relies on the suspension, suppression, temporary calming, or outright denial of antagonisms, conflicts, and disagreements. Politically aware scholars of affect find many inroads for studying affective practices and formations that respond to the antagonistic nature of co-existence in crisis-riddled terrains.

Hansjörg Dilger, Maren Wirth, and Kristina Mashimi introduce the reflexive concept of *Affective Engagements* as a way to analyze the dynamic positionality of anthropological research in contexts of activist movements and socio-political struggles. Drawing on a case

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study of their 2023 "We Want Them Back" symposium on the restitution of human remains from colonial contexts in Berlin, the authors explore how activists foster social and political transformation through shared affective orientations and dissonances. They reflexively draw on their own experience to examine how ethnographic researchers engage—or deliberately refrain from engaging—with research participants in their socio-political locations and expressed aims. In a tour de force combining theory, methodological reflection, and participatory observation, the team integrates insights from phenomenology, affect theory, and engaged anthropology to highlight the importance of reflexivity in politicized research contexts. In a more theoretical key, an interdisciplinary team consisting of Aletta Diefenbach, Matthias Lüthjohann, and Hans Roth probes how the legacies of critical theories and scholarly modes of critique shape *Affects of Critique*. Considering both scholarship on the sociology of critique as well as the distinctively non-critical, but rather "reparative" or appreciative orientation of the early turn to affect (Sedgwick, 1997), the authors offer a systematic perspective on the embodied, relational, and situated character of practices of critique. By no means opposed to critique, the authors show that affect is in fact front and center in practices of critique—it informs, instigates, galvanizes, and sensitizes these practices. According to them, critique emerges from affect, critique's forms and practices are affective, and critique itself affects, by wielding a transformative power that goes beyond what Habermas once called the "forceless force" of rational argument.

Anyone who has ever wondered why critique, affective or not, might fail to make inroads into social formations and individual orientations might find Fabian Bernhardt's chapter on *Affective Stasis* instructive. Drawing on the ancient Greek concept, Bernhardt describes a paradoxical condition characterized by the co-presence of extreme tension and an arresting immobility. Affective stasis combines a paralyzing stuckness, inhibition, or block with an underlying tension that has the potential to erupt into sudden violent conflict, upsetting a previous state of tenuous political balance. Bernhardt traces the ancient Greek sensitivity toward this process, but also grounds his insights in present-day experiences of societal disruption, arrested temporality, and personal immobility during the COVID-19 lockdowns—showing how stasis offers a lens for analyzing how affective arrangements can freeze embodied actors into modes of psychosocial standstill. Henrike Kohpeiß operates on a similar broad societal plane with her concept of *Unfeeling*: the non-accidental lack of collective affective responses to objects or situations that would merit robust affective engagement, such as the global ecological crisis. Kohpeiß uses the tools of a decolonial critical theory to analyze collective conditions of disaffection as the result of deliberate efforts of societal factions in the Global North to prolong the profitable status quo of fossil capitalism. She shows how the "imperial mode of living" (Brand & Wissen, 2021) mobilizes an array of sociopolitical and discursive strategies to produce repertoires of curbed, deflected, or repressed affectivity, whose cumulative effect can lead to a derealization of the ecological crisis and its consequences. Affect theory here reaches a crucial threshold: it shifts from the study of everyday affective relations toward a terrain in which affect is a resource, either for taking stock of reality or for denying it. The dominant conflict is no longer a clash of orientations but a struggle over the very parameters of an inhabitable world—a struggle that, for progressive actors, amounts to a clash with a reactionary politics of unreality in defense of a suicidal status quo.

The first *Key Concepts* volume as well as this second installment showcase the research carried out at the Berlin-based Collaborative Research Center *Affective Societies*. Both books feature conceptual work that has inspired research in the Center during the almost 12 years

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it was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). This has always involved researchers from within the Center as well as international collaborations with colleagues who provided external and alternative perspectives on the Center's research. Our intention for the chapters in the sixth thematic part is to highlight and emphasize these perspectives and open up potential future avenues for affect and emotion research, probing paths that have remained less explored by the Center's core faculty, but that provide a novel, critical, and stimulating impetus, potentially prefiguring future work. The chapters assembled in this final section are less about specific concepts, than about offering broader perspectives on affect and emotion. These perspectives showcase the potential of affect theory to shape more general takes on embodiment, emphasize how emotions can help us understand social change, and explore the limits of Western affect-centric approaches for coming to terms with the troubling conditions of the Anthropocene.

Donovan O. Schaefer's chapter *Affect as Method: Against the Numb View of Embodiment* suggests that embodiment can point the way toward a richer understanding of affect, and that, conversely, the vocabulary of feeling, affect, and emotion are needed to truly comprehend the relationships between embodied subjects and formations of power. The sociology of emotions has developed several theories addressing socially situated affect and emotion, and Marci D. Cottingham integrates and demarcates these from other approaches in her chapter *Studying (Neo-)Emotion Practices in Affect and Emotion Research*. Using her practice-based perspective on emotion and affect, she probes three areas of future research: misfeeling and misrecognition, deviance and defiance, and the emergence of new emotion categories in response to broader dynamics of social change—what she calls, coining a novel concept, neo-emotions (see also Cottingham, 2024). To conclude the volume, Tamar Blickstein examines how the unfolding ecological catastrophe exposes the limitations of academic knowledge systems, especially in contexts marked by colonial histories of extractivism, dispossession, and exploitation. Blickstein, a cultural anthropologist who has done ethnographic research on settler-colonial agribusiness and deforestation in South America, engages Indigenous thought to understand how affect studies—despite their entanglement in racialized colonial discourses—might offer underutilized tools for rethinking ecological and epistemic crises.

Taken together, the three *Perspective* chapters present social and cultural affect and emotion theory at a crossroads. On the one hand, they demonstrate the ongoing generative potential of established perspectives and methods—even of now-familiar, much-debated notions such as embodiment and social change. On the other hand, they convey a growing sense of crisis, impasse, and stagnation in how affect theory has been taken up within the Western academy. As a way forward, these chapters outline a timely task for affect theory: to remain grounded in its traditional strengths while productively transforming itself. This involves incorporating novel conceptual resources and sensuous registers, thereby expanding its sociohistorical sensitivity. At the same time, the chapters call on affect theory to return to its roots—by reactivating the energies and untapped potentials of local lifeworlds and everyday sociality.

Outlook

The ground covered between the outrage politics of Trump and Vance catering to a rapid-reaction online culture, the Vietnamese carescapes of the city of Berlin, and Maasai

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communities challenging "restitution" is tremendous. Similarly vast is the conceptual space between emotion politics and emotional reflexivity on the one hand, and home feelings, haunting, and sensory care on the other. Much of the power of the conceptual tools assembled in *The New Key Concepts in Affective Societies* stems from their shared assumption of affective relationality as a common ground. They have been derived from a broad variety of themes and backgrounds and can be mobilized to investigate a diverse range of empirical fields, sites, and cases.

This breadth reflects the fact that individuals and collectives always partake in both broader macro-political dynamics *and* local spheres of belonging. The modalities of participation might be different, but the effects on the lives of those involved are equally massive: the machinations of macro-politics subject individuals to wide-ranging effects, often with consequences for their well-being and life chances, which can linger for generations. Homely spheres of belonging, local networks of practice, and mutual care might provide shelter and protection from the whims of grand-scale politics, supply meaning and purpose, and compensate for systemic deficits in provisioning care or safety. However, the home is by no means a sanctuary, as indicated by statistics on domestic and sexual partner violence (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023; Dwyer, 2022), and by tensions in transgenerational family dynamics (Röttger-Rössler & Lam, 2018). A protective sphere of local involvement might also shield individuals from insights into global dynamics and also from their complicity in systems of extraction and exploitation (Rothberg, 2019; Shotwell, 2016). This means that the study of affect and emotion is tasked with navigating tensions and hidden dynamics that might contradict surface appearances. Scholars may need to curb the temptation to positively value certain practices, experiences, or modes of involvement in the face of troubling tendencies that may not be readily apparent.

There is also a more general tension surrounding the issue of violence, exploitation, and oppression within contemporary arrangements of living. The concepts we use—the theoretical resources affect and emotion theorists draw on—are mostly reflective of Western experiential and intellectual perspectives, largely beholden to Western traditions of scholarship and knowledge production. As such, these concepts may be ill-equipped to grapple with the orientations, experiential worlds, and sense-making of those frequently left out of such traditions—including Indigenous peoples and their descendants, and many in the Global South more generally. This is not a straightforward matter, after all, as affect theory, thanks to its Euro-modern inheritance, might be singularly apt to explore "how capitalism feels" (Berlant, 2011; Cvetkovich, 2012) and how partaking in extractive, oppressive, and structurally violent regimes is lived concretely and dealt with affectively (Kohpeiß, 2025). That being said, the type of scholarship characteristic of affect theory will inevitably harbor limitations that reflect colonial legacies and the limited positionalities of, for the most part, affluent regions of the world.

As Tamar Blickstein argues in the chapter that concludes this volume, an awareness of colonial affect can help researchers gain insight into the drivers of the climate catastrophe, especially at sites of multispecies attachment at the frontlines of ecological destruction. Blickstein notes affect's under-explored capacity to bypass the academic hierarchies often imposed on ontological worlds—hierarchies that have historically dismissed or ignored the ontologies of the colonized. A serious attention to Indigenous conceptions of relationality—such as the Qom concept of *qadma'*, or territory—can help guide affect theorists to rethink what affective concepts can be and do in a time of ecological crisis. Qadma' might truly be a

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"key" concept, as it can set us on a path to a differently configured landscape of scholarship on affect. It may reinvigorate the methodological point of our endeavor: to craft concepts that work as affective formations—concise, intense, illuminating, and inextricable from the territories and experiences most characteristic of our troubled times.

Notes

1 Amanpour's spoken commentary on the scene, recorded at today's message length limit of 90 seconds, is little more than a bonus track for the die-hards. Not surprisingly, her commentary also bustles with ostentatious affectivity. https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/28/us/video/christiane-amanpour-trump-zelensky-digvid (accessed on July 13, 2025).
2 https://www.bild.de/politik/inland/linken-chef-van-aken-kritisiert-gruene-als-besserverdiener-partei-67b72fb719756d1c4d18c899 (accessed July 13, 2025).
3 https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/05/politics/elon-musk-rogan-interview-empathy-doge/index.html (accessed March 12, 2025).

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PART I

Governance, Reflexivity, Contestation

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2

EMOTIONAL REFLEXIVITY

Elgen Sauerborn

Emotional reflexivity emphasizes the essential role that emotions play in how humans think, reflect, and make sense of the world. It is based on the understanding that emotions and cognitive processes are deeply connected and cannot be fully separated. At the same time, this concept suggests that emotions not only shape people's thoughts and actions, but also become something they think about and reflect on. People actively examine their own emotions and those of others. They explicate, address, and deliberately engage with feelings, and use them to better understand personal as well as broader social or political issues.

Based on the idea that reflexivity involves reflecting on oneself or others in relation to social conditions, I understand emotional reflexivity as the process of examining the social role of emotions based on what people know and believe about them. My focus lies on reflexive knowledge about emotions, particularly regarding their social meaning and function.

In the social sciences, there are several notions of emotional reflexivity. For one thing, it involves how people deal with their emotions when reflecting on personal aspects of their lives, such as when making important decisions, evaluating past experiences, or planning for the future. For example, when someone decides to change jobs, they might not only consider tangible factors such as salary and job stability but also feelings such as fulfillment, passion, and stress related to both their current and future job. Reflexivity, therefore, is not merely a cognitive act but is deeply informed by emotions. Another notion of emotional reflexivity concerns how emotions are addressed, discussed, and analyzed in various societal contexts. This includes how people talk about their feelings in personal relationships, how the media portrays emotional reactions to current events or how organizations manage emotions. In the workplace, for instance, managers might encourage open discussions about stress and burnout to intentionally cultivate a desired organizational culture.

This chapter expands on these existing approaches and introduces further dimensions of emotional reflexivity. Instead of focusing on how individuals think about their own feelings, it examines how social actors or institutions think about the social meaning of emotions. It shows how the social aspects of emotions—such as emotion norms, ideals, and their social functions—are becoming the object of reflexivity. Rather than centering on the reflexivity of emotions of individuals, I consider how the social meaning and function of

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emotions are deliberately addressed and used to navigate and understand broader societal issues. This perspective also sheds light on how groups and institutions, not just individuals, use emotions to understand and respond to social problems. For example, activists in social movements often reflect and mobilize collective emotions such as injustice, hope, and solidarity to initiate change and gain support. Similarly, politicians or journalists might emphasize the emotions of social groups, such as the frustration and anger expressed by political populists, to explain their radicalization and increasing influence.

Sociological Approaches to Emotional Reflexivity

Various authors in sociology have used the term *emotional reflexivity* to describe different social phenomena. These notions generally share the understanding that emotions and reflexive processes are deeply intertwined, and even inseparable.

One prominent approach focuses on the role of emotions within reflexive processes. This concept emerged as a reaction to classical sociological theories of reflexivity, particularly those advanced by Giddens (1990) and Beck et al. (1994). These foundational theories conceptualize reflexivity as a process in modern societies in which individuals reflect on and critically examine how social conditions, structures, and relationships shape their own beliefs, actions, and identity.

Other scholars, such as Holmes (2010, 2015) and Burkitt (2012), have criticized these notions of reflexivity for overemphasizing cognitive aspects and neglecting the role of emotions. They argue that reflexivity and reasoning are inherently emotional processes. People rely on their emotions to evaluate their identities, beliefs, and attitudes; make decisions; and navigate their relationships in different areas of life. In this perspective, social actors are emotional beings who strive to understand and change their lives in relation to their social and natural environment and to others (see Holmes, 2010, p. 140). Reflexivity, thus, includes bodies, practices, and emotions (Holmes, 2010) and is always informed by emotions (Burkitt, 2012).

A slightly different perspective comes from Neckel (2014). Like Holmes and Burkitt, he emphasizes a shift away from understanding emotions as natural phenomena, and toward regarding them as integral components of reflexive processes. However, his approach especially highlights how emotions are subject to self-thematization, which means that people increasingly consciously and deliberately shape and control their feelings. A key aspect of this process is the commodification of emotions, which become valuable economic resources that thus transform into a form of capital (Hochschild, 1983; Illouz, 2007). For example, according to Neckel, employees need to reflect on their emotional role and function to effectively manage both their emotions and their work. To meet external economic expectations, they must adapt their emotions to align with what is required of them. As a result, emotions are perceived as something external to the individual, and change the way people receive and relate to themselves. This particular form of emotional reflexivity stresses its alienating aspects, which might be less pronounced if emotions remained implicit. More importantly, the explicit engagement with emotions in an economic context underscores the role of reflexivity in shaping expectations, norms, and emotional roles.

In this chapter, I build on Neckel's approach and attempt to extend the concept of emotional reflexivity by emphasizing two aspects: first, I highlight how institutions, rather than individuals, refer to emotions in their decision-making and reflexive processes. I examine

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how institutional actors—such as organizations, the media, or social movements—deal with emotions and structure them within society. Second, my perspective examines how emotions and in particular their social meanings and functions are addressed, scrutinized, and understood. By doing so, I seek to show how institutional actors not only reflect on emotions themselves, but also engage with more abstract and grounded concepts such as emotion-related ideals, norms, conflicts, and stereotypes. For example, political parties may address and thematize emotions such as fear or hope to influence policy decisions. Similarly, media coverage of certain events may include emotional responses of social groups and analyses of what these emotions reveal about broader social trends.

Emotional Reflexivity in Contemporary Western Societies

Drawing on the idea that reflexivity involves the act or ability to consider oneself or others in relation to the social context or objective circumstances (Archer, 2003), I understand emotional reflexivity as a process that involves reflection on the social role of emotions based on the knowledge that people possess about them. Similar to Giddens' (1990) understanding of reflexivity, I emphasize the importance of expanding knowledge about the principles, consequences, and challenges of the reflexive reference point, which, in this case, is emotions. However, unlike Beck (1994), and in line with scholars such as Holmes (2010) and Burkitt (2012), I do not differentiate between reflexivity and reflection. Instead, I stress the importance of reflexive knowledge about emotions, especially about their social meanings and functions.

This understanding might become clearer by considering examples that highlight the increased emotional reflexivity in recent years. Scholars and other public figures have progressively predicted that societies are becoming more emotional (Davies, 2018). From the perceived sentimentality of the so-called "woke" left and narratives surrounding ostensibly passionate climate movements (→ *Unfeeling; Affective Engagements*), to the emotional reactions to wars in the Middle East and Ukraine (→ *Outrage Politics*), reflections on societal emotions point to a rising affective pulse. But despite the increasing attention paid to the emotionality of society, there is still a lack of clarity about what this "emotional society" really means. Are people actually experiencing more emotions, becoming more sensitive, angry, and irrational? Or are they engaging more in discussions and reflections about emotions?

In Western societies, discussing, examining, and questioning one's own feelings and those of others are common features of public discussions. Media and public debates often reflect on emotions and their meaning—such as Trump's anger, the frustration and despair among right-wing populists, the supposed irrationality of climate activists, or disputes about who has the right to feel offended by whom. These deliberations underscore the crucial role of emotions in shaping the way people understand social and political phenomena. In this context, the public preoccupation with emotions serves as a means of explaining and justifying political, cultural, and economic actions and conflicts. This trend goes along with an increasing tendency of individuals and groups to instrumentalize emotions in order to advance economic and political agendas, define social and cultural boundaries, or pursue interest-driven strategies.

Looking at emotional reflexivity from an institutional or public perspective highlights the importance of explicit knowledge about emotions. Just as knowledge about modernity is

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a central part of reflexive modernization as discussed by Giddens, knowledge about emotions and their meaning is a crucial component of emotional reflexivity. This perspective goes beyond a therapeutic reflection about one's own feelings, as it involves engaging with abstract knowledge about the emotions of different social actors and groups. At the social level, such understanding may not always match what people actually feel as individuals, as it includes not just direct affective experiences but also the way emotions are expressed and interpreted by others.

How are emotions handled in organizational environments? How are they challenged in political debates or shaped by media coverage? How do public figures or institutions strategically use emotions in discourse to achieve specific goals? In what ways is the role of emotions as an academic subject changing, not only in the traditional disciplines that deal with emotions, such as psychology, but also in the social sciences and humanities? Questions like these are not only being explored by emotion scholars, but also by journalists, authors of popular literature, and social media influencers. This broad public discussion of the social function of emotions is a key feature of emotional reflexivity.

In the following section, I will draw on examples from sociological emotion research to show how the rise in emotional reflexivity manifests at different levels of society. The analysis focuses on phenomena such as groups, organizations, and the public sphere. In addition, I will examine emotion programs—standardized approaches used to cultivate emotions, such as mindfulness and awareness practices (Neckel & Sauerborn, 2023)—and public debates about the relationship between science and society. These examples demonstrate how emotional reflexivity shapes institutions and permeates public discourse.

Meso-Level: Emotional Reflexivity in Institutional Emotion Programs

A social phenomenon that illustrates emotional reflexivity is the rising popularity of emotion programs. Emotion programs should be understood here as standardized practices that aim to foster certain emotional abilities and competencies. These programs are deliberately developed or offered by institutional actors to serve as instruments for shaping emotions and developing emotional skills. At their core, emotion programs focus on teaching and reinforcing emotional habits and behaviors. As such, they contribute to shaping collective emotional norms and experiences within a society (Neckel & Sauerborn, 2023). Two widely recognized emotion programs that draw on reflexive techniques to manage emotions and emotional knowledge are mindfulness and awareness-raising initiatives. Mindfulness refers to a secular adaptation of Buddhist meditation practices that has been integrated into Western culture through standardized programs. These programs are usually delivered through workshops or small groups, where participants are guided in established meditation practices and techniques for reflecting on oneself and one's feelings (Sauerborn et al., 2022). The aim of mindfulness programs is not only to help individuals cope with stress and improve their mental well-being, but also to cultivate deeper self-awareness so that participants can better understand and regulate their emotions in everyday life.

Similarly, awareness-raising programs focus on educating awareness of social issues such as discrimination, privilege, and power dynamics. While these programs are less standardized than mindfulness programs, they also employ various methods to encourage participants to reflect on their own emotions and the emotions of others. Programs for awareness-raising

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can be found in various forms, including books, self-help guides, courses, and workshops. Following Maser and Neckel (2023), I will refer to these programs in brief as *awareness*.

Many public and private institutions and organizations provide emotion programs and employ techniques and methods to teach participants how to manage and experience certain feelings. Remarkably, the very existence and popularity of emotion programs are a testament to the concept of emotional reflexivity. If institutional actors did not recognize the importance and benefits of shaping emotions, these programs would likely not exist. Emotion programs are deeply intertwined with both individual feelings and the social values and ideals associated with emotions. They encourage individuals to think about which emotions are considered desirable, privileged, or marginalized, and to evaluate the legitimacy of emotions in different contexts and situations.

One of the primary goals of mindfulness programs, for instance, is to cultivate a conscious awareness of one's own feelings. To achieve this emotional state, practitioners employ several techniques such as meditation, journaling, and therapeutic group discussions. But while mindfulness teachers provide methods to better observe and comprehend one's feelings, they also introduce a more abstract understanding of emotions and emphasize their social construction and impact. In this context, some mindfulness teachers distinguish between emotions that they consider authentic and those that are shaped by social expectations or external pressure (Sauerborn et al., 2022). They see the ability to recognize which emotions are more genuine than others as a step toward a more desirable awareness of one's own emotions. A mindful approach to one's own feelings, therefore, involves recognizing what one does supposedly *really* feel and distinguishing it from emotions that are considered to be imposed by external demands or social norms. At the same time, other interpretations of mindfulness programs, particularly in business settings, focus on optimizing emotions through the application of Buddhist meditation practices. The coexistence of these two seemingly paradoxical objectives—awareness of authentic emotions and the optimization of emotions—is also a key aspect of emotional reflexivity (Sauerborn et al., 2022).

Emotional reflexivity is further evident in the context of awareness-raising programs, which have gained prominence amid often heated debates surrounding left-wing politics. As Maser and Neckel (2023) observe, these debates are characterized by mutual accusations of emotional overreaction. The authors highlight a central tension: the growing demand for greater sensitivity to the emotional suffering of stigmatized groups contrasts with criticism of those who are perceived as arrogant because they claim to represent universal values (Maser & Neckel, 2023, p. 300). To address these tensions, standardized programs, such as workshops and awareness teams at public events, clubs, or festivals, focus on who should feel or express certain emotions under what circumstances. For example, awareness workshops often address feelings such as shame, guilt, or anger among those who are considered privileged. Through group discussion and reflection, participants explore how the experiences and identities of marginalized groups can evoke desired emotional responses. On a broader level, those engaged in awareness initiatives critically examine how social structures, such as ethnicity, gender, and class, shape emotional experiences. These discussions point to emotions in the context of social and political power dynamics, hierarchies, and values and require a deep understanding of emotional dynamics. Thus, Maser and Neckel see awareness as a politically motivated effort, where emotions are explicitly discussed.

Both mindfulness and awareness programs are striking examples of how individual emotions are produced institutionally, as well as how these institutions draw on a very abstract

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knowledge of emotions for this purpose. This emotional knowledge then becomes a reflexive object within these programs themselves.

Macro-level: Emotional Reflexivity among the Interplay of Science and Society

A key concern for those conceptualizing emotional reflexivity is to overcome the traditional divide between emotionality and rationality (Holmes, 2010). By emphasizing the significance of emotions within reflexive processes, which have traditionally been viewed as cognitive processes, this approach challenges and reframes the conventual dualism.

However, this dichotomy often appears in public discourse, especially in discussions surrounding science and society. Recent attacks on scientific insights, particularly from right-wing populist politics (van Dyk, 2021), conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic (Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2022), and misinformation in the Brexit debates (Eyal, 2019), often involve a deliberate reflection about the emotions of all involved parties. As a result, emotions that characterize the relationship between science and society are becoming increasingly reflexive (Sauerborn & von Scheve, 2025).

Similar tendencies can be observed in debates over freedom of speech and the so-called *cancel culture* within academia, where the focus frequently shifts to ideals of *emotional safety* and the value of academic freedom (Revers & Traunmüller, 2020). These controversies illustrate a dualistic perspective on the relationship between science and the public: on the one side, rational and "objective" scientists, and on the other, emotional or sensitive citizens. This divide becomes visible in debates around groups that explicitly doubt scientific consensus, such as *anti-vaxxers*, or by those perceived as placing too much emphasis on emotions, like the so-called *woke* milieu (Durnová, 2019). In this context, science is often portrayed as the rational authority that is responsible for educating an emotional public about the impact of crises and possible remedies. In this way, science serves as an allegedly sober and rational entity that generates and communicates scientific knowledge (Eyal, 2019).

Similarly, public debates about *fake news* and responses to vaccination programs increasingly focus on the emotions of those involved. The term *post-truth*, for instance, is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as a situation where emotions and personal beliefs have more influence on political debate and public opinion than objective facts (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Expressions like *climate hysteria*, *eco grief*, or *Impfneid* (German for vaccination envy) further indicate that explicit references to emotions are shaping the relationship between science and society.

Both scientific and societal actors are now engaging more actively and reflexively with emotions and are bringing them to the center of public discourse (Sauerborn & von Scheve, 2025). The increasing importance of emotions in discussions on scientific topics demonstrates that emotions have become a collective object of critical inquiry and public debate.

Conclusion

Emotions play a decisive role in the reflexive actions of individuals and social actors, for example in decision-making, deliberation, or strategic planning, as well as in the strategies of institutional and public actors. These actors often refer to emotions in order to stir up or overcome conflicts; to provide explanations for social, political, or economic problems;

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or to assert their tactical interests. They use specific emotional knowledge to signal social codes, make distinctions, or alter the status of social groups.

Broadening the view of emotional reflexivity shows that public and institutional actors are engaging with the complex social dimensions of emotions. This includes understanding how certain emotions are idealized or stigmatized, how emotion norms influence behavior, and how emotional conflicts and stereotypes shape social interactions. This deeper, more nuanced understanding of emotional reflexivity shows how the social function of emotions becomes the subject of reflexive processes.

The growing recognition of emotions as a central element of contemporary societies can be observed in many areas and requires further empirical research. This is evident not only because emotions are taking up more and more space in public debate, but also in political efforts to distance themselves from overly emotional responses. For example, after the federal elections in Germany, the designated chancellor Friedrich Merz emphasized the mood surrounding the change of government in terms of "sobriety" rather than "euphoria" (Maurer, 2025), signaling a conscious shift away from emotionally charged political styles. At the same time, emotional reflexivity is crucial for understanding the narratives of the far right, which often focus on emotions such as fear and resentment. These narratives frequently emphasize, for example, the alleged anxiety of the population of leaving their homes due to rising crime, thereby creating a sense of emotional urgency that supports demands for stricter political measures. Emotional reflexivity is also playing a growing role in new technological and therapeutic contexts. For example, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in psychological counseling and emotional support—in the form of AI-driven chatbots or digital therapy platforms, for example—raises important questions about how emotional experiences are interpreted, communicated, and potentially reshaped by non-human actors. These developments show that looking at emotional reflexivity in various societal realms can contribute to a better understanding of social, political, and economic contexts.

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3

CONTESTED EMOTIONS

Christian von Scheve

Social conflict typically refers to disagreement or tension between individuals and groups regarding a particular issue that is at stake. Existing research has long highlighted the central role of emotions in conflict and conflict resolution, chiefly as drivers of mobilization and the modes of discourse and behavior in which conflict is enacted. The concept of *contested emotions* broadly reflects the observation that in many contemporary conflicts, emotions have become contested issues *in themselves*. The conflicts in question not only revolve around the actual issue that is at stake, for example, an adequate response to global warming or the most effective immigration policies. Instead, emotions, too, become central objects of contestation in these conflicts. More specifically, it is the emotions that people experience—or do not experience—vis-à-vis a particular issue, that become contested.

Traditional views have it that opposing parties argue about ultimate goals, the most successful strategies to reach a goal, the consequences of goals and strategies, the morally sound position in view of an issue, and the like. It is less obvious, however, that they also tend to argue about the emotions that the conflicting parties—or citizens more generally—are supposed to feel or express in relation to the contested issue. Conflicting parties can be observed to argue about the *right* or *wrong* way to feel regarding an issue at stake, about the *adequate* or *inadequate* emotional response, as well as over the *appropriate* or *inappropriate* affective experience in relation to the conflict. These enunciations typically include different addressees, that is, different subjects of emotional experience, primarily political in- and out-groups, but also bystanders or the general public.

The concept of *contested emotions* emphasizes specific kinds and intensities of emotions as they become integral parts of the debates and discourses surrounding a particular social conflict. These can be the emotions that, from an analytical standpoint, have given rise to or drive a particular conflict, but it can also be emotions that conflicting parties single out to be particularly instrumental to fight or resolve a conflict. The concept shall aid researchers to better understand the affective forces that propel pertinent conflicts, the discourses of conflict, and the social processes that contribute to the experience and understanding of emotions. In this regard, the concept raises a number of intriguing questions: on what grounds do people contest and criticize emotions? What specific understanding of emotions informs

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acts of contestation? What understanding is, theoretically, required so that emotions can be contested in a meaningful way? What are the individual and social implications of disputing others' emotions? In the following section, I will outline some initial answers to these questions, first by providing some examples and conceptual details; second, by analyzing the different grounds on which emotions can be contested; and, third, by briefly outlining how the idea gained traction that emotions are "contestable" in the first place, providing some context with regard to closely related concepts.

Background

The abundance of contested emotions in contemporary conflicts is best illustrated with some examples. The first set of examples illustrates the general normativity of emotions and emotion discourses, which can be conceived as a precursor to contestation, whereas the second set is more tuned toward contestation as such. In an interview with the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in January 2025 on the second presidency of Donald J. Trump, Mark Lilla, a political scientist at Columbia University, stated: "Our reaction to Trump should not be fear, but rage. And valor" (Strauß, 2025).[1] In an article on the Israel-Palestine war, the German tabloid *BILD* in October 2023 featured a headline announcing: "Why one has to be compassionate with Gaza" (BILD, 2023).[2] Nigel Biggar (2017), a professor of theology at Oxford, in a much-discussed commentary in *The Times*, requests that Britons feel neither guilt nor shame in view of their colonial past. A little later, in *The Guardian*, his Oxford colleague James McDougall (2018) objects: "The history of empire isn't about pride—or guilt." From these examples that recommend certain emotions, argue for the merit of other emotions, or claim the inappropriateness of still other emotions, it is only a short way to cases in which emotions are more explicitly contested and related to conflicting parties. The contestation of emotions in these cases often implies criticism and the accusation and vituperation of groups and individuals. For example, "toxic masculinity" for some involves socially inappropriate and psychologically dysfunctional male ways of feeling and of relating to one's own and others' emotions. Activists and scholars have singled out and criticized what they identify as the typically masculine discouragement of emotional vulnerability, the suppression of emotions, and the limiting of male emotional expressiveness (e.g., Hooks, 2004, pp. 60–61; see also Pop Culture Detective, 2016). Because these emotional traits are considered instrumental in fueling gender-based conflict, including misogyny, violence, and aggression, men are called upon to "unlearn" these emotion repertoires, for example, in a health and well-being program offered by Brown University (n.d.) on "Unlearning Toxic Masculinity."

Climate change is another example, where younger climate activists are accused of experiencing the "wrong" and "inadequate" feelings by climate change denialists—in particular hysteria, panic, dread, and anxiety—and of generally experiencing too intense feelings and emotions. In turn, climate activists frequently complain about denialists or the general public being emotionally numb, and of not feeling what would be, in their view, necessary and appropriate to feel. Greta Thunberg's now famous lines at the World Economic Forum in 2019 are a particularly bold case in point: "I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic."

A final example concerns immigration, where those with outspoken anti-immigration attitudes blame supporters of more liberal immigration regimes for their inadequate and

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excessive sympathy and compassion toward refugees and, generally, their exuberant sensitivity. Conversely, the anti-immigration faction is frequently blamed for their inhumane and immoral coldness, apathy, and scorn, and their lack of sympathy and compassion.

The probing of others' emotions, however, is not germane to social conflict. It is indeed more common and widespread—though also not widely researched—in everyday social life, where emotions are frequently scrutinized, critiqued, questioned, and challenged. We tell our spouses that their anger at a friend is unjustified because no bad intentions were involved. We tell a classmate that there is no reason to be afraid of the upcoming exam because she studied relentlessly and knows her stuff. We tell our friend to cheer up eventually and to let go of his bad mood—we're at a party, after all. And we tell our children—and sometimes also adults—that they should be ashamed of what we consider gross misbehavior.

Although the challenging of others' emotions in personal relationships and the contestation of emotions in political conflict share a range of common principles and raise numerous questions for the science of emotion, there are important differences. In political contexts, contested emotions are closely tied to a broader ongoing conflict and disputed issue and are often being linked to moral standards and integrity. They involve groups that are invested in a disputed issue, and therefore, the emotions that become the targets of contestations are often *political* emotions, embodying some degree of groupness, collectivity, and social identity (Szanto & Slaby, 2020).

Why should we care about contested emotions? There are at least two reasons: first, the contestation of an emotion will almost certainly lead to changes in this emotion; it may alter its meaning and initiate processes of emotion management and regulation, but it can also be defended or shielded from attempts at contestation. In any case, contestation is likely to affect how people experience, express, and articulate their emotions. The second reason is that the challenging and criticizing of someone's emotions—in the context of political conflict, but also in social relationships—can be experienced as a fundamental and painful attack on the individual or collective self. This is because we typically cannot change our feelings and emotions toward a particular object or person in the same way as we can change beliefs and convictions.

Different from most beliefs, the ways in which we feel toward the world are not at our full disposal, because they are deeply embodied and internalized during socialization. Admittedly, we can regulate and alter our emotions to some degree, but the very purpose of emotions is that they, at least to some extent, "control" *us* (in the sense of prompting verbal and non-verbal behavior and making certain courses of action more likely than others). If someone questions my belief that nuclear energy is a sustainable technology and provides ample evidence to the contrary, I might be reluctant at first, but may ultimately decide to change my belief. If, however, someone criticizes and maybe even ridicules my fear over nuclear energy, I will almost certainly interpret this as an attack on who I am, on my self and my identity, as an individual and as a member of a social or political group. It is clear, then, that contesting emotions can substantially affect the course of conflict and the ways we feel.

Grounds of Contestation

The concept of *contested emotions* proposes that emotions, much like beliefs, opinions, or attitudes, are frequent issues of contestation. Contestation means that emotions are challenged, questioned, disputed, and criticized by others. This can pertain, quite generically,

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to particular emotions, for example, anger, joy, guilt, pride, or shame, to their intensity, or to specific components of an emotion, for instance, a subjective feeling, a facial or vocal expression, a linguistic articulation, or a cognitive appraisal. Contestations can be direct, when targeting an emotion or a component of an emotion, but they can also be indirect by questioning or criticizing, in a more abstract fashion, certain norms, rules, and practices related to emotions or entire emotion regimes (see the upcoming section).

But what are the grounds on which emotions are contested? Why, and regarding which criteria, do people think that others' emotions are "right" or "wrong," "appropriate" or "inappropriate," "adequate" or "inadequate"? In the following, I will discuss three ideal types of grounds on which emotions can be challenged and criticized, and I call these the *formal*, *social*, and *cultural* grounds of the appropriateness of emotions. These are different from, but overlapping with, the forms of appropriateness discussed by D'Arms and Jacobson (2023) and the specific standards of appropriateness for political emotions developed by Szanto and Tietjen (in press, 2025). My distinction is primarily an analytical one, a heuristic tool, and most empirical cases of contested emotions will refer to multiple or overlapping grounds.

Formal Appropriateness

Discussions about the formal appropriateness of emotions are well established in the philosophy of emotion. Basically, this type of appropriateness is fixated on the target object of an emotion and requires a particular (lay as well as theoretical) understanding of emotions. This understanding broadly assumes that emotions have an intentional structure and represent evaluative relationships with the world. Prototypical evaluative relations are considered the *formal* objects of emotions, embodying specific evaluative properties: imminent danger in the case of fear, mistreatment as the cause of indignation, or loss in the case of grief (e.g., Teroni, 2007). In contrast to these formal objects, the intentional (or target) objects of emotions are those acts, objects, events, or individuals at which a particular emotion is directed in a specific case, for example, my anger at the driver of a car who is blocking my path as a cyclist (see also the discussion by Szanto and Tietjen [in press, 2025], for the case of political emotions).

Given that emotions embody the evaluative properties of objects (or persons, events, etc.), that is, the properties that make these objects appear good or bad, desirable or undesirable, likable or despicable to us, we can raise the question of the formal appropriateness of a particular emotion—and we can contest an emotion on these grounds. For example, the formal object of guilt is a wrongdoing for which I am (at least partly) responsible. If, however, I experience guilt in view of a wrongdoing for which I cannot be held responsible, this guilt is inappropriate and can thus be criticized or disputed. This type of appropriateness is sometimes also referred to as the "fittingness" of an emotion (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2023). Hence, emotions can meaningfully be judged over whether they "correctly" instantiate the evaluative properties of a given target object, based on a consensus in emotion theory regarding the formal objects of emotions. This consensus, however, is likely to shift with the very meanings of discrete emotion concepts (e.g., shame, guilt, anger) across time and culture.

In many cases, these evaluative properties can be clearly determined—for example, a thunderstorm posing a danger to a group of hikers, or a hideous crime that has been committed

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by a clearly identified perpetrator on willful intent. Hence, I can easily criticize my son's fear of a harmless spider because the spider does not constitute a danger. I can meaningfully question a friend's shame because her behavior, by any standards, has in no way put her in a bad light in the eyes of others. Criticizing or questioning someone's emotions when the evaluative properties of the target object are commonly accepted and undisputed will thus typically amount to a critique of the *beliefs* about the target object underlying the emotion in question. Hence, I am not actually criticizing my son's fear, but I am criticizing his belief that the spider is dangerous. This would constitute a *weak* form of emotional contestation, because it targets more a belief than the emotion. I might, however, specifically criticize his fear as being recalcitrant, irrational, and even pathological. This, I suggest, is a *strong* and usually invective form of emotional contestation because it targets the entire person and how it relates, in feeling, to the world.

In many political arenas, the evaluative properties of the things at stake are usually difficult to determine; they are *in themselves* matters of debate and contestation. Whether immigration is more of a cultural challenge or more of an economic requirement for industrialized societies is a hotly debated issue. The threat posed by the SARS-CoV-2 virus has been a matter of ongoing debate, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. And the impact of climate change is likewise a matter of ongoing debate. Because the evaluative properties of things that are at stake in the political arena are hardly ever consensual, it becomes almost impossible to clearly establish the formal appropriateness of a particular emotion in these contexts. Why, then, do people engage in contesting others' emotions in these cases, and is this at all meaningful? One answer is that emotions tend to work as *discursive shortcuts* (much like hashtags) for complex matters that are difficult to appraise. Instead of engaging in the often arduous work of reconstructing and understanding one's own and others' deliberative and normative stances on an issue (and their reasons), one resorts to assessments of emotions: if you don't feel like I do with regard to this or that issue, you are getting it plainly wrong, have entirely different goals and desires, or have different ethical and moral values, all of which provide reasons for critique and contestation. And because emotions tend to *embody* the evaluative properties of, say, welfare benefits or immigration, they act like a political gyroscope. The fuzziness of the evaluative properties of these kinds of targets, on the one hand, makes criticizing emotions on formal grounds an intricate and complex, sometimes even a futile endeavor. On the other hand, individual as well as collective emotions in these arenas are often seen as not just representing some externally established evaluative property, but as actively constituting this property. Then, the entire person or social group and their emotional compass come under scrutiny and can be questioned and contested, which is likely to add heat to an ongoing conflict.

Social Appropriateness

In addition to formal appropriateness, we can contest emotions on the grounds of their *social* appropriateness. That is, we assess emotions not only with respect to their fittingness, but also regarding the question of whether they are socially appropriate or suitable to a particular situation. Whether an emotion is socially appropriate is not determined by the (conventional) association between an emotion concept and the evaluative properties of a target object, but rather by judgments of the self and others in light of applicable norms, rules, and expectations governing a particular situation. These standards can be personal, for example,

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when it comes to impression management and the presentation of self (Goffman), but they are mostly social, as we are adapting our emotions, in particular our emotional expressions, to the expectations of others. Research has coined the term "feeling rules" to refer to social norms that specifically govern the experience and expression of emotions, specifying what is emotionally appropriate, correct, and expected in certain situations (Hochschild, 2012).

Feeling rules have different scopes and categories of addressees, which are immediately relevant for contested emotions. Some feeling rules pertain to clearly defined social contexts and addressees, such as norms of emotional expression in some service sector jobs. The scope of other norms is fuzzier and includes broader categories of individuals (for instance, defined by gender, kinship, or social status) and a wider array of social situations. Crossing the border to moral and ethical norms, some emotion norms are independent of specific contexts and situations and might simply proscribe ways of feeling that are considered virtuous or vicious.

Whereas formal appropriateness is rooted in the correspondence of formal object, target object, and emotion, the criteria for social appropriateness are more varied, and so are contestations of emotions. I might criticize a friend for his lack of empathy and awareness in an encounter with a member of a minority group, because this is what is commonly expected or because of underlying moral and ethical concerns. I might also criticize others for their lack of outrage and indignation in view of misguided political developments, as Stéphane Hessel (2010) has done in his popular essay *Indignez-vous!,* implying that these emotions are the appropriate ones to feel because they prompt resistance and mobilization. Importantly, a particular emotion can be formally appropriate, but is considered socially inappropriate, as is the case with many negative group-based emotions targeted at minorities or disadvantaged groups.

In principle, feeling rules are thoroughly *political* things that only rarely emerge by accident. Instead, individual or collective actors often have strong incentives to implement emotion norms or entire "emotional regimes" (Reddy, 2001) that serve their interests, in politics, religion, or the economy. An individual's or a group's emotions can be criticized, and even be sanctioned, because they are deemed to violate prevailing emotion norms. Actions that attack a prevailing emotional regime or seek to abolish specific emotion norms also count as instances of emotional contestations—for example, feminist struggles targeting victim shame in the wake of sexual abuse.

Cultural Appropriateness

The cultural appropriateness of emotions makes up the third ground on which emotions can be contested. While feeling rules specify which emotions to show or feel in a particular situation, cultural ideals of "good" and "right," "bad" and "wrong" emotions and their associated social expectations (sometimes also referred to as *emotion norms*) are notably more generic and not tied to specific situations. In this sense, there is a clear parallel to the distinction between values (or value systems, value orientations) and social norms commonly drawn in the social sciences.

The idea that emotions can be culturally appropriate or inappropriate rests on the observation that most emotions are, in historical perspective, more or less *en vogue*, are at the center of public attention or remain invisible, and are more or less important for social affairs (Frevert, 2013). This cultural attention to specific emotions, some being "all over the place" and others remaining hidden and unacknowledged, usually goes along with strong evaluative judgments of these emotions. Culture contributes to our understanding of which

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emotions are considered good or bad, vicious or virtuous. This is probably most evident and comprehensive in religious doctrines, with guilt, for example, assuming a prominent role in Christian cultures. Virtue ethics suggests that one should strive for modest intensities in emotions rather than for the extremes. Moreover, cultures differ significantly in view of the emotions they deem important for social life, for instance, shame being a prominent and much-required emotion in some cultures while remaining an unacknowledged and repressed emotion in others (e.g., Scheff, 2003).

The criteria for this form of appropriateness are thus primarily based on normative *ideals* of emotions, which are part of the prevailing emotional culture or style (Illouz, 2008) of a society and against which occurring emotions are constantly evaluated and judged. These ideals, and therefore the cultural appropriateness of emotions, vary across historical periods and cultures, as well as across social fields, milieus, and institutions within societies. Different social and cultural contexts determine how value and attention are allotted to different emotions, for example, in politics (anger, rage), in social relationships (mindfulness, body shame), or in personality development (empathy, sensitivity).

This evaluative cultural centering (or de-centering) of emotions includes their representation and discussion in public discourse, media, arts, and literature, as well as various rituals and practices revolving around these emotions (e.g., religion, sports, family). Cultural practices embody shared, conventional, and commonly expected forms of behavior in society. Because emotions are integral parts of many cultural practices, they also offer reasons for establishing the appropriateness of emotions. When cultural practices are challenged or come into conflict with each other (think about religious practices or modes of travel), it is likely that their emotional dimensions also become issues of contestation.

Some examples will help illustrate the contestation of emotions based on considerations of their cultural appropriateness. Although anger and rage (or any other emotions, for that matter) have, for a long time, been considered inappropriate in public debates about social issues (following a Habermasian ideal), they are being rehabilitated as adequate and much-needed ways of expression, especially in feminist and antiracist struggles. This is evident in a piece Myisha Cherry (2020), a philosopher at UC Riverside, wrote for *The Atlantic* on the Black Lives Matter protests, titled "Anger Can Build a Better World." The article contests the policing of anger and its understanding as "antithetical to love," instead positioning it as an expression of "compassion for the downtrodden and the desire for a better world." A second example is "female rage," which, at least since Audrey Lorde's (1981) *The Uses of Anger*, has occupied a central place in conflicts regarding gender equality and feminist claims. As acts against the social control of female anger in response to suppression and discrimination, calls for its rehabilitation have been published widely in academic and non-academic outlets. They have recently also entered, in commodified form, popular culture with Taylor Swift's attempt at trademarking "Female Rage: The Musical" (*Direct a Film or Female Rage*, 2024). A final example is epitomized by the phrase "owning the libs,"[3] which refers to practices of the U.S. far right and conservatives to elicit strong and aversive emotional reactions among liberals, for instance "rolling coal" (e.g., Marcotte, 2018). Here, the deliberate "triggering" of certain emotional sensibilities—often accompanied by a "fuck your feelings" slogan—can be interpreted as an emotional "enactment" of affective polarization (e.g., von Scheve, 2024). It is a form of contesting alleged liberal emotion norms that demand awareness, mindfulness, and attention to other people's sensitivities, often as part of a broader regime of "political correctness."

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Conditions of Contestation

One intriguing question is why individuals or groups would contest others' emotions in the first place. The different forms of appropriateness provide several reasons, but underlying these reasons is the more basic assumption that people can somehow respond to these contestations, in particular by *changing* their emotions to make them more appropriate, based on insight, persuasion, coercion, and the like. Traditional as well as most scientific views, however, assume that emotions do not come with infinite degrees of freedom. This means that we are not typically "choosing" our emotions as we choose between chocolate bars or political parties. Emotions, different from many verbal and non-verbal behaviors, are not entirely at our disposal; they often arise involuntarily, even against our will, and we often passively endure our emotions. Arguably, we can regulate and control our emotions to some degree, but their inaccessibility is a vital feature. Why, then, would we harbor the idea of contesting others' emotions?

The viability of the concept of contested emotions relies on three broader socio-historical developments that have gradually changed everyday conceptions of emotions. They have contributed to the emergence of an understanding of emotions as a faculty that is under our immediate voluntary control, a capacity that can be put to use to serve our (or other people's) goals and interests. I will briefly summarize these developments that can be categorized under labels of work and employment, self-optimization, and emotional reflexivity. As Arlie Hochschild (2012) and Eva Illouz (2008) have argued, workplaces since the 1950s have seen a continuous shift in the valuation of human emotions as resources that can be exploited to serve corporate goals, at all levels of a corporate hierarchy. This shift is paralleled by the idea that emotions can in fact be managed, controlled, and regulated, and this includes both self-regulation and regulation induced by third parties (e.g., management, superiors, corporate culture). The second notable development concerns the advent of a "therapeutic culture" (Illouz, 2008) that frames the self (and its emotions) as perpetually vulnerable and in need of healing and improvement. The therapeutic culture is joined by a new spirit of capitalism that emphasizes the instrumental *optimization* of the self, including its emotions, to live up to the demands of "neoliberal" work (Neckel, 2005). Both therapeutic culture and self-optimization have significantly contributed to an image of emotions as experiences that can be controlled, curated, and configured. Finally, and certainly a consequence of these developments, contemporary societies see unprecedented levels of (→ *Emotional Reflexivity*). In a nutshell, this means that societies have become preoccupied with emotions and devote a substantial amount of citizens' attention to their own and others' individual and collective emotions. This is evident, for example, in the surge of references to emotion in politics and the economy, various indicators to diagnose emotions at these levels (e.g., affective polarization, market sentiment), and, last but not least, in the scientific attention paid to the emotions. This attention to emotions is a precondition for the judgment and evaluation of emotions against the different criteria of appropriateness and thus for their contestation.

Outlook

Contested emotions become integral parts of social conflicts in various ways and for various reasons. In this way, contestations shape emotions as well as the conflicts to which they are attached. To prevent misunderstanding, the concept of contested emotions does not

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imply that there are conflicts that are somehow void of affect and emotion. It rather states that in some conflicts, emotions become, in a reflexive and discursive way, conflictual issues in themselves. This prompts several yet unresolved questions that I cannot address here but that should be at the center of attention of future research. The observation that emotions become contested issues in social conflicts is likely to be related to the acknowledgment of feelings as justifications for actions and as premises in argumentation. Institutionalized programs of awareness and mindfulness, for example, tend to give priority to mere *feelings* of offense and injury as justifications for sanctions, in particular, social exclusion. This, evidently, paves the way for contesting these feelings. The entanglement of social conflict and emotions, at various levels, also provokes the question of whether and how democratic societies need to provide adequate and legitimate spaces for the expression, contestation, and negotiation of emotions. As of now, these spaces are absent because the guardians of public discourse and political debate seem overly optimistic regarding the ideal of a "rational" public sphere. Finally, the question arises of what the contestation of emotions means for the associated conflicts and the underlying issues that are at stake. One might be tempted to assume that emotions distract parties from the actual issue, constituting a convenient but ineffective strawman debate. This, however, is a short-sighted view because it is our emotions that imbue issues with evaluative qualities—making them worthy of debate in the first place.

Notes

1 Author's own back-translation.
2 Author's own translation.
3 I owe this example to Philipp Wunderlich.

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4

EMOTIONAL POLITICS

Jonas Harbke, Simon Koschut, Julia Mehlmann, and Gabriela Pancheva

This chapter introduces the concept of emotional politics, emphasizing how emotions are used in political discourse to mobilize support, shape perceptions, and influence decision-making through emotional campaigning, polarization, and governance. Emotional campaigning shapes public discourse and electoral outcomes by evoking emotions like fear or empathy. It relies on personalization, storytelling, and influencers. Emotional polarization constructs and exploits political divides to consolidate support, weaponizing fear and anger, and cultivating group identity. Emotional governance manages emotions to exercise power and control, with leaders influencing public sentiment and activists challenging norms. Overall, emotional politics explains how emotions underpin various political processes.

Emotions in Politics

The intersection of emotions and politics has garnered increasing scholarly attention, with recent studies emphasizing its multifaceted dimensions. Three key approaches provide a framework for understanding the interplay between emotions and political life: the *politics of emotion*, *political emotion*, and *emotional politics*. Each offers unique insights into how emotions operate within political contexts, revealing their distributive, designated, and deliberative roles.

The *politics of emotion* examines the distributive dynamics of emotional recognition, focusing on the normative structures that determine who is permitted or encouraged to feel certain emotions, under which conditions, and at what times. Karl Gustafsson and Todd Hall (2021) emphasize this dimension in their work, analyzing how emotions are unequally distributed across political landscapes. Their distributive approach highlights whose feelings matter in political settings, often reinforcing existing power structures and preserving the status quo. While this perspective underscores the exclusionary nature of emotional recognition, it frequently neglects the transformative and deliberative potential of emotions in driving political discourse and change.

By contrast, the concept of *political emotion* focuses on the designation of specific emotions to particular political systems or ideologies. Martha Nussbaum's *Political Emotions*

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(2013) exemplifies this approach, advocating for the cultivation of emotions like compassion and hope to strengthen democratic citizenship. However, this perspective has been critiqued for its limited attention to structural inequalities and the role of emotions in challenging and resisting injustice (Ebner-Landy, 2023). By framing emotions as tools for enhancing democratic values, it risks sidelining their disruptive and emancipatory capacities.

We introduce the concept of *emotional politics*, adding a deliberative dimension by emphasizing how emotions are strategically deployed in political discourse to mobilize support, shape perceptions, and influence decision-making. This approach broadens the scope of studying emotions in politics, shifting from their distributive allocation or designated function to the deliberative articulation of emotions. Precisely, it explores how emotions shape public opinion or frame policies (Brader & Marcus, 2013; Hunter, 2015; Verbalyte et al., 2022). Furthermore, it studies how emotions are instrumentalized by political actors to construct ideologies, identities, and belongings (Bilgic & Gkouti, 2021; Goodwin et al., 2001; Illouz, 2023). By bridging existing research strands and focusing on the active role of emotions in shaping political outcomes, the concept of emotional politics offers a more nuanced understanding of the reciprocal relationship between affect and governance. This perspective not only deepens our grasp of emotions' role in politics but also demonstrates their capacity to foster both resilience and manipulation.

Emotional Politics and Its Dimensions

In this section, we develop a conceptual framework for this phenomenon. Specifically, we argue that emotional politics operates through three dimensions: *emotional campaigning*, *emotional polarization*, and *emotional governance*. Each dimension involves distinct goals, tools, and strategies.

Emotional campaigning, the first dimension, involves political actors using emotions to shape public discourse, mobilize support, and influence electoral outcomes. Political messages are crafted to evoke specific emotional responses, drawing on emotions like fear, hope, anger, and sympathy. Emotive storytelling, vivid imagery, and persuasive rhetoric help forge deep connections with voters. Visionary emotional politics, such as Barack Obama's 2008 campaign slogan "Yes We Can," evoke hope and aspiration, mobilizing support for transformative leadership. Nelson Mandela's vision for a post-apartheid South Africa similarly inspired hope and unity, demonstrating the power of emotional campaigning in overcoming adversity. One prominent method is through scandalization or moral shocks, where events or images trigger strong emotional reactions and mobilize collective action (Jasper, 2011). For instance, the image of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler who drowned while fleeing to Europe, elicited global sympathy and temporarily shifted the discourse around refugee policies (Adler-Nissen et al., 2020). Similarly, scandals involving child labor in supply chains have mobilized transnational protests against systemic racism and corporate accountability (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2022).

Personalization and storytelling also play crucial roles. Activists and politicians share personal anecdotes to humanize political issues and generate empathy. For example, civil rights leaders like Malala Yousafzai used her personal story of surviving a Taliban attack to connect emotionally with audiences, galvanizing support for girls' right to education. Holocaust survivor testimonies similarly stir sorrow and outrage, promoting empathy and commitment to remembrance. Emotional campaigning can also involve borrowing emotional

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attachment from significant figures like celebrities and influencers. In that sense, environmental campaigns often enlist figures like Leonardo DiCaprio to amplify messages and stimulate emotions supporting conservation efforts. In a similar fashion, social media influencers, by sharing personal struggles with mental health, help destigmatize these issues and mobilize support for mental wellness.

Emotional polarization, the second dimension, involves exploiting emotional divides to consolidate support and delegitimize opposition. Emotional polarization is about how emotional articulations amplify around particular issues.[1] It refers to the intensification of emotional expressions—such as anger or fear—toward specific political or social issues, events, or groups, emphasizing emotional reactions to contexts (→ *Emotional Reflexivity*). Political actors weaponize emotions such as fear, anger, and resentment to heighten societal divisions and cultivate an us-versus-them mentality (Goodwin et al., 2001; Gould, 2004). Scare tactics are a potent tool in this arena. Politicians may highlight potential threats to galvanize public opinion on issues like national security or economic instability. For example, post-9/11 fear was used to justify the Iraq invasion and controversial security measures (Hall & Ross, 2015). Populist movements have also exploited economic fears to promote anti-globalization and protectionist policies (Doerr et al., 2013). Emotional polarization can sometimes strengthen social cohesion within political communities, fostering a sense of collective identity and shared purpose (→ *Affective Mobilization*). Charging moral batteries through ritualized events generates emotional energy and establishes moral boundaries (Collins, 2004). Thus, political rallies and demonstrations evoke emotions of solidarity among supporters, encouraging unity and commitment. Nationalist movements, through rituals like flag-raising ceremonies, strengthen group cohesion and amplify us-versus-them dynamics.

Emotional governance, the third dimension, involves managing institutional emotion repertoires and feeling rules to exercise power and control (Richards, 2007; von Poser et al., 2019). Emotional governance refers to the strategic use of emotions by political leaders and institutions to shape public attitudes, influence decision-making, and guide societal behavior. It involves the manipulation or cultivation of specific emotions, such as fear, hope, or anger, to achieve political goals and maintain social order. Political leaders deploy emotions to influence public sentiment, shape behavior, and legitimize authority, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kinnvall, 2023). To navigate the pandemic, states constructed context-specific strategies and narratives to cater to people's need for relief and redemption in the face of the anxiety and fear of the global health crisis (Kinnvall, 2023, p. 157). This atmosphere of uncertainty and necessity for institutional actions to address the crisis (and the failure thereof) has proven to be favorable for populists to question "science, institutions, experts, and governments—vis-à-vis the virus" (Resende, 2021, p. 151). In this process, "corona-nationalism" emerged as an imaginary anxiety-reducing response, where borders and nations played the role of protection against the disease, thus reinforcing us-versus-them attitudes. For instance, in the US, Latinos were pointed out as carriers of the disease, while a high number of anti-Asian hate incidents were also recorded. In Europe, Roma and migrants in general were the scapegoats for the spread of the disease (Kinnvall, 2023, p. 159).

While political leaders have mobilized emotions to reinforce certain nationalistic, exclusionary agendas during times of crisis, contests over feeling rules and emotion repertoires often arise from groups or individuals from the political margins as well (Koschut, 2019).

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One such group is FEMEN, whose topless protests challenge gendered feeling rules and draw attention to gender inequality and violence against women. Under the movement's slogan "My Body Is My Weapon!" the activists from FEMEN carry out street activism related to various political issues by writing messages on their bare chests and backs, such as "Stop War on Women" (FEMEN, 2024) and "Heil Weidel" (FEMEN, 2025). FEMEN activists challenge gendered feeling rules, defined as "rules about the verbal and non-verbal expression of appropriate emotions in a given situation" (Koschut, 2020, p. 14). They do this by disrupting the taboo of women showing their bare chests in public spaces, a taboo linked to feelings of shame, societal expectations and norms of female modesty, sexuality and morality, and varying legal barriers across the world. Beyond the individual actions FEMEN activists undertake on different topics, their choice of instrument of action, specifically their naked upper bodies, immediately contests the gendered double standard. Men in European and Western societies, for the most part, can walk around bare-chested without fear of legal repercussions and/or sexual harassment, in contrast to women.[2]

Conversely, silent consent can perpetuate harmful power dynamics by stifling dissent. In authoritarian regimes, the absence of vocal opposition may signal compliance. In democratic contexts, silence in the face of hate speech can normalize illiberal agendas. The German far-right party AfD's challenge to Holocaust remembrance norms exemplifies this. Emotional governance includes redirecting emotions and emotional empowerment to enable stigmatized groups to reclaim agency (van Troost et al., 2013). The LGBTQ+ community's transformation of shame into pride and the Women's Movements' collective healing processes are examples. Support groups for survivors of gender-based violence foster solidarity and empowerment, promoting social change.

In sum, the three dimensions of emotional politics—campaigning, polarization, and governance—demonstrate how emotions are strategically harnessed to shape public discourse, consolidate support through societal divisions, and manage power dynamics, ultimately influencing political outcomes and social change. The following case vignette exemplifies the concept of emotional politics, demonstrating how emotions are strategically used to critique and influence public perception of EU migration policies, mobilizing outrage and solidarity through powerful visual and emotional contrasts. Illustrating all three dimensions of emotion in politics, the case vignette explores how emotions are strategically mobilized during electoral campaigns, how they contribute to deepening political divides, and how they influence decision-making and governance practices.

Case Vignette

In March 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) launched a handwashing challenge named #SafeHands, as a part of the measures recommended for fighting the COVID-19 pandemic (World Health Organization, n.d.). The European Commission (EC) joined the challenge by sharing a video of President Ursula von der Leyen demonstrating proper hand hygiene in a sterile-looking washroom, as recommended by the WHO. She carefully soaps her hands, distributing the foaming cleanser multiple times between her hands and fingers for 30 seconds, before rinsing off the foam thoroughly, drying her hands with paper towels, and then holding them up in front of the camera. In the end of the clip, the message "Save Lives. Clean Your Hands" appears on the top of the screen. The video contains no speaking,

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but it is dubbed with the humming of the "Ode to Joy," EU's anthem (European Commission, 2020).

In April 2020, the non-governmental organization (NGO) Sea-Watch circulated a video collage on social media titled "Don't wash your hands of [*sic*] responsibility" (Sea-Watch, 2020a) presenting von der Leyen's video on the left and footage depicting people attempting to wash their hands in the refugee camp in Mória, Greece, on the right side of the screen. Sea-Watch is a German NGO conducting civilian search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean, as well as documenting and exposing human rights violations. The organization was founded in 2014 "by a group of volunteers who could no longer stand idly by and watch the politically calculated deaths in the Mediterranean" (Sea-Watch, 2024). Sea-Watch advocates for "solidarity without borders" and collaborates with other NGOs and civil society groups to strengthen solidarity networks (Sea-Watch, 2024). In the video from Mória, one sees several individuals turn on various makeshift water taps lined up in a row, but no water flows from any of them. The wash troughs appear dirty, and in some cases, there are no basins, requiring people to squat on the ground to reach the taps. A young man with a hood, squatting in front of a tap, looks directly into the camera and says: "How are we supposed to wash our hands for 30 seconds if there is no water?" In the final scene, a child is shown with someone pouring water from a plastic bottle over their previously soaped hands. Throughout the whole video collage, the melody of "Ode to Joy" is hummed, and the text "Leavenoonebehind2020.org" is displayed (Sea-Watch, 2020a).

This example illustrates how political activists might question the emotional needs and sincerity of others. Sea-Watch's response to the EC's appeal for #SafeHands positions the moral stance of the EU in stark comparison to the reality of the living conditions of refugees in Mória. Thus, they sharply criticize the validity and applicability of this seemingly simple rule of how one should wash their hands properly. Furthermore, Sea-Watch reveals the implications of EU policy toward refugees and what conditions it produces, thereby evoking feelings of outrage and anger toward the EU. The apparent contrast constitutes an example of emotional polarization. It illustrates the privileged position of EU officials, as opposed to the inhuman conditions of the refugees' lives. The audiovisual presentation seems jarring and provocative, especially having the "Ode to Joy" as an audio accompaniment. The anthem of the EU, played at official institutional events, generally evokes emotions of pride, joy, and hope, emphasizing unity, celebration, and solidarity with the EU member states. However, in this case, "Ode to Joy" plays over footage depicting the miserable conditions of people living in Europe's largest refugee camp in Greece, an EU member state. This discrepancy between the symbolic message of the anthem and the harsh reality faced by refugees contributes to the emotional polarization on the topic of EU migration policy. By disseminating the video collage, Sea-Watch delegitimized the universality of EU values, thus consolidating the criticism and political stance of leftist organizations against EU political elites and migration policy.

Moreover, the case exemplifies emotional governance as leftist groups contest the official emotion repertoires and feeling rules toward refugees of the EU. Already in response to the increase in refugee movements to Europe in 2015, then-European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker emphasized the EU's self-image as a "community of solidarity." Member states were urged to show compassion for refugees fleeing war and displacement, who saw Europe as a "beacon of hope" (European Commission, 2015). Ursula von der Leyen's statements following her visit to the Greek-Turkish border in March 2020 built upon this

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same emotion repertoire, as she expressed her sympathy for migrants (Europäische Kommission, 2020). At the same time, however, she also underscored the priority of "maintaining order at our external borders"[3] (Europäische Kommission, 2020), thereby legitimizing political measures such as the controversial pushbacks against refugees at the EU's external borders carried out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex. It is precisely this ambivalence between the declarations of solidarity on the one hand and the implementation of policies that result in human rights violations on the other—whether through the use of force at the EU's borders or the critical humanitarian conditions in Mória—that activist groups like Sea-Watch criticize. In their understanding, leftist activist groups try to debunk the EU's double standard in migration issues.

Finally, we can see emotional campaigning. On April 23, 2020, Sea-Watch shared another video on Twitter/X (Sea-Watch, 2020b) that had originally been posted by Leftvision, a volunteer-based media collective reporting on protests and movements. The video, created in collaboration with Sea-Watch and Leftvision, documents a protest by the African community in the Mória refugee camp. The footage shows protesters carrying banners with slogans such as "Freedom for all. We are exposed to Covid-19," "Stop racism," and "The world abandoned us." The march is accompanied by police, with sirens audible in the background. In its tweet, Sea-Watch stated: "Protest by the African community in #Moria, #Lesbos—not only against the internment and the miserable hygienic conditions in the overcrowded camp, but also against the racism they experience. We continue to demand: Evacuation now—#LeaveNoOneBehind!"[4] (Sea-Watch, 2020b). Activists emphasized that the responsibility for the critical situation in Mória lies not with the refugees, but with the EU, which has failed to implement a fair and humane migration policy. In addition, demonstrations in numerous European cities pointed to the inhumane conditions in the camps and called for more solidarity and humanity. The activists aim at mobilizing support through scandalization, personalization, and the evocation of emotions like indignation and anger.

Conclusion

Emotions in politics have always been present, and their intersection has been illuminated by conceptual approaches such as *politics of emotion*, *political emotion*, and *emotional politics*. These provide insights into the different roles emotions play in political contexts—distributive, designated, and deliberative. In this chapter, we develop a conceptual framework for *emotional politics* to highlight the deliberative articulation of emotions in politics. By breaking down emotional politics into three dimensions—emotional campaigning, polarization, and governance—we show how emotions are used by political actors to construct ideologies, identities, and belongings.

Emotional campaigning, the first dimension, constitutes the use of emotions to shape public discourse, mobilize support, and influence electoral outcomes. This is achieved by harnessing emotions like hope, fear, sympathy, and anger through various strategies, including political messaging, scandalization, moral shocks, personalization, storytelling, and borrowing emotional attachment from renowned entertainment figures. Emotional polarization, the second dimension, entails the exploitation of emotional divides to strengthen support and delegitimize opposition. Here, political actors weaponize fear, anger, and resentment to increase the divide between opposing groups, thus fostering an us-versus-them mentality. Emotional governance, the third dimension, involves the management of

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emotion repertoires and feeling rules to exercise power and control. In this dimension, fear, hope, anger, and so on are manipulated and cultivated for political aims.

Throughout the chapter, these three dimensions have been illustrated with various examples, including the 2020 video collage circulated by Sea-Watch. This video juxtaposes the lives of EC President Ursula von der Leyen and refugees in Mória, emphasizing the difference in living conditions exacerbated by COVID-19. Through the lens, Sea-Watch elicits anger and disappointment toward the EU, thus further polarizing the debate on EU migration policy. Furthermore, leftist activist groups contest EU feeling rules and emotion repertoire by questioning the official positions of Ursula von der Leyen, in which she shares sympathy with refugees, and exposing the actual conditions in refugee camps. Lastly, emotional campaigning by Sea-Watch can be observed in a Twitter/X post, where they show a protest by the African community in the Mória refugee camp. Protestors remind us of the fact that they are being exposed to COVID-19, too, and that the world has abandoned them. Thus, activists mobilized support through scandalization, personalization, and the evocation of emotions like indignation and anger. People went out on the streets to protest the insufficiency of EU migration policy and the inhumane treatment and conditions in refugee camps.

An integrative understanding of emotional politics requires recognizing the dynamic interplay between its three core dimensions—emotional campaigning, emotional polarization, and emotional governance. These are not isolated mechanisms, but mutually reinforcing processes that co-constitute the emotional fabric of political life. Emotional campaigning often sets the tone by introducing emotive narratives and symbolic figures that resonate with public sentiment, laying the groundwork for emotional polarization. Once emotional divisions take root, polarization deepens affective boundaries between political groups, creating fertile ground for political actors to govern emotions more strategically—either by amplifying divisions to consolidate power or by managing emotional climates to restore a sense of order and legitimacy. In turn, emotional governance feeds back into campaigning and polarization by shaping the emotional rules of engagement, determining which emotions are amplified, moderated, or delegitimized in the public sphere. Theoretically, this triadic relationship highlights how emotional politics functions as a recursive process: campaigns mobilize emotion, polarization channels it, and governance institutionalizes it. In practice, this dynamic explains how emotions shape not only political discourse but also the long-term trajectories of political institutions and international alignments.

These insights highlight that emotional politics is inherently shaped by cultural and contextual factors. While our analysis focused on a leftist NGO based in Germany to illustrate the three dimensions at play, we see significant value in applying this framework to a broader range of social and political phenomena—across the political spectrum and in diverse temporal and spatial contexts. Furthermore, exploring the gendered aspects of emotional politics offers a promising avenue for further research. For instance, how do gendered stereotypes and power hierarchies influence the expression and perception of emotional politics?

Notes

1 By contrast, affective polarization refers to the deepening emotional divide between social and political groups, often manifesting as distrust or hostility toward the perceived outgroup (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023). Whereas the former is issue-centered, the latter is rooted in antagonistic, identity-based distinctions between groups.

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2 The terms "men" and "women" are used here in a generalized way, which may oversimplify the diverse experiences of gender-nonconforming, non-binary, and transgender individuals. The gendered double standard in public decency and clothing laws and societal perceptions of nudity can affect people differently depending on their gender identity and presentation.
3 Translated by the authors.
4 Translated by the authors.

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5

OUTRAGE POLITICS

Michal Givoni

With the growth of social media, outrage has become one of the most ubiquitous and controversial elements of our affective repertoire. In recent years, numerous observers have documented the rise of "outrage culture" (Turner, 2014), "outrage society" (Han, 2017, pp. 7–8), and "outrage rhetoric" (Rice, 2023), as well as the havoc they wreck on democratic culture. In both academic research and popular writing, outrage is identified as the dubious factor behind political polarization and the corruption of public debate and as one of the most destructive products of communicative capitalism. Its proliferation across the political spectrum crystallizes concerns on politics' drift toward the affective (→ *Emotional Politics*) from two opposing ends, as outrage is considered either a reiterative, programmed, and ultimately meaningless gesture or a ruthless, vengeful, and all-too-personal attack. However, the growth of outrage and its political repercussions remain poorly understood as long as it is perceived as a mere aberration of politics as it should be. Outrage, as this chapter argues, is the overarching tone of a political form that is affiliated and entangled with respectable practices of critique and protest and has distinctive roots, tropes, and rationalities. On the most elementary level, "outrage politics" denotes a disposition in which political action is channeled to rival performances of blame and framed by an affectivity that is divisive and mimetic at once. It designates a sprawling domain of public exchange in which furious, openly selective, and often personality-based condemnations and counterattacks are intertwined with another and more principled debate over the propriety of the means of critique and their affective and rhetorical limits. Outrage politics is recognized by its exhausting and endless cycles of anger and recrimination. At the same time, it also encompasses the problematization and regulation of these seemingly impulsive performances and their cultivation and mindful embrace.

The point of departure for the following analysis is the growing mobilization of outrage as a tool of public communication and the ineluctable, if not imperative, status it has attained in public life. This trend has reached a particularly troubling peak with the frenzied responses to the Hamas-led massacre of October 7th and Israel's brutal war in Gaza, which accentuated the appeal of outrage politics but also its failure to make any meaningful political difference. The debates on the war in Israel-Palestine exemplify the main premise of this chapter:

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that the mighty indignations of outrage politics are an inverted expression of political impotence and ultimately stem from obstructed, rather than vitalizing, feelings. In what follows I develop this argument by combining conceptual, discursive, and genealogical modes of inquiry that put forth a multifaceted and intentionally ambivalent portrait of the expressions and problematizations of outrage in politics. My aim is to present a heuristic for probing affects of protest and critique more generally and trace an analytic path that underscores their fundamental ambiguity (→ *Affects of Critique*). These affects, which are widely perceived as vectors of a vigorous democratic culture and as vital enablers of political dissent, need to be interrogated as the perplexing phenomena they actually are—as gestures whose political effects and even their tonalities and actual affective charge cannot be taken for granted.

Communicative Capitalism's Primary Affect

Outrage seems to transpire today more as a background noise than as a carefully crafted message. Its grip on daily life, rather than stemming from a deep and authentic agitation, is related to the way in which it "envelopes [us] like a second skin" (Desutter, 2019, p. 10). Moral psychologists and critical thinkers concur that the consolidation of outrage as a default mode of response is a dire consequence of the attention economy and the algorithmic manipulation of digital media (→ *Infrastructures of Feeling*). Digital platforms, they argue, expand the stimuli for moral outrage, lower the costs of its expression, and amplify its personal benefits (Crockett, 2017). They favor negative feelings, moral-emotional content, and group antagonism as part of their business model, which relies on users' engagement as a means of data extraction (Graham, 2018; Han, 2017; Kothari, 2022; Rose-Stockwell, 2023; Törnberg & Uitermark, 2022). Most paradoxically, by facilitating the performance of outrage, which often takes no more than a clickbait, digital media drain it of any genuine feeling. "Just as a habitual snacker eats without feeling hungry," as neuroscientist Molly Crockett (2017, p. 770) put it, "a habitual online shamer might express outrage without actually feeling outraged."

The claim that digital outrage is not actually felt resonates with the distinction between affects, feelings, and emotions and with the now familiar convergence between digital cultures and viral affects. Digital media publics, as Zizi Papacharissi (2022, p. 62) has shown, are formed through pre-emotive reactions and "soft structures of feelings" that often appear facile and superficial. It is through the circulation of affects that news streams and online debates attain a critical intensity, that political storytelling gains tonality and texture, and that moods and atmospheres that energize civic engagement and protest are forged. Indeed, outrage is one of the primary affective channels through which citizens nowadays "feel their way into the story" (Papacharissi, 200, p. 68). The moral panic around it, however well-founded, also reflects a long-held bias against the affective and replicates its separation from rational and seemingly more respectable faculties (cf. Mazzarella, 2012). Outrage often transpires as a pre-subjective gesture that attains its affective charge recursively through propagation, aggregation, and resonance (Rice, 2023). Its proliferation is enabled by the fantasy of participation that animates communicative capitalism and by its privileging of circulation over content (Dean, 2005). But its fleeting, contagious, and reiterative qualities, I argue, do not prevent it from playing a genuine role in public life.

As the template from which the impetus and the intelligibility of critical assertions are drawn, outrage supplements, if not overtakes, another affect with which the hermeneutics of suspicion has long been infused. In a landmark article published in the 1990s, Eve

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Kosofsky Sedgwick (1997) claimed that the practice of critique is shaped and propelled by a prevalent affect of paranoia. This conservative inclination, she argued, explains why demystification and exposure continue to function as the predominant blueprint for the transformation of politics even as they fail to achieve their expected goals. The mimetic structure of outrage and its reflexive sequences—that is, the fact that outrage is often directed against the seemingly misplaced outrage of others—are traits that it shares with paranoid reading, which embraces the very same plot it unravels as its own source of argumentative coherence (Sedgwick, 1997, pp. 10–12). Yet unlike paranoia, which Sedgwick classifies as a negative affect that diminishes vital capacities, the viral performance of outrage also encompasses more positive affects. By promoting the "rationality of scandal" as critique's new face, outrage mingles critique with a libidinal enjoyment and aligns its practice with a rewarding sense of belonging to a like-minded community (Desutter, 2019). What makes outrage so attractive as a formula for both trivial and more carefully substantiated critique is that unlike paranoid reading—with its anxious discoveries and melancholic tone—outrage often feels both empowering and fun.

Viewing outrage as an affect rather than an emotion does not mean that it can be attributed to social media alone. Alongside its low-level activations on digital platforms, which earned it the reputation of "communicative capitalism's primary affect" (Dean, 2021, p. x), outrage is also the aggregative product of a genre of political opinion media whose growth has parallelled its digital explosion. Since the late 1990s, it has been normalized and skillfully performed in political blogs, political talk radio, and cable news analysis programs in which "being offensive (and reliably indignant when offended) is the foundation of most content" (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014, p. 5). This media genre, with its characteristic venom, feedback loops, and personal attacks, demonstrates that the politics that coalesce around outrage is a multilayered disposition that does not operate through algorithmic habituation alone. While digital media have amplified, facilitated, and trivialized the affective expressions of outrage, the politics of outrage also consists of its calculated and artful embrace.

Beyond Indignation

Outrage is commonly defined as a combination of anger and disgust that is triggered by a perceived violation of moral norm (Carpenter et al., 2021, p. 1110). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, outrage, which designates both a violent injury or a wrong and an affective reaction to them, is "a fierce and overwhelming indignation, anger, etc., experienced in response to some injustice or affront." These standard definitions clarify that outrage, rather than a distinct feeling, is characterized by the intensity and excess with which it colors other affective expressions, an observation that also resonates with the etymology of the term, which derives from the Latin *ultra* (beyond) and the suffix-*age*. Accordingly, studies on political emotions rarely discuss outrage as a clear-cut category and tend to conflate it with its vehement relatives. Kristen Miller and James Jasper (2022, pp. 183–184) observe that outrage, anger, and indignation are often used interchangeably but also remark that outrage is a stronger term that connotes "an aggressive excess beyond what is normal." Their view of indignation as a "package of feeling-thinking processes" may also apply to outrage, which similarly includes

> ongoing felt loyalties to our own groups, distrust or dislike of other groups, a surge of adrenaline or cortisol that make us more alert, a tightening of attention, disgust at an

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> action, compassion for its victims, a thrill or joy at belonging to a group that can express its displeasure and perhaps redress the wrong, and fear . . . over dangers.

But while outrage shares these feeling-thinking processes and the discourse of blame that are typical to indignation, it is also a performance in which the "aggressive excess" of a prior transgression is mirrored and put on display. Outrage can be seen as indignation on steroids—an affective posture that replicates a violation rather than merely denouncing it. This view may explain why outrage is often framed as the driving force behind online firestorms and as a symbol of public incivility. If indignation, beyond its feeling-thinking processes, is also an affective tipping point and a transformative moment in which a situation becomes intolerable and a protest against it emerges (Knops, 2023, p. 11), outrage, I argue, is the dramatization of this reclamation of power.

Given that it is often hard to tell where indignation ends and outrage begins, the ambiguities of outrage politics can be gleaned from studies that have come to the defense of various sorts of affective performances of blame while drawing distinctions between their virtuous and detrimental variations. These studies, which both reflect and promote the affective agenda of movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, have contributed to the discursive evolution of outrage politics by seeking to counter the bad reputation of anger, rage, indignation, and outrage and their vengeful and counterproductive image. Their validation of raging emotions that challenge political decorum rests on the claim that these emotions play a particularly important role in struggles of marginalized and oppressed groups. Fierce, accusatory, and often disciplined feelings, as the argument goes, operate as "moral batteries" that transform shame into pride (Miller & Jasper, 2022, p. 187), as necessary affirmations of self-value, and as fuel for an ongoing and often frustrating striving for radical change (Cherry, 2021). Thus, the drift toward outrage is validated today as a resource for resistance and as a means for an ethical repair that should not be assessed by its political instrumentality alone (Srinivasan, 2018). Over and beyond the buzz of digital participation and its impulsive condemnations, being outraged is perceived as an inclination whose pragmatic dismissal is "a sort of psychic tax that is often levied on victims of oppression" (p. 135), as an attitude that struggles for feminist and racial justice should embrace, and as a vital component of their affective pedagogies (cf. Gould, 2009, p. 214).

The claim that outrage is not just an agent of chaos but can also be a rightful and necessary disruption of oppressive relations of power is hard to dismiss. And yet, this claim can be met with another objection: that outrage politics, however warranted, is ultimately a victim of its own success. Its endless replication by contending camps nullifies its radical potential, generates an "outrage fatigue" (Crockett, 2017, p. 269), and is too easily absorbed in the grind of the business-as-usual. Indeed, outrage is so inherently reflexive and duplicable that no context-sensitive distinction can help stem the tide of its political instrumentalization, as any context-sensitive distinction is liable to flare it even more. The ambiguities of outrage politics cannot be cured by the righteousness of its cause; to better understand them, I argue, there is a need to look back to the political genre from which it evolved and examine its recent mutations. One of the features of outrage politics is its tendency to conflate the personal and the political and blur distinctions between the grievous and the banal. But its disproportionality and exponential growth are linked to the morally acclaimed image of the indignation it performs with a vengeance, which has been fraught with tensions long before the ascent of its seemingly perverse form.

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Flaws of Emotional Coordination

As a politics that is structured around a "talkative affect" (Knops, 2023, p. 279) and grounds its contentions in an outspoken communication of affronts, outrage politics is an outgrowth of the Enlightenment's politics of pity, which similarly prioritizes the discursive and affective mediation of moral wrongs. Based on the understanding that the alleviation of suffering requires a concerted action that depends on public speech, the politics of pity, as Luc Boltanski (1999) has shown, emerged at the end of the 18th century and played a crucial role in the formation of the deliberative public sphere. This politics encompassed several "paradigmatic scenarios" for conveying social suffering and offered a set of discursive conventions for articulating moral sensibilities and visceral reactions to injustice and avoidable misery (Boltanski, 1999, p. 53). Chief among its forms of "emotional coordination" was the topic of denunciation, which served as a platform for a novel kind of "enlightened" indignation (Boltanski, 1999, p. 54). Set against "unanimous indignation" and aiming to reverse the allocation of roles in its narratives of scapegoating and persecution, enlightened indignation was validated by a claim of moral impartiality and deployed theories of domination to ground its accusations of persecutors (Boltanski, 1999, pp. 60–61).

Outrage politics' most ostensible deviation from the politics of pity lies in the blurring of this distinction. Its quarrels are rendered all the more circular as struggles of oppressed groups adopt the muscular form of unanimous blaming historically associated with the Right, and as agents that are implicated in acts of domination and exclusion mobilize rights talk and vulnerability claims. But enlightened indignation—"the critical operation par excellence" according to Boltanski (1999, p. 61)—was not exempt from problems even before these categories blended. Its coupling of factual truth claims and heartfelt performance made it vulnerable, like the other scripts of the politics of pity, to counter-critiques that mobilized charges of selectivity, hypocrisy, and over-zealousness to disqualify its claims (Boltanski, 1999, pp. 64, 42, 45). The discursive devices of the politics of pity juggled its contradictory constraints by combining a realistic and objective report with caring expressions of concern and commitment. But these devices could only afford it a limited protection: the alignment of the factual and the affective in the politics of pity and its reliance on an "emotive style" that inserts "the trace of the person speaking" within the statement have always provided a convenient hook for opposing indignations (Boltanski, 1999, p. 42).

While the roots of outrage politics and its quandaries go back to the Enlightenment's politics of pity, its rise reflects a reconfiguration of the factual and the emotional layers of its earlier indignation scripts. Rather than aiming at a dual exposure of preventable suffering and moral concern, outrage politics pivots on gestures and claims that use a blend of affective and epistemic resources to establish a status of victimhood. The current appeal of this status thrives on the valuation of trauma and personal pain in the therapeutic cultures of emotional capitalism and on the affirmation of suffering in psychoanalytic and human rights discourses (Chouliaraki, 2021). As Lilie Chouliaraki has argued, their view of the self as "a vulnerable figure that needs to communicate its suffering to command recognition" lies at the heart of the subsequent weaponization of victimhood in social media platforms, where it is traded as a universal label and willfully applied in a context-blind way (Chouliaraki, 2021, p. 16). Fueled by the economic and racial anxieties of post-recession neoliberalism and by the spread of distrust and resentment, "the platformization of pain," as Chouliaraki (2021) contends, allows victimhood to deploy its full potential as an attribute that everyone can claim (p. 20).

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Over and beyond the expansion of digital media, it is therefore the endemic precarity of neoliberalism and its cult of the emotional self that create a propitious environment for the inherently mimetic affect of outrage. But to gain a fuller picture of the expansion of outrage and its divergence from enlightened indignation, we need to consider other consequences, besides the rise of victimhood, of the alignment of emotional and communicative capitalism and of the compensation they offer for the erosion of moral certainties and political expectations. What appears as a right, if not an obligation, to be outraged is also a symptom of a shift from an other-oriented to a self-oriented morality and of the role that feelings of empathy and indignation came to play as the ultimate validation of moral claims. The transition from justification to gratification has been apparent in the field of humanitarian communication, where, since the 1990s, the politics of pity, with its clear separation between a (Western) spectator and a vulnerable other, had been replaced by a "mirror structure" that "situates the pleasures of the self at the heart of moral action" (Chouliaraki, 2013, pp. 4, 3). Contemporary humanitarian discourse, while being predicated on the self, has channeled its emotionality to minor, ironic, and ambivalent feelings that reflect a skepticism with narratives of salvation and emancipation (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 72; see also Sharma, 2017). Outrage politics, by contrast, present a parallel example of a self-oriented morality that is oblivious to the demise of grand narratives—and vindicates the moral clarity and the vehement emotions associated with them as if they have never been questioned.

Melodramatic Helplessness and the Political Present

The aggressive excess of outrage politics leaves no room for doubt: it breaks with ambivalent genres of feelings and seems to ignore the waning of political ideals and of the social horizons of expectations they register (Berlant, 2011). And yet, the crisis of agency that animates these genres, whose emotional coordination pivots on the adaptation to the neoliberal crisis ordinary, also plays a major role in the affirmation of outrage. One of the prominent genres through which the expression of outrage unfolds is the melodrama, which grounds its sentimentality and hyperbole on a polarized narrative in which the persecution of helpless victims by evil villains leads to the heroic triumph of virtue. The generic conventions of the melodrama, its manichaeistic worldview, and its victim-hero duality shape emotional expression on social media platforms (Boler et al., 2024) but also leave their mark on discourses of environmental (Schwarze, 2006) and national politics. One of its remarkable manifestations is found in the justifications of the American War on Terror after 9/11, which mobilized the moral absolutes of the melodramatic plot to depict a foretold victory on what was perceived as an assault on American innocence, virtue, and freedom. The use of melodramatic scripts of suffering and redemption to grant a felt legitimacy to the expansion of state power was prompted, as Elisabeth Anker (2014) argued, by an erosion of sovereign agency and resonated with a long-standing sense of political powerlessness and social vulnerability. The melodrama owed its appeal to the promise of emancipation it held for the nation and for its individual citizens alike: both its intensified victimization and its reclamation of power offered a refuge from devitalized, vague, and disorienting feelings of helplessness and constriction.

"Orgies of feelings," a notion Anker (2014, p. 15) borrows from Nietzsche to describe the affective displacement of the melodrama, can also explain what makes outrage such a compelling, if ultimately thwarted, formula of political expression and interpretation.

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Whether outrage is merely gestured at or forcefully performed, its overwhelming presence as a benchmark of political commitment is due to the fantasy of sovereignty and political change it replicates against all odds. Its ability to stage a transgression, rather than merely represent it, consolidates the power of this fantasy and sets an affective standard for critical statements and denunciations that normative considerations can hardly contest.

While the politics of pity, the rise of the ethics of victimhood and self-oriented morality, and the political appeal of the melodramatic genre shed light on the emergence and consolidation of outrage politics, the disputes that accompanied the early stages of the war in Israel-Palestine are a troubling intimation of its future. The widely felt imperative to make some sort of statement about the Hamas massacre and Israel's brutal war; the attacks these statements provoked; the tactical use of social media and of information warfare; the heavy use of inflammatory speech, analogies, and personal appeals and targeting; and the endless clashes over the need to contextualize atrocities and war crimes—in the vertiginous war over the war, which spilled over from social media into street and campus demonstrations and back, outrage politics was the only obvious winner. Beyond their ferocity and global reach, the debates over the war had two other striking features: they invoked outrage politics as the interpretive frame of any war-related statement whatever its wording, rhetoric, or tone; and they hardly had any positive impact on the deployment of military violence and the fate of civilians on both sides. For all its massive appeal and resonance, this war of words, as one observer remarked, betrayed a sense of helplessness; in many debates, "the crucial question seemed to be not 'What is to be done?' but 'What is to be said?'" (Adler-Bell, 2023).

Prospects for Further Research

As the rival melodramas around the war in Israel-Palestine show, the powerlessness, confusion, and exhaustion that outrage politics propagates even as it promises to amend them is a progressive issue no less than a conservative one. The proliferation of outrage is not just a toxic effect of right-wing populism but also a symptom of the cruel attachment to leftist and liberal ideals of emancipation and freedom—an alluring way to secure future-oriented scripts of transformation and improvement that fail to deliver on their promise (Brown, 1999; Berlant, 2011). The clamors of outrage politics can also be heard as a kind of whimper, and given the pervasive sense of impasse that looms over the political present, they can only be expected to endure. Since outrage politics is so deeply embedded in other affective conventions—whether those stemming from enlightened indignation, from the emotional cultivation of the self, or from the orgiastic displacement of helplessness—the regulation of public speech and media platforms can only offer it a partial remedy. The challenges it poses call for further empirical research on the affective dynamics and roots of outrage politics, on the generic conventions and rhetorical means it activates, and on its varied performances and rituals. Future research should attend to the ways in which it travels between digital platforms and other public spaces and interacts with disparate political sensibilities and forms, as well as to the detailed histories and genealogies of its assertions of blame. A careful examination of these issues is needed in order to overcome the limited problematization of outrage: rather than asking if outrage is good or bad for politics and distinguishing between its virtuous and detrimental forms, the guiding question should be how outrage serves to set moral boundaries and what its critical affective alternatives are.[1]

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Note

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6

AFFECTIVE MOBILIZATION

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This chapter explores the concept of "affective mobilization" as a way of understanding the emergence of collective actions and struggles for social and political transformation in activist and social movement contexts. We argue that a focus on affect—understood as an open-ended and relational force that gives rise to often unexpected practices, socio-material formations, and political outcomes—is seminal for grasping how particular kinds of connectivity facilitate and potentially undermine societal change.

Our argument builds on—and at the same time extends—a rich body of social science research that has explored how emotions such as hope, fear, anger, or solidarity give rise to diverse types of collective action and protest in contexts ranging from civil rights and anti-war movements to feminist and LGTBQI struggles, to activist engagement around migration, decolonization, and climate change (Gould, 2004). These approaches, drawn from different social science perspectives and methodologies, illuminate two key dynamics. First, they show how the articulation of and appeal to emotions can be a means, sometimes used strategically, of mobilizing collective movements and struggles (Salmela & von Scheve, 2018). Second, they emphasize how the emotional connectivity that characterizes these mobilization processes as a consequence can potentially transform socio-political structures, while at the same time shaping individual life situations and collective identities (Jasper, 1998; Goodwin et al., 2001).

With the conceptualization of "affective mobilization," we develop an understanding of socio-political protests and struggles that goes *beyond* a focus on locating emotions in specific actors, discourses, and practices—a focus that has characterized the study of emotions in mobilization processes thus far. We argue that the concept of affective mobilization captures the relational dynamics and intensities that shape such collective protests and actions. They do so in often highly contingent ways within and across a variety of socio-material environments, facilitated not least by the circulation and amplification of political sentiments through digital networked media (Papacharissi, 2015; Lünenborg, 2021). We show that these context-specific affective dynamics are crucial for understanding how struggles to influence political processes come into being, how they gain momentum to change societal structures, and why certain processes of mobilization sometimes diminish or (temporarily) cease altogether.

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Explication of the Concept

While the term affective mobilization has been widely used across the literature, it often serves as a vague label or buzzword with minimal conceptual clarity (Leung, 2009; Sauer, 2019; Koschut, 2020; Lünenborg & Backes, 2025; Waugh, 2025). Where attempts at conceptualization exist, they typically focus on isolated aspects—such as embodiment—whereas our aim is to offer a more holistic definition grounded in longstanding empirical research.

As we have experienced first-hand while writing this chapter in an interdisciplinary team, the exchange between various disciplinary perspectives holds the potential to provide a more nuanced understanding of affective mobilization processes. While anthropology, media studies, and political science—all disciplines engaged in this text—each attend to the interplay between micro, meso, and macro levels within their respective frameworks, they do so in distinct ways, shaped by their specific theoretical and methodological orientations. In our interdisciplinary collaboration, these different approaches complement one another, enabling us to expand upon existing perspectives on affective mobilization by bringing into focus the complex interrelations between different analytical levels.

The first perspective we wish to highlight focuses on bodies and sensations, emphasizing how affective mobilization operates through bodily experiences that ground individuals' sense of belonging to a collective. These sensations—such as a racing heartbeat in a protest crowd, a shiver of indignation while watching a viral video, or the shared tension in a moment of collective silence—become the ground of interaction between actors who rally around a common cause (→ *Affective Engagements*). While mobilization is inherently affective, its *specific* forms emerge from the interplay between individual bodies and the broader socio-material environments they engage with. These environments are shaped by atmospheres (Anderson, 2009) and affective arrangements (Slaby, 2019), which arise through such interactions and, in turn, shape them. They encompass the spatial and material characteristics of a protest site—the sounds and smells in the air, the rhythmic chanting of voices, and the mediated intensities of livestreams and social media posts. In such contexts, networked media do more than transmit messages; they amplify and circulate affective intensities according to their own temporal and economic logics. These intensities can energize movements striving for inclusive democratic futures—or, conversely, bolster exclusionary and racist agendas. By approaching digital media and their infrastructures as (non-human) bodies, we can better understand how mediated communication is embedded in the visceral and affective dimensions of social mobilization.

Second, mobilization processes are essentially driven by resonances and conflicts within and across these socio-material environments and contexts. Affective dynamics shape the relationships and interactions between individual bodies and actors in the specific constellations where collective protests and struggles emerge. Often, affective resonances (Mühlhoff, 2019b) help stabilize these constellations by preventing internal tensions from fracturing the collective. At the same time, such resonances can foster alliances *across* different contexts mobilizing for the same cause—whether through shared desires and goals or through interpersonal connections between individual actors. However, affective dynamics are not limited to building cohesion. Conflicts and tensions are equally integral to mobilization processes. On the one hand, they define the boundaries between mobilizing groups and the social structures and institutions they oppose. On the other hand, they also mark lines of confrontation with counter-mobilizations that emerge in direct opposition. These dynamics

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of polarization can be further intensified by platform algorithms that amplify antagonistic content on social media (→ *Infrastructures of Feeling*).

Third, a focus on the affective dynamics of mobilization processes helps explain the structures that can emerge from collective protests and struggles, as well as the processes of disintegration related to them. Because mobilization processes are always embedded in complex power relations, sustaining a collective's engagement often demands significant affective investment—whether in the form of emotional labor, ongoing care, or the continuous work of keeping hope and solidarity alive. The concept of affective mobilization thus also draws attention to the *fragility* of these efforts, particularly in movements shaped by experiences of marginalization and oppression. In such contexts, affective dynamics like exhaustion, frustration, or disillusionment can mark the limits of what a mobilization can sustain. Yet these moments of breakdown may also generate openings for regeneration—where collectives find renewed energy, reorient their goals, or build new solidarities out of shared struggle.

Our argument is based on empirical findings on the role of affective dynamics in sociopolitical mobilization in three different contexts: climate change, migration, and religious solidarity. In the following section, we will present three vignettes from our research. Drawn from social and cultural anthropology and political science, and incorporating insights from media and communication studies, they illustrate the relevance and contested nature of affective dynamics in mobilization processes. Each of the three vignettes addresses one of the proposed analytical perspectives, while two of the vignettes also describe the researchers' own affective entanglements during fieldwork.

Bodily Sensations in Affective Arrangements

It's Pentecost Monday in Berlin-Kreuzberg, and the Carnival of Cultures, one of Berlin's largest and most popular street festivals, is taking place. Various migrant and diasporic communities offer culinary specialties at numerous stalls. The smell of grilled meat, pastries, and noodles tossed in oil fills the air. Towering above the vibrant festivities stands the protestant Heilig-Kreuz-Kirche. The Church is hosting an interfaith peace prayer, which will be followed by a walking meditation in order to raise awareness of the climate crisis—all organized by Brücke des Glaubens,[1] *a climate activist group comprising members of various religious communities. Inside the neo gothic building, the buzz of voices and music are shielded by thick church walls. It's refreshingly cool. As I*[2] *enter, the prayer is just coming to an end. Wilfried, one of the initiators of Brücke des Glaubens, invites those present to take part in the meditation: "We now walk mindfully and lovingly, in a row, very slowly and in silence," he explains. "We breathe in and lift one foot naturally. We breathe out and lower the foot again. With each breath, we connect in love with Mother Earth beneath our feet, with the sky above us and with the people in front of, behind and around us."*

Instead of a calm, solemn atmosphere, however, a certain restlessness is noticeable at first: Chairs are moved, families and friends discuss whether they should stay or go. Some leave, but others also enter from outside. Nonetheless, Michael begins to put one foot in front of the other, moving carefully and calmly down the center aisle toward the altar. Others follow him. A long line of people is formed. Together, they walk in silence, solemnly and attentively. I join them and with each step I feel how the vast space becomes quieter, how the calmness also spreads within me. Voices, smell, and lively chaos fade

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into the background as we walk through the room together, step by step, trying to keep our balance. Walking so slowly is unfamiliar. When Wilfried ends the meditation after 20 minutes and invites us to sing together, every free space between the seat rows is filled with people.

As this example illustrates, spiritual climate activism is shaped by a wide range of emotions—including joy, connectedness, and calmness, but also fear, hope, and guilt (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). These emotions are consciously and unconsciously communicated, managed, negotiated, and sometimes contested (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). However, activists also use more implicit affective dynamics. Walking meditations, like the one at the *Heilig-Kreuz-Kirche* which are applied as forms of protest in public spaces and sometimes even to block streets, derive their effectiveness from a broad spectrum of affective dynamics, thus reaching beyond the strategic mobilization of particular emotions.

Through protest formats such as the walking meditation, activists create specific affective arrangements (Slaby, 2019) that have the potential to shape and transform not only individual subjectivities but entire political movements (Laszczkowski, 2019, p. 491). By choreographing bodies in space, they guide participants to focus on their bodily presence, aiming to shift their orientation toward the world and those around them.

These forms of public protest are intertwined with, and build on, other "nonspectacular forms of activism" (Harms, 2022, p. 516). Harms argues that, within the framework of regenerative cultures, climate activists use quotidian practices to "articulate a politics that targets the intimate and is envisioned to rework communities from below and within" (Harms, 2022, p. 516). In concrete moments of protest, they build on the ideas and affective dispositions (Mühlhoff, 2019a) that emerge from this particular orientation toward the world, allowing them to interpret and manage their emotions and to mobilize others for their cause.

The climate activists of *Brücke des Glaubens* use the specific dynamics and potential of the walking meditation to affectively mobilize themselves and others toward greater recognition of the climate crisis as well as collective action to counter it. They do so by grounding their approach in micro-bodily sensations and intercorporeal dynamics, in order to reorient dominant societal perceptions of the Earth. At the same time, they also use social media, blog articles, and journalistic media to mobilize beyond the specific spatial and temporal settings of their protest. One of the organizers of *Brücke des Glaubens* notes that to her, social media is also essential for maintaining a transnational connection with activists in the "Global South," who are already struggling with the consequences of the climate crisis. The activists therefore consciously and unconsciously connect various scales, from micro-bodily sensations toward transnational, planetary, and transcendental scales, in order to mobilize sustainable change.

Resonance and Conflict

Red plumes of smoke arose from the roof of the district sports hall in Albstadt-Ebingen as emergency calls flooded in on October 26, 2023. Shortly afterward, firefighters found empty smoke canisters and a banner reading "#Remigration. The Ländle remains German."[3] *The far-right group Reconquista 21, associated with the Identitarian Movement, staged the action amid heated debates over housing refugees in the hall. That same day,*

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the group disseminated posts and an action video on social media, expressing solidarity with the local protests against "the great replacement" and "foreign infiltration." Local media condemned the incident as a "xenophobic attack" (Tonnemacher & Irion, 2023) *and a "racist and dangerous action"* (Nölke & Eyckeler, 2023).

Following the event, attendance at the weekly Sunday March against this refugee accommodation—organized by "Albstadt steht auf" and frequented by AfD[4] politicians—dropped from about 800 to 300, while the number of counter-demonstrators increased from 14 to around 120. A cross-party alliance of Social Democrats, Greens, and left-wing groups gathered under the slogan "Solidarity instead of right-wing agitation" (Stuhrmann, 2023)*, carrying signs reading "Refugees welcome" and "Fascism is not a solution." Despite the counter-protest, public pressure prevented refugee housing in the sports hall. Instead, the refugees were distributed to smaller units, and residential containers were built. The debate remained emotionally charged even after these decisions.*

The *Identitarian Movement*'s action was designed to provoke strong affective resonance within its target audience. Red smoke, perceived as an alarm signal, triggered emergency responses, heightening the sense of danger and urgency. The slogan "#Remigration" reinforced existing emotion norms[5] within the far-right community of feeling, where fear and hostility toward refugees are framed as morally justified responses. However, rather than solely consolidating anti-refugee sentiment, the action triggered divergent resonance, amplifying opposition. The significant decline in attendance at the subsequent Sunday March suggests that, in the short term, the activist action failed to generate affective resonance within its target audience—possibly because the intensity and framing of the event alienated more moderate sympathizers or produced affective confusion rather than cohesion. Instead, the diffuse affects it produced may have led to uncertainty or reluctance. Moreover, the local media's framing of the action may have further alienated individuals who opposed the planned refugee accommodation but were unwilling to associate themselves with a movement publicly labeled as "racist" and "xenophobic." By contrast, the counter-demonstration expanded from isolated individuals to a cross-party coalition, suggesting that shared affective resonance—ranging from outrage to moral obligation—is pivotal for alliance-building. Instead of strengthening far-right mobilization, the event intensified emotional polarization (→ *Emotional Politics*), sharpening political divisions.

Emotional polarization, in this context, operated through an "us versus them" narrative. The *Identitarian Movement* deliberately positioned local Germans ("the Ländle") against supposed "foreign infiltrators." The term "infiltration" and the conspiracy theory of the "great replacement" carry strong negative connotations, evoking emotions such as fear, distrust, disgust, and anger. These emotions are strategically mobilized to instill a sense of existential threat, reinforcing the perception of an imminent cultural or demographic "takeover." Yet, this polarization did not unfold unidirectionally. While the *Identitarian Movement* sought to normalize fear as an appropriate emotional response, the counter-movement contested this emotion norm by framing solidarity as a moral imperative. Slogans such as "Refugees Welcome" and "Fascism is not a solution" reflected an alternative community of feeling that positioned resistance to "right-wing agitation."

Although their short-term mobilization failed, and despite the absence of a causal link, the *Identitarian Movement* strategically framed the halted refugee housing in the sports hall

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as their achievement. Moreover, they reinforced their narrative by disseminating images and videos on digital platforms, where far-right influencers, channels, and media amplified the content, garnering over 30,000 views and 200 shares on Telegram and over 5,000 views on X. By leveraging digital networked media, the group extended their reach beyond the local context, spread their narrative, and portrayed the event as proof of successful resistance against local authorities so as to encourage further mobilization.

Structuring and Disintegration

Surrounded by members of the Vietnamese-Buddhist Phổ Đà community, I[6] opened another letter from the district office. We had been fighting together for years to resubmit the building permit to finally legalize their temple. Once again, we had placed our hope in promises from politicians—believing that this time might be different. As I read the words aloud—yet another rejection—optimistic smiles faded into silence: "Why did we even believe them?" someone muttered. "For them, we are still just Vietnamese." The monk looked down, visibly unsettled, "Should we just move to another place?" he asked.

This moment captured the emotional cycle the group had endured for over four years: anticipation, disappointment, and the struggle to believe again. The pagoda, a spiritual and social anchor for Vietnamese families across Berlin, was repeatedly denied formal recognition—despite the fact that a Christian church would have been permitted in the same zoning area without contestation. Bureaucratic objections framed the temple as a leisure space, a "cultural center" not a religious one. This classification delegitimized the community's spiritual claims and marked them as perpetually outside the religious-public sphere, illustrating what Fortier (2016) *calls the ambivalent politics of affective citizenship: only certain affective-religious repertoires are recognized as legitimate public belonging, while others are relegated to "cultural" leisure. Non-dominant religious practices are left without institutional recognition, and thus denied the moral resonance and public visibility afforded to dominant faith traditions.*

In response, the community organized petitions, livestreamed discussions, and invited journalists and politicians to temple festivals to convey why this place matters. We believed affective resonance was needed: people had to see, taste, and feel the atmosphere of the pagoda and hear from the people themselves about its meaning to them. These affective efforts repeatedly led to short-term success of six months extensions. One elder summarized the sentiment of the group: "'Just six more months.' Six more months of temporary stay, six more months until we can bring our families. We've heard this enough in our time in Germany." We gradually realized that the six-month deadline was less an administrative timetable than a bureaucratic technology that sliced our collective protest into manageable intervals. This refrain structured not just legal time, but our emotional experience. Hope and disappointment, structuring and disintegration, began to repeat in patterned rhythms—until this pattern itself became an emotional burden.

This dynamic reflects what Flam (2015) calls slow mobilization: a form of activism built not just on dramatic moments, but on sustained emotional engagement and the hope that institutional change is possible. Yet, as we experienced firsthand, this kind of mobilization is fragile. The "six more months" became an affective trap, a pacifying mechanism that absorbed protest by endlessly resetting its horizon. Hope, rather than fueling transformation,

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became part of what delayed it. In Berlant's (2011) term, this was a form of "cruel optimism," an attachment to an object of desire that becomes an obstacle to flourishing. The hope for recognition bound the group together, but also prolonged their exposure to uncertainty and disappointment.

As the campaign progressed, differences within the group emerged. Younger members were energized by media attention—from local news and Berlin-based papers to occasional nationwide coverage, including a German TV-drama (Scheffler & Thiel, 2024)[7] while older ones, shaped by decades of precarious belonging in Germany, grew skeptical. The labor of maintaining momentum, organizing events, cooking for invited guests, and hosting yet another journalist was not equally shared. Some began to withdraw. The monk himself became a kind of emotional barometer for the mood of the community as a whole, at times uplifted, at other times withdrawn. More than once, he wanted to just stop and move elsewhere, while others still clung to hope.

The Phổ Đà case thus shows how affective mobilization oscillates between structuring and disintegration. On the one hand, it created a shared project and emotional investment, establishing the ground for political action. On the other, it was undermined by emotional fatigue, unequal labor, and a growing mistrust—toward the state and, at times, within the group. When recognition in the form of the approved building permit finally arrived, it was met with a mix of jubilation and uncertainty. Was this a resolution or just another temporary concession?

Conclusion

Moving beyond a focus on discrete emotions, in this chapter we have explored how affective dynamics intricately shape processes of social and political mobilization in diverse contexts of activist protest. As the empirical material in the three vignettes shows, processes of affective mobilization are inherently unpredictable and multi-layered. They are not only subject to cognition and discursive persuasion but also fundamentally grounded in bodily experience.

Bodily sensations, embedded in particular socio-material contexts, shape the emergence and disintegration of collective structures. And while shared feelings of solidarity and resonance foster political alliances and strengthen collective action, conflict, often driven by opposing emotion norms, plays an equally crucial role. This may lead to a cyclical pattern in collective protests, with intense phases of mobilization and counter-mobilization giving way to disillusionment, exhaustion, and disintegration before a new cycle of committed practical engagement may be set in motion. In all these regards, affective mobilization is inseparably intertwined with networked media, bringing actors together trans-locally, mobilizing actors via social media, using online media to amplify offline protest through direct outreach to followers, or offering content for coverage in "traditional" journalistic media. In this sense, social media themselves become affect generators, bringing their own affective dynamics into play (Lünenborg, 2021).

In our own writing collaboration, we have drawn on different empirical reference points and disciplinary and methodological perspectives to explore the interplay of three main affective features of protest and collective action, namely, bodily sensations, socio-material environments, and cyclical temporalities. For future research, we would like to encourage further inter- and trans-disciplinary analysis of these three aspects of affective mobilization.

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Such a multifaceted view, we contend, enables us to better grasp the complex and often implicit work of affect in and through social movements and particular constellations of activist protest. At the same time, the concept offers a useful lens for examining affective mobilization in less visible everyday settings—such as schools, hospitals, or welfare offices—where people negotiate bureaucratic routines, power asymmetries, and emotional strains. Even outside overt protest, the ways people respond to institutional atmospheres, whether through quiet resistance, disengagement, or subtle gestures of solidarity, hold analytical weight.

Seen this way, affective mobilization is not limited to "spectacular" or "iconic" moments of mass movements that capture the affective nature of a protest. It can also function as a political seismograph, registering shifts in mood, emerging frustrations, or fragile hopes that precede formal action. Attending to these signals can help researchers detect when a collective is beginning to fracture or when a new organizational form is taking shape. Future research as well as activist practice might explore how social actors, movements, and institutions can cultivate that kind of affective sensitivity. This means moving beyond a narrow focus on immediately visible mobilizations, toward recognizing the subtle kinds of relational tensions, ambient moods, and affective undercurrents that often go unnoticed.

Notes

1 "Brücke des Glaubens" is an interfaith subgroup of Extinction Rebellion Germany, inspired by the XR Faith Bridge from the UK. The name developed in the UK in 2019, when members of Extinction Rebellion from different religious backgrounds occupied the Lambeth Bridge in London together as part of the "International Rebellion" protest.
2 I in this case refers to Maren Wirth.
3 The following citations are translated from German. "Ländle" colloquially refers to Swabia, a region in southwestern Germany.
4 AfD is the abbreviation for "Alternative für Deutschland," a German party known for right-wing populist and, in some instances, right-wing extremist positions.
5 Emotion norms refer to the appropriate emotional expressions within a given social or political framework, determining which emotions are deemed acceptable (Terzi et al., 2021).
6 In this case Max Müller.
7 Tatort (German for "Crime Scene") is a long-running police procedural aired by national broadcasters in German-speaking countries. Each 90-minute episode often reflects local issues and cultural milieus. The episode "Am Tag der wandernden Seelen" ("On the Day of Wandering Souls"), aired in May 2024, portrays the Vietnamese community in Berlin and integrates the real-life institutional struggle of the Phổ Đà pagoda into its fictional plot, highlighting themes of diasporic belonging and cultural resilience.

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7

READING RELATIONS

Gesa Jessen

The concept of reading relations orients the analysis of literature toward reading as a social practice. It pays attention to all the ways the mostly solitary act of literary reception is very much a relational process, structured by the awareness that modes of reading are aligned with forms of belonging, ethical attitudes, and political positions. Looking at *reading relations* means interpreting literary texts in the context of their reception. It means paying particular attention to how the act of reading and the emotions involved in the process are referred to, judged, and embedded in social discourses. For the actual work of the literary scholar, this means viewing the literary text as part of a social field of discourse. In addition to reading the primary text and the accompanying paratext (forewords, blurbs on the spine, cover design, information from the publisher), it relies on incorporating reviews written by literary critics, as well as reading impressions and reviews shared via social media into the analysis. *Reading relations* do not mean to describe the process of reception one might call "immediate"—that is, what happens in the moment of reading between text and reader. Instead, *reading relations* bring into focus the lateral, more mediated relations that develop around the act of reading. The goal is to understand how different concepts of reading relate to each other and form an integral part of literature today.

The emotions that characterize certain modes of reading play a central role here. While emotional involvement is frequently referenced as an important part of literature's reception through reading, which specific emotions characterize a good read and what degree of emotionalization is appropriate for which readers differ widely. Diverse political and moral attitudes correlate with varied and often conflicting expectations regarding reading experiences, including the emotions addressed, stirred, or negated by reading. Paying attention to how *reading relations* shape the perception and evaluation of literature makes it possible, on the one hand, to understand how negotiations of social norms also include negotiations about right and wrong feelings and, on the other hand, to recognize the changing role literature plays in these negotiation processes.

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Literary Analysis and the Reader

Even though reading has always been part of the theory and practice of literature—it is, after all, what most people *do* with literary texts—it was not until the second half of the 20th century that it became a major focus of literary study and criticism in the European and US-American tradition. In order to understand how reading as a social practice shapes the perception of literature today, a brief excursion through the history of the relationship between literary analysis and the reader will be helpful.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s literary scholars at the University of Constance developed a reception theory which stood in continuity with Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics insofar as it approached literature mainly as an object of interpretation. Looking at reception rather than creation meant that literature's specific form and function was tied to the act of reading as much as it was to writing. In fact, reading, from the perspective of reception theory, was an integral part of literary writing: For literary scholar Wolfgang Iser, one of the central figures of the Constance School, the presence of an "implicit reader" (Iser, 1970), a built-in structure that emerged in the process of writing, was a defining feature of any literary text. The implicit, textual reader addressing the actual reader contributed to what Iser called the "appeal structure" of literature. This structure forged a complex relationship between ways of reading offered by the text and what readers actually did when they engaged said text in the process of reception. According to Iser, this relationship was also subjected to historical changes, with actual readers having to face an ever-increasing amount of indeterminacy when reading since the 18th century, becoming more independent, self-reflective, and self-conscious of their own involvement in the process.

Looking at the way reading practices shaped literary history became the main focus in the works of another prominent scholar of the Constance School, Hans Robert Jauß. He developed an approach in which the horizon of expectation with which readers encounter the literary text always encompasses both the knowledge of the historical situatedness of the text in a certain period of origin and their own situatedness in a potentially different time (Jauß, 1970). For Jauß, reading thus held the potential to change literary texts—to alter how they worked and what they meant—throughout history.

At the same time as the Constance School scholars, US-American literary scholars also began to analyze the contribution of readers to literature through reader-response criticism. While Stanley Fish challenged the idea of reading as a subjective experience by exploring the way every reader was part of what he called "interpretive communities" (Fish, 1967), Norman N. Holland combined methodology from psychoanalysis and literary criticism, understanding reading as an exercise in confronting the literary identity of the author with that of the reader (Holland, 1973), and David Bleich described reading as a two-step process in which a subjective reception takes place first, followed by comparison with the receptions of a wider reading community—a process of negotiation that ultimately forms the reading impression (Bleich, 1978).

A further dimension was added to reader-response criticism/reception theory during the early 1970s in the works of British cultural theorist Stuart Hall, who applied the linguistic model of encoding and decoding in order to show how recipients actively participate in creating the meaning and cultural impact of a work of art (Hall, 1973). In this context Hall paid particular attention to how repeatedly performing specific acts of interpretation can lead to certain types of reading being perceived as common sense, solidifying social

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discourses and norms of understanding, creating social narratives and ultimately the power structures upheld by them.

This focus on reading's social impact continued in the 1980s and 1990s, when the ethical and political dimensions of reading literature were increasingly expounded on. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum understood reading as an engagement with ethical questions (Nussbaum, 1996), while literary scholar J. Hillis Miller saw the experience of reading as an exercise in ethics during which readers decided to subject their own will to a categorical linguistic imperative (Miller, 1987). In stark contrast to Miller, gender studies and queer theory scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick developed the concept of "reparative reading" in the early 2000s, which explored how readers worked with the text in order to actively generate its meaning instead of interpreting it in an extractivist manner—a mode Sedgwick called "paranoid reading" (Sedgwick, 2003).

At the same time, an increasing number of research approached literature by studying the role of emotions and affects involved in the act of reading, examining the mobilization and negotiation of feelings. German-US American literary scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, for example, described the affective dimension of reading by emphasizing that not only meanings, but also "Stimmungen" (moods—which he understands as individually experienced, but socially constituted) form an essential part of the experience of literature (Gumbrecht, 2011), while "aesthetic emotions" (Menninghaus et al., 2019) at play in the reception of literature became the focus of empirical studies conducted at the Frankfurt am Main based Max-Planck-Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, founded in 2013.

In recent years, the examination of reading emotions as well as investigations into the ethical and political dimensions of reading have been increasingly brought together in order to question how reading, by involving certain emotions, is embedded in dynamics of social negotiations of values and norms of feeling. Whether it be the late Lauren Berlant's analyses of how literature and everyday life interact in the creation of affective fantasies (Berlant, 2011), Tyler Bradway's look at "bad reading" as a queer literary practice (Bradway, 2017), research into how feelings of uncertainty and probability are at play in the practice of reading literature at Oslo's Centre for Literature, Cognition and Emotions (Kukkonen, 2020), or *reading for affect* (Berg et al., 2019) as a way of understanding affective dynamics of public discourses proposed by Anna Lea Berg, Christian von Scheve, Yasemin Nur Ural, and Robert Walter-Jochum—emotions involved in reading literature are seen now as entangled in processes of negotiation about social belonging, which are tied to normative concepts about appropriate ways to feel. This is the area of research the concept of *reading relations* would like to contribute to.

Evaluation, Reflexivity, Performativity: Reading as a Social Practice

Based on the paradigm of affective relationality (Slaby, 2019), the concept of reading relations places reading into the context of social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and alienation. These dynamics both shape and are shaped by who reads what, where, and how. Looking at the relationalities that arise through reading allows literature to be seen as a social arena in which not only the form, content, and style of literary texts, or the positionality of literary authors, are subjected to processes of normative evaluation, but in which diverging ideas about what constitutes the right or wrong way to read are increasingly contested.

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Whereas literature has always been socially embedded and reading practices have been indicative of morals, values, and normative attitudes throughout history, three aspects make understanding literature through *reading relations* in contemporary societies an especially worthwhile endeavor:

1) Diversified and dynamic structures of evaluation
   As shown earlier, readers and reading became an important focus of literary studies in the second half of the 20th century. This development ran parallel to dynamics of democratization and popularization of literature, which were linked both to social changes such as the expansion of education and to an increased accessibility of books through pocket editions and paperbacks. From the 1980s onwards, a decline in the importance of literature as a leading medium, a greater diversification and specialization of the literary landscape, and an advancing globalization of the book market can be observed. Against this background, a de-hierarchization of the evaluation of literature continues to take place, resulting in competing ideas of good and bad literature, good and bad reading. Normative judgments on the quality and purpose of literature are less firmly set in stone or proclaimed by experts as they were a few decades ago, reflecting a reader/consumer-oriented evaluation and reviewing culture. This, in turn, often gives rise to negotiations and conflicts concerning the right way to read, which play out in a complex media arrangement and at different levels of the public sphere.
2) Reflexivity and performativity of reading relations
   While the importance attached to literature's emotional impact through reading has had its historical highs before (the European discourse on sensibility in the 18th century provides an impressive example of this), today's approaches to reading emotions display some peculiarities. In the context of sociological diagnoses regarding an increased → *Emotional Reflexivity* (Neckel, 2014; Sauerborn, 2022), it can be observed that feelings mobilized by reading are understood not only as a component of subjective and personal immersion, but also as a form of participation in social processes of feeling. Both the expectation of being emotionally involved in the reading and the process of observing, assessing, and evaluating these feelings structure the reading experience. This process is often also combined with a practice of performing and sharing said emotions through reviews that emulate emotional impact through either description or visualization. Publishing and sharing reactions and reviews contribute to the third aspect, the understanding of reading as a relational practice.
3) Focus on reading emotions as relational
   Both the technical possibilities of documenting and sharing the process of reading in real time—in which internet-based social media have replaced earlier means such as reading diaries or in-person book clubs—and a changed concept of literature have contributed to the perception of reading, and its associated emotion-forming processes, as increasingly relational. Analogous to the "end of the autonomy of art" (Ullrich, 2022), literature is also no longer approached with the expectation of having an aesthetic experience fundamentally different from the lived experiences of daily life, which was inherent to the concept of literature of 20th-century modernism.

   An understanding of reading as a relational process is reflected in both the way readers share their experiences of reading with each other and in the communication between readers and authors. On a less interpersonal level, the way reading is embedded

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in political or ethical projects (as a means of raising awareness, mobilizing feelings of solidarity, outrage, or compassion), in leisure activities (as a form of entertainment, providing relaxation, or diversion), in practices of self-improvement (to cultivate more empathy, to broaden horizons, to enhance focus or the ability to reflect) also points to an approach to literature that understands reading not as an isolated aesthetic immersion, but as a social, relational act.

Reading relations offer a perspective for describing the dense web of feelings, judgments, and political or ethical alignments that emerge through encounters with literature. These affective dynamics—whether expected, experienced, or reflected upon—are shaped and negotiated by various actors, including writers, publishers, readers, critics, and scholars, all of whom engage with literature in different ways today. It emphasizes the social and relational nature of reading and thus shows how literature as a practice unfolds its impact and meaning.

In the following section, I will take a closer look at the reception of Hanya Yanagihara's novel *A Little Life*, published in 2015. The global critical and commercial success of the book, which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Price, the National Book Award, and the Women's Prize for Fiction, and translated into over 20 languages, was accompanied by a debate about the appropriateness of various *reading relations* and the emotions mobilized through them. The way *A Little Life* made its readers feel became very much the focus of its praise as well as its criticism, attesting to the importance of competing expectations regarding the emotions reading should or should not elicit. Therefore, examining the novel in its embeddedness in various practices of evaluating, reacting to, and reflecting on processes of reading and feeling will give us a clearer understanding of the way *reading relations* shape literature today.

Tear-Stained Pages and "Torture Porn": Reading Emotions of *A Little Life*

If one searches for images related to *A Little Life* on the image sharing site Pinterest, one of the very first results coming up shows a page from the book covered in traces of moisture. As comments suggest, what we see here are tears cried by an unseen reader as they finished reading the fifth part of the novel, "The Happy Years." Other Pinterest users report having similar reactions, describing themselves as "ugly crying," "sobbing," or "tearing up." The image of the tear-stained page has an equivalent on the video sharing side TikTok, where, under the hashtags #alittlelife and #littlelifereaction, people have uploaded videos of themselves or others crying while reading the book, or sharing before and after images documenting changes in their emotional state while reading through close-ups of their often tear-stained faces.

The performative and public staging of specific emotions experienced while reading—in this case sadness and despair—points toward the integral part readers' emotions played in the public reception of *A Little Life*. This is not entirely surprising, as the novel places an emotional state—namely that of suffering—at the center of its extensive narrative. Yanagihara's story follows a group of male friends who are entangled in complex dynamics of affection and worry felt toward the central figure of Jude, who lives his life in the aftermath of severe physical, mental, and sexual abuse he was subjected to as a child. Jude's continuous suffering, resulting from both his traumatic past and tragic events chronicled throughout *A Little Life*, are portrayed as entirely beyond Jude's control—they largely happen to him

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like cruel blows of fate. Even the pain he technically inflicts on himself, such as his life-threatening self-harm, is very clearly shown to be a coping mechanism and direct result of the trauma of his formative years. As Yanagihara's protagonist states while reflecting on the axiom of equality:

> The person I was will always be the person I am, he realizes. The context may have changed: he may be in this apartment, and he may have a job that he enjoys and that pays him well, and he may have parents and friends he loves. He may be respected; in court, he may even be feared. But fundamentally, he is the same person, a person who inspires disgust, a person meant to be hated.
>
> *(Yanagihara, 2015, p. 340)*

Jude's life-story therefore offers little room for moral conflict, but all the more room for empathy. Accordingly, as Joseph R. Worthen has shown in his analysis of engagements with the book on the reviewing side Goodreads, readers often approach the novel through what he calls "empathy aptitude reading" (Worthen, 2020), that is, an attitude characterized by the expectancy to cultivate a specific emotional relation, namely empathy, through reading.

Not only did readers on Goodreads note feeling emotionally impacted, but literary critics such as Daniel Mendelsohn (2015) in *The New York Review of Books* or Garth Greenwell (2015) in *The Atlantic* also considered readers' emotions as central features of *A Little Life*. Greenwell praised the novel for going against conventional literary tastes—"by embracing melodrama and exaggeration and sentiment"—in order to "access emotional truth," especially that of queer life in contemporary US-American society. The experience of an "emotional truth" through reading, which tears drying on the novel's pages and recordings of crying readers seem to vouch for, is precisely what Mendelsohn calls into question in his review. Whereas he does acknowledge that *A Little Life* elicits intense emotional responses, he doubts that they convey any truth, describing the novel as "little more than a machine designed to produce negative emotions for the reader to wallow in." The analogy between the book and an emotion producing machine suggests artifice instead of art, indicating that a difference exists between truly felt, authentic reading emotions and those merely mechanically produced.

This normative distinction between ways of feeling prompted the editor of *A Little Life*, Gerald Howard of Doubleday, to publicly respond to Mendelsohn in *The New York Review of Books*, accepting criticism of the novel, but insisting that emotional reactions from readers were an essential feature of literature, not forgery: "What I do object to, however, is his implication that my author has somehow, to use his [Mendelssohn's, G.J.] word, 'duped' its readers into feeling the emotions of pity and terror and sadness and compassion" (Howard & Mendelsohn, 2015). What was the difference, Howard asked, between feeling like crying while reading acclaimed novels by Charles Dickens or John Williams, and *A Little Life*? Did not most literature "dupe" its readers into feeling for and with fictional characters? To which Mendelssohn, in his reply to Howard, answered that Yanagihara's "slathering-on of trauma" amounted to a "a crude and inartistic way of wringing emotion from the reader," resulting in readers' reactions "whose basis seems to me more therapeutic than aesthetic" (Howard & Mendelsohn, 2015).

Mendelsohn thus outlined a connection between the way *A Little Life* works as a text, a reading attitude, and an emotional state that he considered inappropriate for a

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literary-aesthetic relationship. In his original review of the novel, he had already attributed some of its success to "a culture where victimhood has become a claim to status" and assumed that *A Little Life* "with its unending parade of aesthetically gratuitous scenes of punitive and humiliating violence" provided "a kind of comfort." Citing a study on declining resilience among college students, Mendelsohn saw the way readers and the novel interacted as manufacturing a sense of reassurance: "To such readers, the ugliness of this author's subject must bring a kind of pleasure, conforming their preexisting view of the world as a site of victimization and little else."

This points to an aspect of the criticism the reading behavior surrounding *A Little Life* received concerning a specific quality of its reception: empathy, and especially compassion with Jude's suffering, is characterized here as a kind of pleasurable experience with an almost erotic connotation. Mendelsohn compares *A Little Life* structurally to a striptease, Alex Needham (2023) in *The Guardian* asks whether the book should be considered "torture porn or serious literature," Carol Anshaw (2015) in *The New York Times* pointed out readers' "voyeuristic interest," and Andrea Long Chu (2022), in her close reading of several of Yanagihara's books, described the author's "fantasies of suffering" as producing a specific love she calls "not curative but palliative." Several reviewers are puzzled by the publisher's decision to put Peter Hujar's 1969 photograph "Orgasmic Man" on the book's cover. The image's subject, whose facial expression might oscillate between pleasure and pain, but who is nonetheless, according to Hujar's title, pictured in a moment of sexual gratification and climax, seems to many an odd choice for a novel whose protagonist experiences sex almost exclusively as a violation and abuse of power.

Yanagihara has explained the choice of cover design by comparing the emotional experience of looking at Hujar's photograph with that of reading *A Little Life*:

> You have the feeling that you are witnessing an almost unbearably intimate moment, that you are seeing something that you shouldn't be seeing. We understand that we are intruders, and yet we cannot look away. In this way, it is my hope that the cover contains an echo of the reading of the book itself . . . .
>
> *(Yanagihara, n. d., transl. G.J.)*

For Mendelsohn, it is precisely that conflation of pleasure and pain, which Hujar's image encapsulates, that makes the reading experience of *A Little Life* ethically questionable. Why would readers actively seek out a novel that makes them "intruders" into the suffering of its protagonist? Literary critics in favor of the book such as Greenwell would point to the aforementioned "emotional truth" that readers of *A Little Life* have access to by becoming witnesses to Jude's trauma and pain. For Mendelsohn, however, this form of witnessing amounts to little more than "wallowing"—a self-indulgent way of intensifying the feeling of emotions widely understood to be negative, such as sadness, sorrow, or despair, which readers commonly report feeling while reading *A Little Life*.

Reading relations play out here as readers and critics, publishers and scholars operate with assumptions and experiences of reading that are closely linked to what emotions they assume should or should not be mobilized by reading and, in doing so, mapping those emotions onto ethical and political positions. Not to cry while reading *A Little Life*, that is, not to sympathize with the suffering of Jude, would, to some readers, be a sign of misreading—an indication that someone is closing themselves off from experiencing the "emotional

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truth" of the novel. This in turn would also suggest an inability or unwillingness to engage with the literary representation of experiences that at least some readers see as one of queer life, a *reading relation* marked by ignorance at best, intolerance at worst. For other readers, it would be precisely in the emotional reading reaction, marked by a kind of pleasurable suffering, that an exploitative and voyeuristic *reading relation* becomes apparent, one that to some aligns with what they see as a much more general societal interest in vulnerability and victimization as popular forms of subjectivity.

Toward Reading Relationally

In an increasingly diversified literary landscape, with numbers of readers continuously dwindling, looking at *reading relations* can offer a perspective on how literature evolves as a practice. It surely no longer occupies the position as leading medium, nor does it carry the promise of education, refinement, and consolidation of social status with which it was once associated. Nonetheless, dealing with literature by writing, publishing, or reading it, as well as discussing certain books, evaluating, and criticizing them, hyping a certain author up or cancelling them, can mobilize intense emotions as well as reflective practices. The social positionality of readers, writers, and critics—their belonging in terms of class, gender, or race, for example—gets tied to certain notions of what reading should or should not feel like for specific readers. These dynamics call into question the historical presumption that reading literature offers a somewhat neutral playing field for aesthetic experience.

Taking into consideration different competing reception processes happening simultaneously, as shown earlier in the case of *A Little Life*, can illuminate the complexities and conflicts happening around literature today. In this context, a perspective based on affect studies such as the one developed through *reading relations* can bridge the gap between literary scholarship and social sciences in order to understand reading literature as both a personal aesthetic and a social practice of developing, reflecting on, and establishing norms of feeling.

For future research, the concept of *reading relations* could offer insights into dynamics around literature in various areas of scientific inquiry for literary scholars, media scholars, cultural and communications scholars, as well as sociologists with an interest in literature. Compelling research questions in this regard could be: how do *reading relations* around the treatment of historical reading material play out? How do new and increasingly common ways of reading, such as listening to audiobooks, restructure *reading relations*? What do *reading relations* look like in a globalized context of reading? Do the power structures embedded in *reading relations* bring forth a dominant, global aesthetic of "popular realism" as literary scholar Moritz Baßler (2023) recently claimed? How are authors changing their self-presentation and interaction with readers via social media, influencing *reading relations* around certain books? How do social categories of inclusion and exclusion such as class, gender, race bring forth specific *reading relations*?

With the help of these and other research questions, the concept of the *reading relations* can be enriched by further methodological and theoretical approaches that provide an increasingly precise understanding of the processes of negotiation and normative evaluation of reading emotions. This in turn offers an insight into how feelings are discursively brought forth, circulated, established, or averted in general. As reading among many practices of producing and negotiating emotions undergoes a constant process of changing its

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parameters, its sphere of influence, and its social function and meaning, *reading relations* bring the necessary flexibility, interdisciplinary openness, and methodological adaptability that will be needed to understand what reading literature means in mobile worlds.

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PART II

Senses, Belonging, Care

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8

OLFACTORY AFFECT

İlke İmer, Claudia Liebelt, and Mayıs Tokel

Olfactory affect refers to the relational dynamics that emerge between actors through the sense of smell and the act of smelling. As a conceptual frame, olfactory affect underscores the intricate role of embodied relationality in our perception of odors and scents, thus pointing to the central importance of the body and the senses in affective arrangements. By focusing on the olfactory, we intend to highlight an often-neglected sensory impression while also recognizing how the sense of smell and the act of smelling are entangled with other sensory impressions. Odors and scents are fleeting and ephemeral, which poses methodological challenges in terms of articulation and representation. And yet, they are also material, effective, and, most importantly, constitutive of relationships, which require scholarly attention.

The concept of olfactory affect challenges commonplace assumptions that odors and scents trigger neurochemical processes and intersubjective transmissions in biologically deterministic ways. Instead, the concept emphasizes that these are multisensory and relational processes, shaped by affective and social dynamics between various actors and across different temporal sequences. Thus, olfactory affect neither treats olfactory orientations as innately given, nor finds them sufficient to understand the complexity of sensorial formations. Instead, it analyses the more-than-human relationality of sensing bodies against the background of social contestation and historical change.

Olfactory affect also points to a form of relationality that transgresses embodied boundaries. In the everyday life of affective societies, olfactory affect can be traced across smooth attunements and dissociative frictions alike. Olfactory affects are tied to belonging and affective resonance in that particular odors and scents—those that emanate from cooking or from food, for example—may afford affective belonging, while potentially also fostering forms of distinction or olfactory othering. Similar to immersion in theatre or film, olfactory affects may be intentionally produced to modulate certain emotional states, social memory, and subjectivities, as for example, in scent-marketing or practices of "olfactory governance" (see the section below). Thus, we see olfactory affects and relationalities as an integral part of broader affective arrangements.

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This chapter draws on our joint work as a team conducting ethnographic research on affects in relation to contested scents among various urban publics in Türkiye and Germany. In what follows, we will unpack the concept of olfactory affect by discussing the (lack of) relevant literature on the topic in Affect Studies, Sensory History, and Sensory Anthropology, as well as by highlighting some key dimensions from neighboring concepts, such as affective relationality and immersion. We will then move on to present two case studies from our own research on olfactory affect, namely its relation to belonging and non-belonging in processes of racialization and othering, and its use in affective governance which may lead to contestations between various socio-political actors. As we will show, olfactory affect raises far-reaching questions about the embodiment of the social, the im/materiality of culture, the role of the senses in both affective arrangements and affective contestation.

Historical Orientation

Olfactory affects are historically situated, just like affects more generally are. Indeed, the affective power of scents and fragrances has prominently been studied from a historical perspective, giving rise to the field of Sensory History (cf. Classen et al., 2002). The works of Alain Corbin (1986) on France and William Tullett (2019) on England show how, over the course of the 18th century, European ideas of stench and bodily exhalations as a danger to public health gave way to new, socio-aesthetic sensations and concepts such as disgust or odor nuisance. Parallel to the emergence of a new sensual perception of the "stench" of the lower social classes, colonialism and industrial capitalism shaped racialized notions about the "uncivilized" smell of "others," including the colonized but also ethnic and religious minorities in Europe (Classen, 1992; Kettler, 2020). Importantly, processes of olfactory othering in Western Europe went hand in hand with ideas of modernity as odorless, giving rise to "projects of olfactory modernity [that] mushroomed around the globe in localized ways" (Huang, 2023, p. 2).

In the social sciences, the growing interest in smell and smelling since the 1990s is part of an interdisciplinary "sensory turn," which is deeply indebted to ethnographic works and sensory anthropology (e.g., Howes, 2003; Stoller, 1989). Sensory anthropology has formulated a powerful critique of the Aristotelian categorization and hierarchization of the senses, which has led to olfaction, as one of the so-called "lower" or "primitive" senses, being "underrepresented and undertheorized in contemporary scholarship" (Howes, 2003, p. xii).

Whereas thinking with and about the audio-visual, for example, has left its mark on affect theory and vice versa, olfaction has rarely been addressed on a conceptual level in affect theory, despite the fact that it has much to offer to it. A notable exception is Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect* (2004), in which she draws on neuroscientific and biochemical research to argue that affects are transmitted through olfactory signals, especially pheromones. By doing so, she conceptualizes smell and scents as affective because of their capacity to move directly into the limbic system of the brain, thus creating moods and modulating human behavior intersubjectively. From such a perspective, mass phenomena such as the "contagious" effect of fear can be explained as an ultimately biochemical process triggered by sensing the fear of others, including through smell. Adopting the concept of "entrainment" from the biochemical literature, Brennan speaks of processes of "coupling" through sensory stimuli (the olfactory prominently among them) triggering intersubjective affective "reactions." According to Brennan (2004), the olfactory transmission of affects is not only considerably faster than linguistic-emotional transmission processes, but also

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"incapable of lying" (p. 136). While we do not deny the existence of olfactory-sensory reactions, in our approach to olfactory affect, we seek to emphasize the relational dimension of olfaction, highlighting how it operates in the context of social and power relations.

Key Dimensions

While smell and smelling are inextricably linked with other sensory impressions, we are interested in foregrounding the social doings and capacities of smell as an analytical concept. Hence, a key dimension of olfactory affect is its relationality as part of larger affective arrangements. Odors and scents trigger affective sensations such as desire or disgust, give rise to affective orientations, and constitute belonging through visceral recognition. In doing so, olfactory affects transcend embodied boundaries, becoming part of more-than-human relationalities and desirings. For instance, plant floral odors, which often mimic the musky perfume of insect pheromones to attract mammals, "are produced to advertise to animals that the plant is at the peak of its sexual ripeness" (Stoddart, 1991, p. 159). However, what makes olfactory affect attractive and relevant for us is less its biochemical power—as in affective reactivity or instinct—than how its affective relationality unfolds in layered processes of social and cultural sensing and sense-making.

Given its mnemonic capacity, that is, its capacity to evoke memories, olfactory affect transcends not just corporeal or spatial, but also temporal boundaries. Like belonging, which is in fact closely connected to olfactory affect and other sensory impressions, it questions the understanding of affect as "a brief and ephemeral event" (Mattes et al., 2019, p. 307). Scents may be ephemeral, but they can also linger, evoking long-forgotten feelings of home (→ *Home Feelings*), or hauntings of the un-homely (→ *Haunting*). Smells, as morally charged and culturally meaningful (im)material carriers, can give rise to specific olfactory affects. As such, they are often used in multisensory spatial design and affective forms of governance—serving as techniques of power that work through "subtle, non-coercive affective means" (Penz & Sauer, 2019, p. 4). Such multisensory techniques of power have also been investigated as "immersive techniques," giving rise to "immersive power" (Mühlhoff, 2018), for example in theatre or art performances, consumer experiences, or working environments. The circulation of affect triggered by odors and scents thus may give rise to forms of affective governance (Penz & Sauer, 2019; Pykett et al., 2016), a concept that we develop further below. Accordingly, olfactory affect may operate to sustain relations of power as part of larger emotion repertoires, but it may also give rise to pockets of resistance, resulting in disruptions and contestation.

In what follows, we present two case studies that illustrate different dimensions of olfactory affect. Based on Mayıs Tokel's ethnographic research in Berlin, the first case discusses the relationality of olfactory affect and belonging in urban contexts shaped by racialization and othering. The second draws on İlke İmer's ethnographic research in Türkiye, which follows the (im)materiality of rosely scents, explaining how the fragrance's widespread use raises concerns about the "affective Govern" in the context of opposing socio-political ideologies and actors.

Olfactory Belonging and Othering: Sensing (at) Home in Berlin

Olfactory affect sheds light on processes of belonging in contexts of urban diversity, migration, and processes of racialization and othering. This case study from ethnographic

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research among Turkish migrants and non-migrants in Berlin illustrates that olfactory affects form a crucial part of sensory and affective arrangements in postmigrant urban settings, informing migrants' practices of homemaking, while also giving rise to conflicts and contestations. To do so, we draw on in-depth ethnographic interviews, participant observation in public park barbecue areas, and kitchen talks with diverse actors (see Pink, 2006).

The project dwells on olfactory affect to understand the affective underpinnings of racialization and social inequalities as much as the formation of immigrants' subjectivities, the transmission of generational experiences, and everyday resistance. Scent practices and stories of (contested) scents stand as a critical analytical tool to investigate affective practices of belonging and non-belonging, both past and present. We rely on a notion of belonging that conceptualizes "people's affective, partially pre-reflexive attachments to places, landscapes, languages, and material objects [better] than the notion of cultural identity" (Mattes et al., 2019, p. 301). In this context, the mnemonic potential of smell as the most potent sense in evoking memory must be mentioned. As Mine, one of Tokel's interlocutors, puts it: "For someone like me, who has experienced migration in various forms since childhood, I believe smell has the potential to transport you to childhood, the past, or a new place."[1] Indeed, early first-generation migrants from Türkiye, many of whom came to Germany from rural areas (Abadan-Unat, 1964), often described their migration in terms of a loss of sensorially rich childhoods. Spacious gardens in the homeland, full of aromatic vegetables, herbs, and fruits—such as apples, mulberries, and sage—were compared to "tasteless" industrial products and polluted or at best deodorized urban spaces and workplaces in Germany. Mine, who came to Germany in her early childhood, described this multisensorial rupture:

> Now imagine that you come from a town with one- or two-story houses and gardens—. ... You grew up in a house with a garden. There are apple trees around. And then you arrive at a place with 4-, 5-, or 6-story buildings, and you move into an apartment on the third floor. In winter, there are coal smells. If it were today, I would love that place. But when I arrived there as a child, looking down from above, I felt like I was coming to a place where I might fall into a pit at any moment. This is a metaphor. It's about looking down from above and seeing the grayness.
>
> *(Interview with Mine, May 27, 2024)*

Epitomized by the grayness, the smell of coal, and the shock of multisensorial loss, early labor migrants in West Berlin, who typically lived in neighborhoods still scarred by World War II demolitions and in proximity to the Berlin Wall that surrounded them, found themselves in harsh, precarious, and backbreaking working conditions. "The constant state of exhaustion," Fatma Aydemir (2022, p. 40) writes, "has just become such a normal part of life." Along this vein, Selma, an elderly woman interlocutor who retired from the cleaning sector, wrote to Tokel that amid the struggle for life and the difficulties brought about by migration, she could not find the luxury of experiencing smells. She added that "[w]e didn't have the strength for it. I think we couldn't perceive scents (*kokular*) much."[2] She spent years performing a labor of deodorization by cleaning, most likely using scented cleaning agents. Yet for her, life lacked aroma, with the unperceivable scents representing her exclusion from the richness of life and a sense of belonging that grew weary due to life's struggles, the difficulties of migration, and working conditions. As such, migrants' life in the German post-war labor regime was characterized as detrimental—in terms of both scents and the

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conscious act of perceiving them—to what Tsing (2015) has called the arts of noticing, or the process of paying attention to the complexities and entanglements of life.

Not least, in the context of post-war Berlin, olfactory othering has significantly shaped the perception of newly recruited guest workers from Southern and Eastern Europe, whose cultural self-representations, especially songs, speak of everyday experiences of racism and stereotyping as so-called "Kümmeltürken" (lit. "caraway Turks," a racial slur) or those, who are said to "stink of garlic" (e.g., Ayata & Kullukcu, 2013). Despite hegemonic assumptions that smell-related racist slurs are a thing of the past, they are still vividly remembered and continue to affect migrants and racialized persons. It is striking that most research participants reported having encountered such derogatory labels connected with smells in their neighborhoods, schools, on TV shows, or in German media. Sara Ahmed's (2014) persuasive analysis of the feeling of disgust through the concept of "stickiness" may help to explain why these slurs have been deliberately and repeatedly used against migrant communities in Germany. Arguing that the feeling of disgust and its expressions are neither an innocent psychic state nor the consequence of the nature of things, Ahmed (2014, pp. 85–87) shows that they emerge from historically formed power relations, serving as an important mechanism for maintaining them. Entangled with other emotions such as fear, the threat of contamination, and perceptions of dirt, disgust functions as a "sticky sign."

Surrounded by smell-related "sticky" speech acts and signs, research participants' bureaucratic and institutional subjugation appeared as sensorially structured and thickened. In their repetitiveness, these acts and signs have become tangible and often adhesive to the bodies of those seen as the Other, leaving people in a damaged and vulnerable position, affecting their everyday life, often creating ambiguities and anxieties. After telling Tokel how she was randomly being shouted at in the Berlin subway ("you dirty Turks, you stink!"), another interlocutor, Sevgi, confided that "even though I love living in Berlin, ... something still remains, deep inside...".[3]

Olfactory Governance: Tracing Rosely Scents in Türkiye

Fragrances have the power to evoke memories, while they are also an indicator of social status, a sign of sanctity, an essential part of the perfume industry, and the subject of recently emerging olfactory technologies (Drobnick, 2006). Olfactory affect thus swings in the intimate interplay between material semiology and embodied-sensual capacities. It moves in the epistemological gap between what the nose smells and how subjects make sense of what they smell. This gap serves as a "productive site for intellectual, economic, technological, and most of all, political" interests, much as White (2017, p. 177) argues for affect more generally. This makes olfactory affect a particularly effective technique of affective governance, exercising both "power over" and "power to" (Penz & Sauer, 2019; see also Foucault, 1976/1978) through fragrances—or what we refer to as "olfactory governance." We draw on Penz and Sauer's definition of affective governance as closely related to technologies of the self, "inscribing domination in people's bodies" (2019, p. 39), rather than working in oppressive or alienating ways. As such, we see olfactory governance as a subtle and productive form of governance, rather than merely repressive (see also Cooper, 2011). Being subtle to the point of being able to affect without conscious awareness, olfactory governance may be seen as, or raise fears of, manipulation. We define olfactory governance as an attempt to affect how people embody and adhere to hegemonic ideologies,

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values, and practices through scents and aromas. In addition, olfactory governance can arise unintentionally over time, as particular scents become culturally and historically charged with social meanings and affective associations.

Based on sensory ethnography conducted in the Turkish metropolis of Istanbul, İmer investigates olfactory governance with rosely scents in urban publics. Part of a larger "renaissance" of diverse scented practices in present-day Türkiye (Liebelt, 2023), mosques, rallying areas, streets, and avenues are increasingly washed, "cleansed," and, for some, "purified" with locally produced rose water in what we analyze as acts of olfactory governance. Such acts are especially prevalent before religious ceremonies as well as political events by the pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), which has ruled Türkiye in an increasingly authoritarian manner since 2002.

In Istanbul, the widespread use of rose fragrance raises questions about affective governance in the context of sociopolitical tensions between various actors, not least due to roses' wide range of meanings and bodily effects. For followers of Sunni Islam, it is the embodied scent of the prophet Muhammad and of Heaven more generally, used widely during mourning ceremonies to relax and calm the grieving. Within the global beauty sector, it is a highly sought-after ingredient of skin-care products, said to have significant benefits on physical, emotional, and spiritual levels, promoting a sense of well-being (Başer et al., 2012). It is also a symbol and brand of the Western Anatolian city of Isparta, where rose products are produced in large quantities and exported globally. While some cherish and desire rose fragrance, others abhor its scent as an affective reminder of death, funerals, and their related gendered roles. Thus, in Sunni Islam, the dominant religious doctrine in Türkiye, the washing of the body of the deceased with rose water is part of a "set of body-related rituals at death" (Zengin, 2019, p. 85) that are tied to notions of purity. Likewise, after the burial, when prayers are recited in the home of the deceased person's closest relatives, younger women in the family are expected to offer rose water to visitors as a customary practice. Several of Imer's women interlocutors disliked the smell of rose, because it reminded them of their gendered "serving duties." For example, when İmer asked Umay, a 40-year-old woman from a deeply conservative family, why her face changed into a sour expression after smelling rose water, she responded as follows:

> Well, it's actually a light scent (*koku*). In that sense, it's a scent I might like. But no—it's too heavy. It's a scent I can't just think of as a scent—it carries too much symbolism, way too much. It's not a pleasant scent [for me . . . It reminds me of] being in a "state of obedience" (*eğilme hali*), bowing in front of someone (*birinin önünde eğilme hali*), that kind of thing, that image. ... This is the scent of a place that I don't belong to, yet one that I was forced to be in for a very long time. ... The constant expectation of me being an obedient little girl.
>
> *(Interview with Umay, November 12, 2024)*

Umay's words demonstrate how olfactory resources and repertoires, much like emotional ones, are connected to broader social inequalities (Jupp et al., 2016). Umay dislikes the scent despite the fact that under different circumstances she "might like" it, discontinuing her use of rose water in post-mortem rites and other aspects of her everyday life. It serves as an example that what the nose smells (a "scent I might like") and how the subject makes sense of what they smell (a "state of obedience") can create a gap in which affective

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governance is met with resistance. Here, olfactory governance becomes manifest as an unintentional effect of sedimented patriarchal norms and practices. Becoming part of women's embodied olfactory affects, it may nevertheless be met with rejection. Thus, the example illustrates how olfactory affect can function as a tool for sustaining hegemonic norms and practices, while also triggering their rejection.

Following rose water's widespread use in public space by private, religious, and state actors, it has come to epitomize—for some—the hypocritical morality of neoliberal Islam in present-day Türkiye. As a contested cultural artefact, rose fragrance has thus become a multisensorial agent of olfactory governance. In addition, it is increasingly used as a sales strategy across different spheres and sectors. One example of this was given by Mevlüde, an employee in a well-known textile company in Türkiye:

> I am the only veiled person on the team. ... Our CPO [Chief Product Officer] asked for my thoughts about producing rose-scented sportswear [targeting pious or "conservative" persons]. In other words, he wanted conservative people to smell roses when they sweated during exercise. And I asked: "why the rose?" You know, being conservative does not imply smelling like a rose, or even loving the aroma of roses.
>
> *(Interview with Mevlüde, April 16, 2024)*

On the one hand, Mevlüde's story provides compelling evidence of neoliberal management's attempt to commercialize rose fragrance, linking its scent with cultural tropes and stereotypes, creating feelings of unease in those to whom those stereotypes are attached. On the other, it illustrates the capacity of olfactory governance to operate as a technique of power, generating new subjectivities and consolidating existing ones. We interpret the proposal to introduce rose-scented sportswear for conservative consumers as an attempt to manage and commodify hegemonic olfactory affect for the consumer-citizen. This resonates with the notion that neoliberal governance establishes an "affective climate" (or "emotionology") by utilizing social norms and affective dispositions (Penz & Sauer, 2019; Stearns & Stearns, 1985).

Given scents' and fragrances' mnemonic capacity, olfactory governance may also be used to mold what will be remembered and what will not. The case of Turkish rose production shows that local producers and multinational corporations that underpin this type of governance face resistance as they attempt to manipulate the olfactory affects tied to the rose. Thus, in an interview, the former AKP mayor of the Isparta's Güneykent region, a major producer of rose products in Türkiye, complained that "when people hear the term 'rose water' they frequently picture rose water being poured onto the coffin at a funeral."[4] Despite efforts to "erase" this connotation and make rose water a more marketable cosmetic product by involving multinational corporations and commissioning "scientific reports," the earlier sensual impression persists, at least for some. This illustrates the resilience of olfactory affects, especially when they have become part of a society's social memory or emotional repertoire.

To sum up, olfactory governance can emerge both as a deliberate attempt and as an unintentional effect of governance through scents and fragrances. In Umay's case, olfactory affect, as an outcome of olfactory governance through rose fragrances, resonates as a bodily sensorial reminder of patriarchal norms and practices that have been passed down through generations. Here, olfactory affect manifests as a layered sediment beyond will or

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consciousness. Conversely, the cases of Mevlüde and the former AKP mayor illustrate how olfactory governance can also be a deliberate attempt to enforce neoliberal governance. Olfactory governance is thus a promising field for investigating olfactory affect. By examining the olfactory affects attached to contested fragrant agents such as the rose in Türkiye, we may gain a deeper understanding of affectively grounded relations in urban publics and affective societies more generally.

Outlook

Talking and writing about olfactory affect alongside odors and scents poses methodological challenges, in terms of both perception and articulation. Describing the training of so-called "noses" for the French perfume industry, Latour (2004) notes that the ability to articulate olfactory affect requires the ability to perceive odors in the first place, an ability that improves with training. And indeed, from the perspective of ethnography, investigating olfactory affect can best be described as a form of attunement that forms part of "affective" or "sensuous" scholarship (Stodulka et al., 2018; Stoller, 1997). This raises questions for further exploration: what kind of inspirations can we draw from olfactory affect's consolidation as well as disruption of hegemonic emotion repertoires? How to sense and articulate olfactory affects that shape social action but remain implicit at best? How to make sense of olfactory affect as the unseen resonance of (unruly) odors and scents?

These questions go beyond the practicalities of ethnographic research. They feed into a fundamental critique of Western philosophical traditions of theory as ocularcentric, with the Greek "theōria" denoting a way of "looking at" things (Howes, 2022, p. 458). Pointing to the limits of "theory" and toward more-than-visual, articulable ways of knowing, attuning to olfactory affect may thus contribute to novel ways of understanding affective societies.

Notes

1 Personal interview with Mine, May 27, 2024. The following quotes by Mine are taken from the same interview. All names are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants.
2 Personal interview with Selma, August 4, 2024.
3 Personal interview with Sevgi, June 2024.
4 Personal interview with former mayor of the Güneykent, Isparta, June 3, 2024.

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9

SENSORY CARE

Max Müller, Luisa Eilinghoff, Anita von Poser, Edda Willamowski, Eric Hahn, and Thi Minh Tam Ta

Sensory care is a conceptual and practice-oriented approach that foregrounds the role of the senses and the richly textured, embodied nature of human experience in care encounters. Arising from our engaged research with Vietnamese communities in Berlin,[1] this perspective insists that care is not merely a rational or cognitive interaction, but a holistic, affectively charged, and synesthetic process—shaped by the interplay of taste, smell, sight, sound, touch, and the emotionally laden intensities of embodied memories. By recognizing these sensory and bodily dimensions, sensory care draws attention to the subtle yet powerful ways in which culturally specific sensory cues can foster comfort, belonging, or alienation and felt dissonances.

While the sensorial basis of caregiving, such as taste, smell, touch, or environmental texture, has long remained at the periphery of institutional models of care, we suggest that sensory awareness is key to understanding how people experience care and respond to it emotionally. In this light, sensory care offers an analytical toolkit for bridging theory and practice, showing how the bodily and emotional aspects of care are shaped, disrupted, or reconfigured in particular contexts. While rooted in our practical work in migration and health contexts, sensory care can be adapted to geriatric wards, early childhood education, end-of-life care, community-based social services, and a wide range of other contexts in which the bodily dimension of care matters and multisensory engagement can enhance empathy, dignity, and belonging.

In what follows, we unfold sensory care in four steps: first, we situate the concept at the intersection of care studies and sensory ethnography. Then, we introduce the method of "asking bodies and synchronising senses" as a particular practice which links clinical intervention with everyday sensorial attunement. Two ethnographic vignettes follow: one drawn from hospice work and the other from group-based therapy. Each vignette illustrates how sensory dissonances can be softened and new affective alignments formed. In the final section, we explore the potential of sensory care beyond clinical contexts, suggesting how its principles might inform urban design and ecological responsiveness in an age of migration and climate change.

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Understanding "Sensory Care"

The concept of sensory care, which conveys the idea that care, affect, and the senses are inextricably interwoven, builds on our engagement (von Poser & Willamowski, 2020; Stumpfögger et al., 2022; Willamowski, 2025) with two intersecting trends that are rarely examined together: the study of care as an affective and relational process, and the role of the senses in shaping lived experience. We understand care as a relational phenomenon that extends beyond the dichotomy of care-giver and care-receiver—a profoundly affective process that transcends categorial boundaries, connecting individuals, families, institutions, broader societal structures, and even nation-states (Drotbohm & Alber, 2015). Care operates across private and professional settings and is shaped by norms, regulations, and emotional dynamics.

Sensory studies, meanwhile, have emphasized how multisensory interactions and embodiment fundamentally shape human experience. Sensory ethnography scholars such as Sarah Pink (2015) and David Howes (2023) argue that it is important to recognize how the relationality and multimodality of sensory perception inform people's engagements with their social and material environments. In therapeutic fields such as psychiatry, psychotherapy, and psychology, sensory perceptions are also central to emotional responses and affective experiences. However, traditional models have tended to isolate individual sensory inputs rather than examining them as interwoven affective dynamics. Sensory care addresses this gap by shifting the focus away from single-sense experiences—such as touch, which is often privileged in medical settings (Christensen et al., 2023)—toward a synesthetic understanding, where sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch[2] coalesce in shaping care encounters (Nichter, 2008; Hänni, 2023). By acknowledging this interplay of all senses, care-givers may gain deeper insights into the well-being and needs of those they care for. Therefore, we believe that the analytical significance of the affective interplay of care, the senses, and multisensoriality requires more articulation and a clear framework for capturing those affective dynamics. These insights stem from our longitudinal research on psychosocial care among Vietnamese communities in Berlin, where we observed how embodied memories and sensory environments influence emotional well-being and the social quality of care encounters. These affective dimensions of care are not simply cognitive or verbal; they emerge through bodily intensities, pre-reflective habits, and ingrained sensory practices (von Poser et al., 2019). Over time, individuals and communities develop sensory repertoires, as habitualized sensory orientations toward the world, that carry affective weight. When these repertoires are disrupted, through migration, illness, or institutional displacement, emotional dissonance and alienation may result (Willamowski, 2025).

This is why we situate sensory care within frameworks of embodiment and affect. It helps illuminate how culturally and personally shaped sensory expectations condition experiences of comfort, distress, or well-being. As the vignette of the "final taste of home" will later illustrate, these dissonances become particularly acute when institutional settings misalign with sensory memory and expectation. Sensory care, in this sense, is a deep form of immersion that engages all the senses to foster *affective relationality* (Slaby, 2019) and enhance care relationships. While applicable in many settings, its value becomes especially clear in migratory contexts, where sensory disconnects intersect with racism, institutional exclusion, and unequal structures of belonging and attending to the senses becomes a potent tool for fostering culturally attuned, empathetic care.

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Making Sense of Sensory Care: Asking Bodies and Synchronizing Senses

The concept of sensory care encapsulates the idea that our very sense of knowing and being in the world, of relating to others, and of caring for the self and others is fundamentally based on embodied and often non-verbal enactments, emerging from a multitude of interactions with bodies, places, objects, and environments. Sensory care, thus, addresses the previously mentioned gap in research on care encounters by shifting attention beyond isolated sensory modalities, showing how taste, smell, sight, sound, and touch together shape the emotional resonance of caregiving. Rather than simply promoting a particular approach, sensory care functions as a powerful conceptual tool, helping researchers and practitioners to identify modes of sensory dissonance or neglect in institutional settings. By illuminating these overlooked dimensions, sensory care emphasizes how a more holistic engagement with embodied experience can foster empathy, cultural attunement, and more inclusive, and hence more effective, care. Building on these insights, our interdisciplinary research team designed a psychoeducational process combining cognitive and sensory approaches throughout the therapeutic process, resulting in stronger patient compliance and sustainable integration of therapeutic strategies into daily life.

At the heart of this process lies what Anita and Edda have described as the practice of "asking bodies and synchronizing senses" (von Poser & Willamowski, 2020, p. 626), a concept grounded in work with patients participating in sensory-focused group activities. These activities directly engaged patients' embodied memories, allowing them to process emotions without relying solely on verbal communication. The goal was not to revisit trauma but to reactivate the knowing body, to work with what is ingrained in the body and what becomes affectively charged through the body in movement and relation. It is important to keep in mind that many participants lacked the vocabulary to articulate feelings of estrangement and discomfort related to migration or racism. Sensory interventions thus offered a tangible mode of expression (see Nguyen et al., 2021).

The therapeutic process, led by the psychiatrists and accompanied by the anthropologists in our team, began by acknowledging affective efforts linked to migration, often hard to grasp due to the fleeting and silenced nature of such experiences: feelings of displacement, loss, non-belonging, or identity struggles. Developing sensory care as a conceptual toolkit allowed us to move beyond purely cognitive models of caregiving. It highlighted the body's crucial role in perceiving and responding to others' needs, drawing on and expanding affect theory by incorporating sensory dynamics. In this process, bodies were "asked" and senses synchronized to counteract habitual negative perceptions associated with depression or dislocation. For instance, Tam, the leading psychiatrist in our team, used opaque boxes containing scent samples. Patients were asked to describe what they smelled, what associations the scent triggered, and how it connected to other senses (→ *Olfactory Affect*). Similar exercises revealed how negative mood states can distort sensory perception, flattening experience into either "happy" or "sad" moods. Sensory care, by contrast, revealed nuanced affective gradations. So, these exercises became reminders of emotional complexity and embodied memory, reconnecting patients to their own affective subtlety. They also provided clinicians with a concrete, sensory-based method to observe and work with emotions, bypassing linguistic limitations.

The relevance of sensory care becomes tangible when viewed alongside further findings from our research with Vietnamese communities in Berlin. Although their biographies and

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migration trajectories are diverse—marked by historical divides, political differences, and related emotional tensions (von Poser et al., 2017; Ta et al., 2021)—they nevertheless share foundational sensory experiences from early life in their country of birth: specific foods, scents, or familiar songs. These shared affective memories, alongside experiences of racial discrimination and socio-cultural displacement in Germany, profoundly shape their life-worlds and reveal why culturally sensitive sensory care can be so impactful (Heyken et al., 2019; Müller et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2021; Stumpfögger et al., 2022; Tuturea et al., 2023; von Poser et al., 2019; von Poser & Willamowski, 2020; Willamowski, 2025).

This lens shows that care is inherently embodied and affectively rich, shaped not only by interpersonal interaction but also by the sensory environments in which care unfolds. In exploring how care is given, received, and contested, sensory care opens new avenues for researchers and practitioners who seek to recognize culturally specific sensory repertoires or identify what we call sensory dissonances—that is, mismatches between the familiar sensory cues patients yearn for and the institutional environment's actual offerings. While it may inspire more holistic approaches to professional caregiving, we see this as one application, rather than the concept's defining aim. Sensory care, ultimately, is a framework for analyzing how synesthetic and embodied factors shape relational dynamics across diverse care settings. To understand this better, consider the following example, which we call "the final taste of home."

The Final Taste of Home

During encounters with volunteers from an intercultural hospice organization striving to provide culturally sensitive care, Max—one of the anthropologists of our team—realized the emotional significance, and the structural neglect, of a form of care that centers on sensory and embodied experience. The hospice workers provided end-of-life care for elderly Vietnamese individuals in nursing homes and hospitals, working to diversify these institutional spaces. Yet frequent sensory dissonances often undermined these efforts and made dying a more alienating experience. The materiality of food and the multisensorial nature of eating play a central role in this dynamic, since "[n]ext to breathing, eating is perhaps the most essential of all human activities, . . . with which much of social life is entwined" (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002, p. 102). Hospice clients of Vietnamese origin often find the cold, dense German evening meals—rye bread, butter, cheese, sausages—unsuitable, especially when ill or dying. By contrast, Vietnamese culinary routines usually include warm meals consumed throughout the day. In old age or poor health, warm, soothing rice porridge, often enriched with herbs, ginger, or shredded chicken, is considered profoundly nourishing and craved for. Its familiar texture, aroma, and flavor provide physical comfort, emotional grounding, and a sense of belonging that reconnects the body to home and kin and engages a cascade of different senses and related affective registers (→ *Home Feelings*).

One hospice volunteer told Max that patients would often ask for "a final taste of home"—a warm, familiar dish. He explained that, when the smell reached their noses, he could see how they immediately felt a deep sense of comfort by connecting the multicolored ensemble of familiar herbs as well as the scent and taste of other ingredients to their home country. As the spoon touched their lips, some were able to let go and peacefully pass away shortly after. This ethnographic anecdote illustrates how subtle multisensory alignments—familiar smells, tastes, and visual cues—can restore dignity and comfort in a patient's final moments.

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Attuning to Care: Care as Sensory Intervention

Another illustrative example of sensory care comes from the phenomenological go-alongs method, in which patients from the specialized outpatient clinic for Vietnamese migrants participated in shared activities outside the clinical setting. The anthropologists of our team accompanied patients on excursions, observing and engaging with their immediate sensory experiences and emotional responses. Previously, patients within the group often felt affective dissonances due to differing migration backgrounds—refugees who fled Vietnam after the socialist reunification of the country and arrived in West Germany and former socialist contract workers from East Germany who still support the current government of the Communist Party. These excursions became expanded therapeutic spaces, where sensory experiences helped form an *ephemeral community of care* (von Poser & Willamowski, 2020), bridging political divides and fostering mutual support.

Developed jointly by the anthropologists and the treating psychiatrists, these encounters extended psychotherapeutic treatment. They not only enabled the recovery of silenced knowledge but also became lasting tools of meaning-making. Participants' modes of being changed markedly when moving through social, material, and spatial environments, compared to when they primarily talked about such impactful interactions in the clinical setting. They unearthed and verbalized hidden stressors in concrete situations of affecting and being affected by others. Later, in therapy, they addressed and contextualized these formerly hidden stresses and hard-to-communicate strains, facilitating overall deeper reflection and contextualization.

For instance, during a visit to Berlin's Botanical Garden, the warmth and humidity of the greenhouse, the visual beauty and the familiar scents of plants from their youth, and the tactile experience of leaves and flowers allowed participants to transcend feelings of alienation temporarily. The immersive multisensory environment enabled the patients to share vulnerability and exchange in a new mode of belonging. Described as reminiscent of a mutual home, the warmth and humidity reactivated embodied memories and paved the way for sensory connection. Sharing homemade food afterward led to conversation about recipes and regional cuisines, further dissolving mistrust and building bonds across political differences. These moments of shared sensory engagement—once again via the medium of food—helped to dissolve barriers of mistrust and isolation that had previously characterized their interactions (von Poser & Willamowski, 2020).

This vignette illustrates how sensory care anchors embodied and emplaced experiences in therapeutic care settings. Through sensory intervention, participants re-established a sense of agency, re-connected nonverbally, and fostered a sense of community (Willamowski, 2025). Leaving the *affective arrangement* (Slaby et al., 2019) of a psychiatric outpatient department of a hospital and venturing outside created new forms of emotional support through shared sensory experiences. Subsequently, participants could more easily express distress and the underlying feelings in therapy, prompting us to note an improved capacity for self-articulation.

Sensory cues also played a crucial role in developing and maintaining care relationships in the clinical setting. Care-givers interpret facial expressions, tones of voice, and gestures to assess needs and respond appropriately. In psychotherapy, the *Emotion-Affect-Model* (Stiglmayr & Leihener, 2015) explains how sensory stimuli, like a soothing sound or harsh light, trigger a calming memory or evoke discomfort. Just as the Botanical Garden reactivated embodied memory, the guided Bamboo Meditation in our group therapy intentionally used sensory imagery to evoke comfort and resilience. Guided by a calm voice

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during this meditation, patients were invited to relax by deep breathing and visualizing a bamboo grove. Tam, a Vietnamese medical doctor trained as a certified psychiatrist and psychotherapist in Germany, knew that bamboo stands for strength, flexibility, and belonging for Vietnamese patients. In diasporic contexts, it can evoke powerful memories of the homeland, symbolizing rootedness and emotional refuge. The multisensory visualization included rustling leaves, the scent of fresh bamboo, and the feeling of touching sturdy stalks. This exercise grounded participants in the present while activating layered sensory memory.

Thus far, we have mainly focused on care as a sensory intervention that can highlight ways to foster more empathetic connections. These positive effects are, in fact, what our interdisciplinary team has been working toward from the beginning of our shared research, striving to bring anthropological, psychiatric, and psychological perspectives into an interdisciplinary serious and critical dialogue. Yet it would be naïve to overlook the potentially adverse effects these interventions may entail in practice. By deepening the awareness of affective and sensory dynamics, sensory care can open avenues for enriched care encounters; at the same time, it also exposes care-givers to intense stimuli that can lead to emotional exhaustion—a phenomenon known as the "cost of caring" or "compassion fatigue" (Figley, 1995). These concepts highlight the burden on care-givers who, through empathetic attunement, absorb distressing experiences. Our team has documented how sounds of crying or visible pain trigger empathy and the need to provide immediate care and comfort from the side of the care-giver (see Stumpfögger et al., 2022). Anthropologists, too, engaged in immersive fieldwork methods on the basis of *affective scholarship* (Stodulka et al., 2018) may experience similar emotional strains as they deeply connect with participants' lifeworlds. In view of this, research as well as therapy based on sensory care must also pay attention to maintaining *sensory self-care*.

Outlook: Integrating "Sensory Care" into Care Practices

Building on our research in migrant healthcare, we have observed how sensory engagements—such as sharing familiar foods, participating in culturally significant activities, or collective movements through specific affective arrangements—strengthen the relationship between care-givers and care-receivers. In our work with Vietnamese communities in Berlin, sensory cues such as the aroma of traditional dishes, familiar music, or the shared act of singing have facilitated deeper connections that transcend barriers.

A vital domain for sensory care is a holistic end-of-life care, where sensory interventions can help craft dignified and, if needed in diasporic contexts, culturally sensitive environments for patients in hospice and palliative settings. By integrating familiar scents, music, or tactile materials into these caring spaces, care-givers in conversation with the dying can co-create conditions in which the latter experience a sense of comfort, home, and belonging in their final moments—easing the transition into dying and death. At the same time, sensory care serves as a diagnostic lens—revealing how institutional settings privilege some sensory norms while marginalizing others, thereby shaping experiences of dignity, alienation, or neglect. Future research might explore how such sensory-optimized environments could expand beyond clinical settings into community-based and public care spaces—responsive to diverse cultural, spiritual, and affective needs.

More broadly, sensory care offers a framework that can inform any field where relational, embodied, and affective dynamics shape human experience. One such field could

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be urban planning. Sensory care could inspire more inclusive cities that respond to diverse sensory needs across generations and communities. Multisensory public spaces, like parks and/or specially designed areas, might counteract overstimulation, offering urban retreats and green sanctuaries shaped by soundscapes, olfactory cues, and adaptive materials that invite reflection and grounded presence. These environments could serve as critical affective infrastructures, fostering well-being, sensory inclusion, and communal belonging. This perspective is particularly urgent in the face of the climate crisis, which is already transforming the sensory ecologies of everyday life. Rising temperatures, pollution, and deforestation risk severing emotional connections to place and landscape. Planners and urban architects can sustain human-nature relationships even amid instability by embedding sensory care into climate-responsive design. Interventions like reintroducing disappearing scents or preserving threatened soundscapes may evoke immersion, foster connection, trigger feelings of nature immersion, and lead to tangible engagement with ecological change.

In sum, sensory care is not only a valuable approach for migration-related healthcare but also a forward-looking conceptual framework, helping us imagine and create environments attuned to embodied, relational, and affective human needs. Embracing the principles of *Affective Societies*, which understand the world as constructed, sustained, and transformed through relational dynamics, we can center the senses in redesigning institutions and shared worlds. From clinical settings to ecological futures, sensory care offers a way to think beyond cognitive and procedural models of care and toward an embodied, affective, and multisensory understanding of what it means to create environments in which people can flourish.

Notes

1 This chapter grows out of our work with the *Network for Mental Health for Vietnamese Migrants and Their Descendants* (Ta et al., 2021), which we—a longstanding collaborative group of anthropologists, psychiatrists, and psychologists—have co-established and supported from its beginnings. The establishment of the network relates to our long-term research, which is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) as part of three interdisciplinary research projects (2015–19; 2019–23: project A02; 2023–27: project D03) of the Collaborative Research Centre 1171 "Affective Societies: Dynamics of Social Coexistence in Mobile Worlds" (https://www.sfb-affective-societies.de).

2 While we focus here on the five traditionally recognized senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell—we acknowledge that many scholars also include additional modalities, among them proprioception (awareness of body position), equilibrioception (sense of balance), chronoception (sense of time), and interoception (awareness of internal bodily states). These senses can also shape caregiving interactions by influencing how individuals perceive their bodies, the passage of time, and their sense of comfort, ultimately affecting how they communicate needs, emphasize with others, and experience care. Recognizing this even broader spectrum of the senses underscores the importance of integrating all relevant sensory dimensions into care encounters to foster more holistic and empathetic support.

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10

AFFECTIVE TREATMENT

Taoyi Yang

This chapter introduces the concept of *affective treatment*. It refers to a social practice through which individuals seek to address affective comportments (e.g., sensations, feelings, emotions, moods) that are perceived by them as "ill" signs and symptoms, such as chronic pain, stress, loneliness, or exhaustion. In doing so, these actors establish specific forms of *affective relationality* (Slaby & Röttger-Rössler, 2018) and realign their embodied experiences of affect with socially and culturally shaped values and norms of health, well-being, and healing. This concept offers an innovative perspective on contemporary self-care and self-treatment practices by emphasizing the inextricable entwinement of *affect* and personally perceived and socially shaped values and norms of health and illness in care processes.

With the popularization of medical and therapeutic knowledge and discourses and the everyday influence of mass media, non-clinical domains are becoming increasingly permeated by the idea of "treatment." The treatment conception, along with affective or emotional reflexivity (→ *Emotional Reflexivity*), propels individuals to "treat" affective states perceived as threatening health, well-being, and the "normalcy" of daily life. These treatment practices extend beyond conventional/orthodox/standard/Western/allopathic medical models by attending not to "disease" (Kleinman, 2020) but to the lived, felt, and socially and culturally shaped distress or "illness" (Kleinman, 2020), and therefore include everyday self-care and self-treatment activities. Examples range from meditation, visiting a folk healer, and sports to pet interactions, music listening, and engaging with media like talk shows or autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) videos.[1] In these practices, individuals actively cultivate affective relationships and modulate affective comportments by interacting with both human and nonhuman entities, including other persons, animals, artworks, food, technologies, and media, through the lens of health and illness.

Findings from digital ethnographic research indicate that contemporary affective treatment is characterized by two core features: sensoriality and performativity. Individuals primarily understand their bodies, health, well-being, and the external world through sensory engagement. Their embodied experience, mediated by the senses, may remain as nonconceptual and pre-verbal sense perceptions or evolve into conceptually informed feelings and emotions through language and discourse. Sensory experiences are crucial in registering

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affect and structuring treatment, particularly in interactions between humans and digital media. The performative aspect involves individuals actively adjusting their bodies and arranging digital media, devices, and environments to establish specific forms of affective relationality, modulate affects, and perform treatment. This chapter aims to elucidate the concept of affective treatment and demonstrate its application in contemporary digital technology and media use.

Conceptualizing Affective Treatment

I propose the concept of affective treatment to better understand self-treatment and its prevalence in the contemporary digital age. By "treatment," I do not mean a clinical intervention of the body (Foucault, 2003) in the conventional biomedical model, such as surgeries, psychopharmacology, or hormonal treatments. Instead, I refer to "treatment" as a mundane, performative, and experiential healing practice that has long existed in traditional and folk medicine, healing rituals, and everyday self-help regimens, through which individuals seek to mitigate or banish signs and symptoms that symbolize and are subjectively and affectively experienced as "illness" (Kleinman, 2020). In this sense, affective treatment can be conceived of through the human repertoires of responding to affective experiences of unwellness and suffering.

"Affect" is foundational to conceptualizing affective treatment. Treatment as a performative and experiential healing practice is constituted through individuals' interactions and relations with people and nonhuman entities, such as therapists/healers, family, friends, food, pets, natural environments, media, and devices. Following the definition of affect as relational dynamics between human and nonhuman bodies (Slaby & Mühlhoff, 2019, p. 27), treatment is full of such dynamics. It cannot be simply equated with those fixed discursive concepts as shown in the modern taxonomy of treatment—standard medical care (biomedicine-based), complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), or psychotherapy. In practice, what individuals seek is very often a treatment that can effectively alleviate ill signs and symptoms regardless of its discursive paradigm. For instance, people living with chronic illnesses turn to CAM because it can better manage relevant symptoms than biomedicine (Sointu, 2012). These ill signs and symptoms usually manifest as specific affective comportments, such as pain, nausea, perturbation, or anxiety, propelling suffering individuals to seek treatment. Apart from seeking clinical interventions, they might take over-the-counter medication, eat differently, make herbal remedies, or confide in a reliable person with traumatic stories. In these self-care and self-treatment practices, they build affective interactions and relationships with human and nonhuman entities to change affective experiences and emotional states, according to their internalized social and cultural values and norms of health and well-being.

Affective treatment can thus be delineated as a concept distinct from well-known constructs like emotion regulation (Gross, 2008), emotion work, or emotion management (Hochschild, 1979), though they all involve modifying emotions and feelings. This distinction can be made is first because these more established concepts are typically seen as cognitive or at least cognitively initiated strategies. The concept of emotion regulation dismisses relational interconnectedness and dynamics in a social situation that lead to a regulation outcome. The concept of emotion work or emotion management neglects the role of subliminal and embodied parts of feelings and emotions in galvanizing human actors, equating "true" feelings with

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suppressed and managed emotions, turning "all socially expressed affect into affectation" (Burkitt, 2014, p. 131). Second, neither the classic emotion regulation framework nor the traditional concept of emotion management was originally oriented toward health or healing per se. They describe how emotions are controlled, not explicitly why or how this contributes to health and well-being. While effective emotion regulation contributes significantly to mental health, affective treatment provides a different analytic lens—one that captures the socially and culturally embedded, situated affective shifts as a core component of supporting health and well-being. These affective shifts are intricately entangled with socially and culturally shaped perceptions and understandings of health, illness, and healing. Subjects in affective treatment do not simply pursue bodily and emotional relief but also assess this relief and reflexively adjust their interactions and relations according to socially and culturally acknowledged standards of health and well-being. Relaxing by indulging in alcohol or tobacco, for example, is often considered unhealthy in modern cultures and cannot be considered affective treatment in modern societies.

In affective treatment, affects "energize" human actors to curate affective relationships toward health and well-being, yet this process is inevitably accompanied by the problematization and treatment of unbalanced or distressing experiences of affect. In this regard, affective treatment as a form of self-care can be distinguished from, though it may overlap with, self-care and wellness promotion framed within self-improvement (e.g., Ziguras, 2004; Illouz, 2008) and self-optimization (Röcke, 2021). Affective treatment regards "the self" as intrinsically relational and underscores existential values, aligning more closely with "an art of existence/living" (Foucault, 1990) as found in Greco-Roman medicine and regimen. Unlike contemporary self-improvement discourses that prioritize the optimization of the individual, affective treatment cannot be reduced to the formation or transformation of an ethical subject alone. In contemporary societies, individuals seek to cope with certain feelings and emotions, such as pain, weariness, loneliness, exhaustion, or anxiety, because these affective experiences and emotional states threaten or disrupt personal health, well-being, and the perceived "normalcy" of daily life. It is an affective practice in response to everyday suffering, as part of human repertoires. For example, one might apply essential oils and listen to ambient nature sounds to facilitate sleep, relax the body, and ease mental burdens associated with job burnout, family instability, or the distressing overflow of information related to war, recession, or climate crises. While this sleep ritual and a good sleep cannot resolve personal struggles and structural precarity, it can at least provisionally alleviate discomfort, maintain health, and sustain a functional rhythm of everyday life.

Affective treatment has its cultural and historical forms. Extensive research on traditional and folk medicine and healing rituals in medical anthropology and the history of medicine (e.g., Csordas, 1994; Zhang, 2007; Stolberg, 2011; Nutton, 2012) has demonstrated this, including treatment or healing ideas and practices shown in Greco-Roman medicine, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), Ayurvedic and Yogic healing, charismatic Christian healing, and other traditions. In these forms of treatment, significant transitions in affect—experienced through interactions with people, food, drink, and the environment—are often seen as signs or causes of health and illness. Modulating affect by (re-)engaging with various human and nonhuman entities is central to treatment. For example, TCM has long recognized the connection between bodily states and health, emphasizing that excessive environmental and affective influences (e.g., wind, cold, heat, dampness) and excessive emotions (e.g., fear, worry, fright) disturb the body's energy flow (Qi 气). Its treatment

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often involves acupuncture and herbal remedies aimed at modulating affect and restoring equilibrium (e.g., Zhang, 2007). Similarly, charismatic Christian healing rituals rely on the sensory dimensions of sound, touch, and environmental arrangements in churches to alter affective states, addressing both physical ailments (e.g., pain, mobility issues, hearing impairments) and emotional or biographical trauma (Csordas, 1994). In Europe, 16th- and early 17th-century physicians still practiced humoral medicine, primarily aiming to regulate excess heat, cold, moisture, or dryness (Stolberg, 2011, p. 25). Patients frequently sought medical advice on dietetics and physical and sexual activities for self-care and self-treatment (Stolberg, 2011, p. 44), in which intense passions and suppressed emotions were widely regarded as powerful causes of disease and illness (Stolberg, 2011, p. 43). Much of what was then considered "palliative" medicine aimed at treating bodily and affective symptoms, including the widespread use of opiates for pain management until the late 19th century (Stolberg, 2011, p. 30).

In modern societies, affective treatment as a form of self-care and self-treatment exists at the margins of expert-driven medical care while sometimes challenging its exclusions and limitations. This can be understood as an outcome of the institutionalization of biomedicine, the prevalence of medical and health knowledge, and the rise of mass media in modern societies. Given the need for professional and scientific expertise and techniques in standard medical care, expert-driven medical treatment and self-treatment significantly diverge. Symptoms and signs signifying illness for laypersons and practitioners/healers of traditional and folk medicine may not qualify as standardized syndromes for clinical diagnoses and treatment within biomedical reasoning (e.g., Kleinman, 2020; Zhang, 2007). Meanwhile, the popularization of health and therapeutic knowledge via mass media has significantly expanded and enhanced personal and public consciousness and reflection on health and well-being (Ziguras, 2004). This knowledge is pluralistic, encompassing biomedical, psychological, and alternative therapeutic and healing traditions. While biomedicine remains dominant in modern healthcare systems, medical anthropological research (e.g., Kleinman, 1980) has demonstrated cross-cultural medical and therapeutic pluralism in both healthcare and everyday health and well-being practices. For instance, a broad range of health-related issues and movements that have become prevalent since the 1970s in Western societies enfold different types of health knowledge and therapeutic discourses, such as vegetarianism, the natural health movement, occupational health, the women's health movement, the New Age Movement, community health, consumerism in health, and critiques of medical practice. These alternative health discourses provide abundant resources for individuals to choose affective treatment practices that align with their needs and beliefs.

While capitalism and neoliberalism have undoubtedly shaped and commodified affective treatment, it is equally important to recognize its potential for empowerment and resistance, particularly for marginalized groups. As Black feminist scholarship argues, self-care is not self-indulgence but self-preservation (Lorde, 2017, p. 130). Through feminist affective reflexivity and "affective solidarity" (Hemmings, 2012), self-care and self-treatment may develop as emancipative power for sustainable feminist politics of transformation. In her fieldwork on Black lesbians' clinical experiences with gynecologists and their spiritual self-care practices in Brazil, Falu (2019, 2020) found that the negative affect and emotions her interlocutors experienced in gynecological clinics, such as shame, anguish, and emotional injury, propelled them to critically reflect on and question racialized and gendered norms implicated in medical technologies and the gynecologists' attitudes and practices. Some of

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them chose to avoid certain gynecological procedures or turn to spiritual cleansing rituals from African-descended traditions to deal with the negative experiences of affect and enact self-healing.

Beyond explicitly health-related activities, such as sports, yoga, or dietary practices, research on therapeutic landscapes (e.g., Rathmann, 2021), materialities of care (Buse et al., 2018), and the East Asian healing boom (Roquet, 2009; Wu, 2017) suggests that individuals also perform care and affective treatment by creatively engaging with nonhuman entities less explicitly associated with health and well-being. Recreational activities such as walking a dog, visiting seaside resorts, or strolling in urban forests can function as affective treatment. In East Asia, the term "healing" (e.g., "治愈" zhiyu in Chinese, "癒し" iyashi in Japanese, "힐링" in Korean) describes practices and encounters that evoke "a feeling of peacefulness," enabling individuals to temporarily "forget their troubles and feel at ease" (Roquet, 2009, p. 88). Activities such as browsing images and videos of animals, having a satisfying meal, playing with cats in a cat café, or watching anime can all generate a healing effect, demonstrating the capacity of recreational activities and involved entities in alleviating "ill" affective experiences and emotional states.

The role of digital media in affective treatment is increasingly significant. Through computer- or internet-mediated technologies, digital media do not merely enhance the traditional mass media's role in producing and disseminating health and therapeutic knowledge and discourses. They are also critical to the global and everyday circulation and contagion of affect and emotion. Research in sociology, media and communication studies, and science and technology studies (e.g., Hansen, 2006; Paterson, 2007; Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012) has demonstrated that digital media and technologies have changed the scope and experience of affect. This occurs not just through textual and pictorial forms of emotional, linguistic, and discursive communication (Döveling et al., 2018), such as hashtags and emojis, but also sensorially. From a (post-)phenomenological perspective, digital technologies can be conceived of as an extension of human embodiment (Hansen, 2006) and actively mediate and reconfigure sensory experiences (Paterson, 2007). They mimic and rouse not just auditory and visual but also haptic sensory experiences through, for example, high-definition and high-fidelity audiovisual technologies, allowing individuals to experience sensations of connectivity, interest, desire, and attachment. In this sense, individuals' interactions with digital technology and media can generate new forms of affective treatment, such as relaxing by engaging with 4K travel vlogs or ASMR videos, and the concept of affective treatment is indispensable for social scientists to better understand changes and continuities in contemporary self-care and self-treatment practices as well as therapeutic or healing culture in the digital age.

Affective Treatment in Everyday Digital Use

My digital ethnography research on affective treatment suggests how affective treatment, characteristic of performativity and sensoriality, is enacted in the contemporary context of digital technology and media use. Performativity means that affective treatment can be conceived of through *emotion repertoires* (von Poser et al., 2019), in which human actors creatively perform treatment guided by discourse, habits, and bodily and sensory perceptions and experiences afforded in socio-material situations or *affective arrangements* (Slaby et al., 2019). Sensoriality means that individuals' interactions with digital media, technologies,

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and material surroundings are intrinsically sensorial, especially regarding the audiovisual generation of haptic sensation. To illustrate this, I concentrate on two cases of Jade and Adah engaging with ASMR videos.

Jade, a university teacher in South Korea, likes to listen to role-play ASMR videos to help with sleep. She lives alone with 16 cats and has experienced chronic pain and sleep difficulties since a car accident 10 years ago left her with a deformed leg. To manage stress from work, disability, and physical discomfort, Jade regularly watches role-play ASMR videos. Her favorite ASMRtist, "Latte ASMR," offers scenarios such as school lice check, or flight attendant sleep care services, which Jade finds calming and reassuring. Jade described how she usually listened to ASMR videos for sleep. She first watches a few minutes of an ASMR video to familiarize herself with the content. Then, she turns off the lights, places her phone beside her pillow with the screen down and the volume low, and ensures "pure darkness" so she can feel as if "it's almost like a person or something being next to you" (interview transcript—November 16, 2023). She lies down on the sofa bed with a heating pad to alleviate her pain, preferring the living room over the bedroom because her cats snuggle up to her, and she can feel their warm bodies and soft fur. In the darkened space, Latte's "caring" and "soothing" voice, combined with the "very relaxing" purring sound, helps Jade fall asleep smoothly (interview transcript—November 16, 2023).

Similarly, Adah, a Cameroonian working in Germany, incorporates non-role-play ASMR videos into her relaxation routine. She finds her job demanding and her daily life exhausting, given the extensive calculations and programming required at work, as well as the challenges of adapting to an unfamiliar lifestyle and cultural differences, including experiences of discrimination. After work, she unwinds by watching ASMR videos outdoors in her backyard for two to three hours, particularly on pleasant days. It is a very peaceful backyard, enveloped by a lawn decorated with flowers. When leaning back in a chair, Adah said she enjoys the rustling of leaves in the light breeze from distant trees, the crisp scent of fresh greenery, and the occasional birdsong or faint voices of passersby. Adah prefers to watch ASMR videos without earphones, letting the sounds blend seamlessly with the natural outdoor ambiance to aid relaxation.

As the two cases show, individuals who seek treatment, like Jade and Adah, were not passively affected by online media and digital devices. They were curating situations with practical awareness by orchestrating the employment of digital media, devices, and heating pads; interacting with animals; and sensing the bedroom and the backyard to modulate affects. They established specific forms of affective relationality with various nonhuman bodies vis-à-vis situatedness, allowing themselves to be affected in certain ways and to help treat pain, stress, and exhaustion. Their experiences of suffering from everyday life, habits of engaging with digital devices, sleep, and enjoying nature, as well as sensory perceptions and responses in the situations constitute emotion repertoire, guiding them to enact the practice of engaging with ASMR videos as affective treatment. Such performativity of affective treatment can help understand why recreational objects and activities that seem unrelated to health and therapy, not only ASMR videos but also casual games, travel vlogs, music, and so forth, can be employed to foster well-being.

Another core feature of affective treatment revealed in these cases is sensoriality (→ *Sensory Care*). Both Jade and Adah engage multiple sensory modalities, including visual, auditory, and haptic (Paterson, 2007) senses: Jade "saw" the ASMR visual images and the darkness, "heard" the ASMRtist's soothing voice and the cats' purring, and also haptically sensed the

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warm heating pad and cat body as well as sensed the playing phone as though someone accompanied her. Adah "saw" the ASMR visual images and the greenery in the backyard; "heard" the rustling leaves, bird-singing, and faint talking sounds of passers-by; and also haptically sensed the tingling triggered by the ASMR videos and the breeze gently brushing her skin. Most importantly, the audiovisual representation on digital media induces non-representational haptic sensations (i.e., the position of the sound, the proximity of hand movements in visuality, and the ASMR sensation), creating multi- and intersensorial experiences. These sensations and changes registered how they were affected by other bodies and how their "ill" signs were alleviated.

Despite these shared sensory engagements, the specific ways in which Jade's and Adah's sense perceptions contribute to their relaxing affective experience and their enactment of affective treatment diverge. In Jade's case, the meaning of her sensory experience is largely mediated by the language and discourse of "caring" that are semantically and semiotically communicated by media content. She associated Latte's speech and her playing role with familiar discourses of interpersonal care. In her videos, Latte always plays a caregiver role, such as a colleague providing help and emotional support at the workplace or a flight attendant providing sleep care service. Besides, these videos usually adopt a first-person point of view, where Latte provides care and talks to the camera, helping Jade feel as though she is receiving personal attention and emotional support.

By contrast, the gain of affective traction and the enactment of affective treatment in Adah's case was almost exclusively achieved through the nonconceptual and pre-verbal aesthetic and sensory experiences. In Adah's re-enactment of her ASMR video watching, she said: "when I'm listening to them [the non-roleplay ASMR videos], like I just feel like, I just want to listen to only that ASMR video, like just listening to it and not think about anything else" (interview transcript—March 12, 2024). When she tried to explain how the non-roleplay ASMR videos might help her relax, I noticed the term "light" that she repeatedly used to describe her affective experience of watching the videos, for example, "The end goal is for me to just feel lighter than before." When I asked her about the meaning of "light," she made a comparison with the sensory, affective experiences in her daily life:

> I don't feel light most of the time. . . . I just want to completely empty my head and think about something else so usually like most of the time, in my daily life, we have the work, we have also the interactions with family members for example and things like that, so like all these things that happen in life are usually not meant to make you feel relaxed . . . and these ASMR things or this outdoor exposure that I have is different, different sensations, different feelings.
>
> *(interview transcript—March 12, 2024)*

Different from the role-play ASMR videos that Jade prefers, the non-roleplay ASMR videos shared by Adah do not contain any diegetic elements, such as speech, storylines, plots, characters, or background music. They only show different visual and auditory triggers, mimicking three-dimensional (visual, auditory, and haptic) human sense perceptions. In this way, the healing effect produced by Adah's digital media use is not from the semantic and discursive meaning of interpersonal care as in Jade's case. It is rather generated by the nonconceptual and pre-verbal aesthetic and sensory experience, allowing Adah to temporarily escape from stress and exhaustion that affords much "heavy" meaning, attenuating her mental burdens.

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Outlook

The concept of affective treatment, as proposed in this chapter, explains self-care and self-treatment practices that aim to address unbalanced or distressing affective experiences and emotional states by establishing specific forms of affective relationality and modulating affects, roughly following medically (in a broad sense) and culturally informed health and healing conceptions. While my digital ethnographic research highlights how contemporary digital technology and media generate new forms of affective treatment, such practices also occur in non-digital settings, such as strolling in the woods or engaging with pets. The dominance of biomedicine in modern societies and the popularization of medical and health knowledge have shaped affective treatment as a form of self-care primarily existing outside clinical settings. However, as evident in traditional and folk medical practices, affective treatment has deep historical and cultural roots, revealing its broader significance beyond modern medical and health contexts.

This has at least two key implications for future research. First, the historical continuity regarding affective or emotional reflexivity shown in affective treatment challenges the narrative about (increased) emotional reflexivity as an exclusively modern phenomenon. The increased public expression and discussion of emotions in modern societies may not necessarily reflect an actual rise in emotional reflexivity but rather a preference for verbalized and psychological modes of emotional expression. Embodied, material, and (human-nonhuman) interactive processes are also central to emotional reflexivity. Practices such as ritual healing, sensorial engagements with digital media, and therapeutic landscapes demonstrate that emotional reflexivity is shaped not only by awareness and consciousness of emotion but also by bodily experience, material environments, objects, and technologically mediated interactions. These alternative modalities of emotional reflexivity remain equally significant and require further empirical investigation, particularly within therapeutic cultures and through the lens of cultural, class, and gender differences.

Second, affective treatment is a cross-cultural phenomenon, but the treatment processes are inevitably shaped by distinct social and cultural ideas of health, well-being, and healing. My ethnographic research suggests several cultural differences: the religious and spiritual dimensions of healing in the West, the association of healing with cuteness in East Asian popular culture, and the link between healing and collectivism or growing national pride in China. These cultural scripts might lead to different affective practices of treatment, for example, the prevalence of cute (kawaii), healing (iyashi) media content and toys in Japan. Moreover, even within the same society, specific affective treatment practices might be diverse, intersecting with social stratification and digital divide. Therefore, future research can adopt a cultural comparative perspective, using transcultural surveys and comparative ethnography to investigate and compare different forms of affective treatment, and examine how these forms are distributed across social and cultural groups.

Note

1 ASMR videos are intentionally created media content featuring specific auditory and visual triggers designed to elicit Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response—a pleasant tingling sensation that typically begins on the scalp and moves down the spine, often accompanied by feelings of relaxation and well-being. These videos commonly include triggers like whispering, tapping, or careful movements, and are frequently used for relaxation and sleep aid purposes.

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11

HOME FEELINGS

Gregory Gan

There is no place like home. This chapter points to a productive ambiguity between the home as a physical space that enables feelings, and the home as a subjective site of various attachments, ranging from familial belonging, to entrapment. Feelings toward the home can take on various scales and temporalities, and may be assigned to anything ranging from a simple household object, to the physical structure of a house, and even, as I show in this chapter, to the entire planet. Home feelings are "phenomenologically inextricable" (Thonhauser, 2019, p. 52) from material and sensorial dimensions of being in the world, entangled with infrastructures, discourses, and affective relations. Thus, the concept offers a way to understand concept to understand the relationship between the effects of tangible, material cultures, and intangible ways of being in the world.

Since a home is at once a site, a feeling, and an abstract idea to which anyone can attach their own meaning, it becomes impossible to disentangle the concept from each person's subjective associations with their own home. This concept is therefore relational, inviting the reader to weigh their home feelings against my case studies and analysis. Moreover, the concept is necessarily reflexive, since my mode of inquiry relies on my own lived experience, and informs the concept's theoretical stance.

I grew up in a prefabricated panel-block apartment in a working class neighborhood in Moscow, then the capital of the Soviet Union. For most of my adult life in Canada, I was equal parts embarrassed and enticed to understand my childhood home, returning to conduct anthropological research in Moscow until Russia's war in Ukraine made it impossible to further engage with this theme. This chapter is therefore as much an effort understand this complex relationship, as a study of feelings shaped both by material constraints and by collective imaginations surrounding the built environment. I develop my argument using three ethnographic cases, which demonstrate three interrelated frameworks for understanding home feelings. My first case examines a demolition campaign initiated in Moscow in 2017, in which I consider the home as a material expression of people's thoughts and feelings. In recognizing how migration or displacement shape feelings about the home, my second case traces the historical circulation of Russian diasporic narratives about the home in historical context. Lastly, I consider how postmigrant actors living in Berlin's panel-block neighborhoods

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creatively express their belonging, proposing a holistic understanding of the home as a key site that coalesces material and affective dimensions of lived experience.

Building the Foundation

The concept of home as bound up with feelings can be traced to the writings of seventeenth-century Swiss medical student, Johannes Hofer, who described a peculiar "disease of the imagination" expressed by soldiers longing for their homelands. Hofer coined a Greek neologism "nostalgia" in order to legitimize such feelings in light of a newly developing study of the human brain, making a deliberate distinction between this term and the vernacular German term *Heimweh*, "home woe" (Davis, 2016, p. 18–19). Previously, The process of severing attachments to home has also been associated with the term "diaspora," initially identified with Jews living outside the "Promised land," but which came to denote any dispersed people united by shared feelings toward their ancestral homeland (Baumann, 2000, p. 319). The trope of journeying and return has figured in stories ranging from Homer's *Odyssey*, to the Biblical Parable of the Prodigal Son, and the prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina. Yet this trope is not exclusive to the Western or Islamic canons.

Modern anthropology is said to have originated with Bronislaw Malinowski's (1922/1964) Homeric ethnography *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, which described journeys of ritual exchange among Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea. Malinowski sought to convey in great detail a Trobriand "atmosphere of home" (p. 19), considering the routines of daily life become essential to adapting a crucial to convey Trobriand culture by adapting a "native's point of view" (p. 25). He was also among the first ethnographers to venture into the field, challenging armchair anthropologists who produced their texts from the comfort of their own homes. Caroline Knowles (1999) argues that for an anthropological "field" to exist as a distinct entity, it has to be juxtaposed to the concept of "home" (p. 54). Therefore, anthropologists began to generate ideas about other societies by evaluating their experiences abroad against ideas cultivated "at home." For instance, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962, pp. 16–36) compared different ways of constructing the home as indicative of the difference between Western and mythological systems of thought. If his brand of structuralist theory sought to discover universal patterns that assumed a direct link between space and social organization, Pierre Bourdieu (1970, p. 169) traced how spatial divisions of a Berber home *metaphorically* map the gendered and social hierarchies of Berber society. Bourdieu's insight paved the way for the poststructural concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977), a social process said to imprint itself on the body, and invisibly coordinate social action.

In an early study correlating material culture to feelings, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and sociologist Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1981) suggest that the "things that surround us are inseparable from who we are" (p. 16). The authors propose that objects that we use come to embody our thoughts and emotions, giving "order to our otherwise shapeless selves" (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. 16). Subsequent material culture scholars have mined domestic spaces for clues regarding ideology, identity, and class, considering how the home enables diverse forms of social interaction, behavior, and social and biological (re)production. bell hooks (2001, p. 385) exemplifies these ideas by envisioning the material site of the home as a place of political liberation, arguing that Black women who have been historically denied the time and energy to care for their families consciously built "homeplace" as a site of intimacy, community, and resistance against white supremacy.

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On the other side of the debate, phenomenological approaches considered how we shape our "shapeless selves" through a relational, intersubjective, and experiential approach. Gaston Bachelard (1958, p. 193) has argued that we form our conscious understanding of the world through the "intimate immensity" of our first place of dwelling, our childhood home. In the ethnography *At Home in the World*, Michael Jackson (1995, p. 157) chronicles Warlpiri Aborigines' experiences of homelessness, arguing that the home is a metaphor that mediates the experience of self with others. Tim Cresswell (2004/2015) has proposed that, regardless of scale, the home is "an exemplary kind of place where people feel a sense of attachment and rootedness" (p. 39). Svetlana Boym (2001) pushes the semantic boundary further, stressing that the home is "not really a place," but a "sense of intimacy with the world" (p. 251), and Sara Ahmed (1999) considers the home to be an affective space, "*sentimentalized* as a space of belonging" (pp. 340–341, emphasis in original). The social sciences have gradually come to regard the "home" as an elastic concept whose meaning can range from the physical structure of a house, to a metaphorical concept that encompasses the entirety of the Earth (Tuan, 1991, pp. 101–102). The home can therefore be conceived as a material, metaphorical, and affective place, as well as a site of intimacy, belonging, and political liberation.

My experience growing up in a Soviet-era panel-block apartment—a nine-story building, which housed over a thousand residents across twelve entranceways—has shaped not only my worldview, but also my research orientation. I have periodically returned to my childhood home to examine it as a research site, writing how my former apartment "affectionately preserved objects from [the] past: a glass chandelier, wooden bird whistles, childhood photos behind lacquered wooden bookshelves with glass doors" (Gan, 2019, p. 156). More recently, I sought to understand not only how material attachments shaped my feelings about the home, but how I came to acquire such feelings in the first place, so I began to take historical inventory over changing attitudes toward Soviet and postsocialist homes, beginning with post-war Soviet housing policy.

These Four Walls

The pivotal moment for Soviet industrial mass housing can be narrowed to a speech given by Nikita Khrushchev at the All-Union Conference of Builders in 1954, in which he denounced Stalinist architectural excesses in favor of a new urban planning mandate (Khrushchev, 1954). An industrial campaign to build panel-block apartments would call on modernist ideas to build the material foundations for Soviet society, which was seen to usher in a new socialist consciousness (Reid, 2006, pp. 238–239). Over the next decade, 100 million people would be assigned a single-family apartment in panel-block housing, which came to be nicknamed nickname *khrushchevki*, after their progenitor. Buoyed by technological optimism epitomized by the Soviet Space program, and coupled with the utopian slogan "Communism by 1980" (Ikonnikov, 1995, p. 8), panel-block housing was seen as a temporary solution to the housing crisis, meant to be replaced within twenty five years. Yet seventy years on, most apartment blocks remain standing.

In 2021, I conducted ethnographic research in Moscow and Berlin, asking research participants how they felt about this type of housing. In Moscow, I met Vera—an artist, mother, and caregiver to her own bedridden mother. Vera described her relationship to her home as follows:

> I moved here intentionally, because I belong to the generation that believed that one day, apple trees will blossom on Mars.[1] I was getting ready for spaceflight. My childhood

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> unfolded during this period. This creative spurt was connected to a new, cosmic era. We were young, and the time was young for our ambition; this was felt in this architecture. We dreamed that one day, we would fly from our *khrushchevkas* to Mars.

It has been argued that a socialist "affective geography" (Mizrokhi, 2020) sought to transform people's consciousness by transforming their living conditions. Yet for Vera, the opposite was true. Vera attached nostalgic feelings characteristic of Soviet ideological discourse to her dilapidated, postsocialist panel-block home. Similarly, examining residents' feelings toward their panel-block homes, Susan Reid (2019) heard *khruschevki* described as "palaces of our hearts," highlighting a discrepancy between the material and the felt environment.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the subsequent transition to a neoliberal economic model, resulted in broad societal changes that brought about both material and affective transformations. This is evidenced in my conversation with Sveta, a professional artist who paints urban landscapes, and who shared with me her memories of growing up in a panel-block home:

> We lived in a shared apartment with another family. You enter a kind of environment where neighbors are like relatives, and the courtyard was akin to home. There were no telephones at the time, so all communication happened through an open window. "Sveta, come have lunch!" or, "you didn't finish your homework!" You knew all your neighbors. You knew who was feeding the stray cats, and whose husband would come home drunk. Conflicts, celebrations, funerals, weddings—everything happened before your eyes, because everyone had these standardized apartments. I don't even remember that we had a lock on our door. Only in the late 1990s, when people began to earn money, did a kind of disunity ensue. Families stopped being open with one another.

A federal law enacted in 1991 allowed tenants to privatize formerly state-owned apartments, ushering in Russia's transformation to a market economy (Korableva et al., 2023, p. 89). While privatization created the most valuable asset for the intergenerational transfer of wealth, it also proved "cruelly-optimistic" (Berlant, 2011, p. 95), as it trapped homeowners, particularly women, into lifestyles coherent with patriarchal capitalist logics (Gan, 2010, pp. 29–31).

In 2017, Moscow authorities initiated a program to demolish over 5,000 *khrushchevki* apartment buildings, proposing to move a million and a half inhabitants into newly constructed high-rises. Vera described how the vote to tear down her apartment building came to pass:

> It happened "forced-voluntarily," as we used to say. They came and left papers in our mailbox that our house was going to be "renovated." They were seemingly gathering opinions on "whether you agree or not" to participate in the program. I was the only one in our entranceway who voted against it. I know all the histories of our entranceway. They are all marginal histories. This marginal life that I witness here; this truth of Russian reality, with all its rude neighbors—I am a recipient of this, unfortunately. I don't have a clean well. I have a dirty well.

Pitted against her neighbors and living under threat of demolition following years of political neglect, Vera's revealing metaphor points to profound disenchantment. It also demonstrates

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precisely how material space can shape consciousness, in so far as the home becomes a key site for navigating political demands, negotiating feelings of belonging, and providing a sense of ontological security.

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine. The first images from Ukraine showed panel-block apartments destroyed by Russian shelling, fracturing all notions of home as a place of safety or security. Any positive feelings I may have felt toward my former home were numbed by the devastation of war. I now faced ethical questions about how to act responsibly when my country of birth became a belligerent against a neighboring nation. I ceased all research in Russia, and turned my attention toward supporting people displaced by the war.

A Roof over One's Head

Displacement, migration, and exile are often characterized as unstable experiences connected to feelings of uprootedness and defamiliarization. However, Svetlana Boym (1998, p. 499) suggests that the intimacy of the home is not opposed to such feelings, but constituted by them. In turn, Omar Kasmani (2023) has argued that feelings of alterity may encourage belonging as a form of "thin attachments." While such attachments may be barely perceptible, or even recognizable to the wider public, they bear "political and outward resonance all the same" (p. 227). Using examples from prior ethnographic research, I similarly discuss home feelings as a form of belonging in displacement, an affective relation that bears political resonance.

Between 2015 and 2019, I conducted multi-sited fieldwork with Russian-speaking migrants in Paris, Berlin, and New York (Gan, 2019). Following the Russian Revolution and Civil War, these urban centers became home to Russian exiles fleeing Bolshevik persecution. These so-called "first-wave émigrés" believed that they were preserving "Russia outside Russia," which they hoped to reconstitute after an imminent fall of the Soviet Union. When this did not happen, émigrés doubled down on their irredentist beliefs, holding on to their Imperial Russian passports, and often refusing to receive citizenship from their host countries until their deaths. Having identified historical narratives about migration and exile, I sought to learn whether contemporary narratives by Russian-language narratives borrowed from these earlier tropes.

In 2016 in Berlin, I met Vadim Fadin, a former rocket scientist who engineered the Soviet analogue to the American Space Shuttle. When he and his wife emigrated to Germany in the 1990s, he pursued his dream of becoming a writer. He told me, "We travelled practically like refugees, with two little suitcases. I took with me all of my working material: the Russian language." Reiterating an early twentieth-century trope made popular by Russian émigrés allowed Vadim to assert his belonging to a diasporic literary community. For the last twenty five years, he and his wife have hosted a popular literary salon in their Berlin home.

Vadim's expression of migrant belonging is reflected in a rich literature on diasporic notions of home. In a classic postcolonial text, Homi Bhabha (1994) challenged binary oppositions that consider migration as a loss of home, urging us to rethink the "homeland" from interstitial spaces and non-European positions (p. 269). Similarly, Sarah Ahmed (1999, p. 333) argues that migration is erroneously considered a form of estrangement from home, but that any home involves movement and dislocation within its very formation. Studying the experiences of Vietnamese migrants growing up in Berlin, Birgitt Röttger-Rössler (2018) proposes that belonging may arise, paradoxically, from feeling "out of place." Sheller and Urry (2006) have argued that in such cases, migrants carry the places they leave with them,

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reassembling them "in the material form of souvenirs, textures, foods, colors, scents, and sounds—reconfiguring the place of arrival both figuratively and imaginatively" (p. 211).

If home feelings can be reassembled—and reinvented—abroad using "thin attachments" (Kasmani, 2023) and by sensing oneself "out of place" (Röttger-Rössler, 2018). However, I discovered that homemaking strategies may also be mobilized to domestic cultures can also inadvertently bolster nationalist ideology "at home." Beginning in the early 2000s, the role of the diaspora became strategically important in supporting Russia's new territorial claims. State ideologues began evoking a spiritual, pan-Slavic connection to Russian citizens living abroad, borrowing irredentist émigré narratives that spurned state borders in favor of a pan-Slavic identity termed *russkiy mir*, "Russian world" (Gan, 2019, p. 221). Russia used this ideology to justify its war against Georgia in 2008; to facilitate the 2014 annexation of Crimea; and ultimately, to enable its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russia's war forced me to shift my research to my new home in Germany, where I currently live, and where I discovered another testament to the complexity of home feelings.

Domestic Arrangements

Concrete residential architecture of former East Germany came to epitomize the social transformations that followed German reunification, during which East Germany was effectively absorbed into a West German economic and political model, and East German housing, termed *Plattenbauten*, lost much of its social prestige. However, this type of housing became among the few social housing spaces accessible to migrants, due to a lower eligibility threshold and cheaper rents. Subsequently, *Plattenbauten* were subject to anti-migrant rhetoric, where terms like *Mentalitätsghetto* "mentality ghettos" (Richter, 2006, p. 71) were pejoratively used to equate where people *lived* with who they *were*.

In my preliminary research on this theme, I reviewed an artwork by artist Sung Tieu (2023), who spent a part of her childhood living in an East Berlin *Plattenbau* dormitory with her mother, a migrant contract worker who came to work for the German Democratic Republic from Vietnam. Inside a white box gallery space, Sung recreates her childhood home as an opaque, black, steel frame. Titled *Block G (Gehrenseestrasse, Berlin*), the work uses hard-edge abstraction and minimalist gesture to undermine patronizing attitudes toward postmigrant actors. Reflecting the paradoxes of home, the architecture is laconic and cold, but the frame is filled with soil, enabling "life to emerge" in unexpected places.

A model of a *Plattenbau* home in an art gallery challenges viewers' perception of the distinction between inhabiting space and being inhabited by it, between art and architecture, and between aesthetic experience and felt atmosphere. Tim Ingold (2016) has previously argued that any building is mainly atmosphere: "as much a thing of air, light, sound and mood as it is a construction" (p. 163), and architect Juhani Pallasmaa (2015) contends that "architectural spaces are not just lifeless stages for our activities. . . . Every space, place and situation is tuned in a specific way, and it projects atmospheres that promote distinct moods and feelings" (p. 7). A model *Plattenbau* home, now demolished, becomes a site of feelings when its poetic image enters into consciousnesses "as a direct product of the heart" (Bachelard, 1958, p. xviii). Indeed, when buildings are well designed, architects say that they have empathy, because they resonate with entities that occupy them, thus bringing full circle a material and an affective conception of home feelings.

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Research Outlook

Each of the aforementioned cases illustrates an aspect of home feelings essential to a comprehensive understanding of the concept. My first case illuminated how feelings about the home are framed by wider social and material transformations, especially when such transformations are accompanied by violent state intervention into the home. My second case examined how home feelings can become instrumentalized both across state borders and historical periods. Finally, my last case illustrated how home feelings may lead to material transformations, as when the home gets reinterpreted through a poetic image, and becomes a catalyst for belonging.

The way we feel at—or out of—home is also essential to how we constitute ourselves in the world. Homes can be destroyed and rebuilt, but they may also be emplaced, displaced, carried across long distances, or set-up temporarily, or exist in interstitial zones or borderlands following natural, or human-made disasters. International conventions mandate the provision of adequate housing as a basic human right, yet political entities metonymize geopolitical borders as the boundaries of the home, arousing suspicion and fear against migrants or asylum seekers when they are seen as breaching these imagined thresholds. Home feelings may shift based on political transformations: following German re-unification, citizens of the former German Democratic Republic did not have to travel very far to find their home in a new place. Postsocialist dwelling spaces, initially constructed based on a materialist conception of space intended to encourage collective modes of living, have now been retrofitted with unique façades, mural art, and balconies to promote feelings of individuality in conditions of market capitalism. Similarly, materials such as reinforced concrete, which represented transparency and equality in postwar socialist architecture, have now been appropriated by modern office environments to convey minimalist chic, meant to inspire individual creativity and innovation.

Such readings of home feelings open up complex dimensions of the concept, making it possible to consider infrastructures that give shape to the environments we inhabit as mutually constitutive of materialities, affects, and politics. These "affective arrangements" reveal the home to be an "affect-intensive site of social life" (Slaby, 2019, p. 109) which may promote empathy, or "lay waste to certain people and places, relations, and things" (Stoler, 2008, p. 196). Such varied interpretations of home feelings inspired the animated ethnographic film *Empathy for Concrete Things* (Gan, 2024), in which animated using original watercolours, and which sought to synthesize the material history of twentieth-century architecture with feelings research participants attached to their former socialist panel-block apartments. By expanding our definition of who feels at home and how, the concept of home feelings helps raise fundamental questions about how we collectively organize as a society. If the built environment can encompass such disparate feelings, and if its residents can come to inhabit such dramatically different sensory, affective, and experiential worlds, then home feelings are not so much constrained by material conditions, as they are by the social, political, or affective regimes that enable them, and in that case, indeed, there is no place like home.

Note

1 Here, Vera refers to a line from a popular Soviet song.

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PART III

Institutions, Economy, Media

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12

INSTITUTIONAL AFFECT

Millicent Churcher, Sandra Calkins, Jandra Böttger, and Jan Slaby

Institutions are rich sites of affect. From schools to hospitals to law courts, the many institutions that organize collective life emerge from affective attachments, relations, and tensions of various kinds. Institutions mediate affects and are maintained by them; they are also, sometimes, undone by them. In capturing the place of institutions in complex relations of affecting and being-affected, *institutional affect* offers a critical inroad to understanding institutional life. This concept highlights the interconnection between how institutions are imagined, the physical manifestations of institutions, and how people feel and act in relation to them. Among other things, *institutional affect* helps to explain how institutions exert power without direct enforcement: as, for instance, when first-generation academics experience shame for standing out in their everyday participation in the university. This conceptual lens also allows explaining pathways of institutional change, and why it is that some institutions shift in certain directions over others (consider the German car industry's sluggish transition to ecological sustainability, compared to its swift pivot to weapons production). Moreover, *institutional affect* helps to account for how and why some institutions—for example, the heteronormative family unit—persist, despite clear evidence of their structural violence.

Traditional approaches to institutions have focused mainly on the indispensable rules that structure human societies (Giddens, 1984; Douglas, 1986; North, 1990). Our account builds on this work but also takes into account newer approaches that emphasize the role of symbolism, affect, and embodiment in mediating processes of institutional change (e.g., Patalano, 2007; Puwar, 2014; Seyfert, 2011; Waylen, 2010). Within this field of research, generally speaking, there is a lack of sustained attention to how affect, embodiment, and material arrangements link up with imagination and wider social imaginaries (see Celermajer et al., 2019 for further discussion). *Institutional affect* shows how all of these elements intersect with one another, and are deeply consequential for patterns of institutional discrimination, exclusion, reform, and resilience.

Our framework captures and analyses affective arrangements (Slaby et al., 2019) that emerge from three intersecting dimensions of institutional life: materialities, actors, and imaginaries. Materialities include institutional spaces, architectures, objects, and technologies.

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By actors we mean differently embodied individuals who occupy particular institutional roles or positionings. Imaginaries comprise the stock of guiding images, symbols, narratives, and other significations that permeate a particular institution and which intersect with broader social imaginaries. In their interplay, these dimensions enable, structure, and channel the affective life of institutions (Churcher et al., 2023). *Institutional affect* homes in on the affective ecologies that are bound up with these overlapping dimensions and with asymmetries of power that exist within and echo through institutions.

Institutional affect offers a framework for understanding both institutional stability and rupture. In the following discussion, we draw on the examples of Gisèle Pelicot's sexual assault trial and the authoritarian takeover currently unfolding within the United States to illustrate how the nexus of imaginaries, materialities, and actors factors into the resilience of institutions as well as their transformation.

The Second Life of Institutions

While institutions can be many things, the concept of *institutional affect* primarily concerns itself with institutions that have emerged with modern statehood and which have become solidified in durable material-semiotic structures.[1] Legal institutions, medical institutions, and institutions of education comprise just a few examples of powerful institutions that organize contemporary forms of social and political life through their capacity to harness, generate, and mediate collective imaginings and affective dynamics (Castoriadis, 1975/1987, p. 132). While such institutions play an indispensable role in distributing vital social goods and services, and in implementing rules that help to ensure social order and stability (see, e.g., Desjarlais, 1997; Biehl, 2013; Livingston, 2012; Zoanni, 2019), they can also reflect and work to reinforce dominant societal power structures—in a manner that belies their declared commitments to fairness, equality, and the common good. Consider, for instance, the ordeals that migrants face in their interactions with the legal system (Stumpfoegger et al., 2023); the discrimination that ethnic and racial minorities confront in educational or medical institutions (Shange, 2019; Ewing, 2025; → *Sensory Care*); and the differential treatment that socio-economically disadvantaged persons experience in policing, housing, or state bureaucracy (Guenther, 2019; Puwar, 2004). It is for this reason that established institutions and their "hidden lives" (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Krook & Mackay, 2011) have long been the focus of emancipatory critiques of domination (Boltanski, 2011).

Institutional settings that have historically evolved to reflect and serve the perspectives, values, and interests of powerful social actors at the expense of others can be a parcourse of humiliation, nuisance, and obstruction for the latter, while offering a comfortable dwelling space for the former (Ahmed, 2007, 2012). *Institutional affect* helps to reveal what we call the "second life" of institutions. This life is marked by informal, pervasive, and normalized practices that run counter to an institution's official mission and to which institutional actors and addressees are habituated. Homing in on this second life focuses attention on the lived realities of institutional double standards, and on the affective workings of power and domination beyond the scope of formal institutional rules: invisible divisions and barriers, atmospheric thresholds, unspoken agreements, and many other shades of organized inequality.

Institutional procedures that are marked by hidden dynamics of power rely on the operation of institutional affect for their maintenance and concealment (Churcher et al., 2023;

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von Scheve & Slaby, 2022). For instance, when institutions and their representatives are consistently portrayed in a positive light, this can serve to deny or obscure patterns of institutional bias and wrongdoing. As a result, those who call out injustice may be pathologized or discredited (Ahmed, 2012). Institutional betrayal and gaslighting of this kind can further compound emotions like anger, mistrust, and alienation among those who fail to be served by the institution in question. The cumulative effects of these exclusionary or discriminatory procedures can be significant, as the following discussion elucidates (see also Protevi, 2022).

The Law and Its Affects

The institution of law offers a clear illustration of institutional affect and its bearing on power relations of various kinds. Law, as an institution, cannot be reduced to a functional, coercive entity that lays down legislative rules and directives; rather, it is a rich site of symbolism. Law comprises a "guiding idea" (Hauriou, 1929/1965) or professed mission—for instance, the pursuit and enforcement of justice, to name one plausible articulation.[2] The law also involves an array of addressees and role-bearers (e.g., the judiciary, the police, jurors, lawyers) who are expected to adhere to a particular set of policies and practices in realization of the law's guiding idea. Moreover, enacting the law and its guiding idea relies on various material infrastructures and facilities (e.g., legal documents, courtrooms).

A cluster of evocative metaphors, images, and symbols construct the law as an impartial, benevolent, transcendent institution and the ultimate source of truth and fairness: witness, in Western culture, the embodiment of the law in the figure of Themis—the Greek goddess of justice, wisdom, and divine law—blindfolded and holding a set of balanced scales. Such significations appeal directly to the imagination and work alongside other embedded narratives and images to invite a strong sense of reverence for legal conclusions and the social understandings these conclusions embed. At the same time, this institutional imaginary obfuscates the partial and particularized character of Western law, which has historically evolved to reflect and serve the imaginings, desires, and interests of elite White men. Critical race theorists, for instance, have highlighted the limitations of the law as an instrument for supporting slavery reparations, when it was originally designed to protect, and can still readily be invoked to preserve, the property of privileged White constituencies (see Harris, 1993; Bhandar, 2018; von Redecker, 2020; da Silva, 2022). Under colonial rule, European law travelled across the globe: a facilitator of colonialism, it was wielded to extract land from colonized people and turn them into a force of wage laborers. At the same time, however, this body of law also provided tools for the colonized to resist and challenge the colonial order (Merry, 1991; → *Property as Affect*).

Those with a non-masculine, non-White embodiment tend to occupy a vexed or at least ambiguous place in relation to legal frameworks, norms, and settings. A powerful strand of feminist scholarship has focused on the systemic disadvantages suffered by female survivors of sexual assault under Western legal systems (Manne, 2018; Alcoff, 2019; Craig, 2021). The legal system's strong and uncritical reliance on consistency as a common test of credibility in sexual assault trials offers a case in point: demonstrated inconsistencies in one's statements, in one's post-assault behavior, and in one's recollection of details peripheral to the assault itself could readily sow feelings of distrust among jurors and discredit plaintiffs. Yet a high level of consistency is difficult to satisfy for those with experiences of significant trauma, insofar as such experiences tend to burden one's mental capacities; moreover, being

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perceived as consistent is difficult for those whose group identity is already constructed as lacking moral-epistemic credibility within the broader social imaginary of a culture (Alcoff, 2019). Applying the lens of *institutional affect* to such cases reveals how institutional standards and norms interact with broader cultural imaginaries to generate affective dynamics that disadvantage those who have been excluded from processes of institutional evolution. At the same time, institutional imaginaries can obscure these exclusions, making them harder to recognize or challenge.

Institutional norms and procedures that serve to regulate affective dynamics among embodied actors in courtroom trials are often supported by architectural elements, objects, technologies, spatial layouts, rituals, and a host of other material arrangements (Bens, 2018, 2022; Carline et al., 2024; Mulchahy, 2011; Mulchahy & Rowden, 2019). Participants in the courtroom stand up to signify respect for the judge, and this deferential relation is reinforced by the judge's seated elevation above the gallery. Those actors charged with the burden of proof—the witness and prosecution—are positioned closest to the jury, and those giving testimony must sit isolated in the witness stand opposite members of the gallery. In many courtroom layouts, the accused is seated in close physical proximity to the plaintiff. This material layout and the power relations it indexes can not only trigger the plaintiff's trauma (Ellison & Munro, 2017) but also elicit a sense of being under intense scrutiny and judgment. Set against a dominant cultural imaginary that positions women as *prima facie* untrustworthy and prone to misjudgment, the affective arrangement of the courtroom can readily activate stereotype threat and a cramping of the plaintiff's agentive powers. This dynamic can be consequential for women and their capacity to seek justice, especially given the normative assumption in courtroom trials that one's credibility as a testifier can be gleaned from their embodied, in-court performance (Watson & Schreiber, 2021; Konradi, 1996, 1999; Orth, 2002), and where nervousness, faltering, or silence is associated with untrustworthiness. Adversarial and aggressive postures that are commonly adopted by members of the legal defense can further serve to cramp the plaintiff's testimonial powers, thereby assisting to skew trial outcomes in favor of defendants (Bell, 2007; Orth, 2002; Koss, 2000).

Institutional affect highlights how the interplay of imaginaries, materialities, and embodied actors within established institutions can serve to produce outcomes that run up against an institution's explicit ideals and self-image. At the same time, this conceptual framework enables a greater understanding of how institutional change and equity is brought about. Attending to the close union between imagination, affect, and material arrangements reveals how the affective experiences of those who are disadvantaged within institutional settings can, when collectivized, encourage the articulation of counter-imaginaries and new material arrangements. Alternative material arrangements, in turn, open up new affective possibilities with the potential to usher in further re-imaginings and their material supports.

When video testimony, physical partitions, and remote testimony were made possible for survivors of assault thanks to sustained pressure from activists, these material reforms embedded counter-imaginings of truth-eliciting conditions and commitments to care that opened up new ways of thinking, feeling, and being in the courtroom. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck and courtroom procedures shifted online, survivors could speak from the comfort of their homes and at a distance from the alienating and austere atmosphere of the courtroom, to significant effect (see, e.g., Watson & Schreiber, 2021). However, even

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progressive institutional reforms can have unintended and undesirable effects: hiding victims of sexual assault behind partitions, for instance, can unwittingly serve to reinforce culturally embedded images of rape survivors as bearing shame. The pervasiveness of this cultural imaginary explains why Gisèle Pelicot's[3] recent insistence on a public trial and having footage of her rapes played to the courtroom—in an effort to lay shame squarely on her rapists—served as a breaking frame moment: one that lays the ground for further social and institutional change. Through spotlighting the uneven and unanticipated effects of shifting institutional materialities, *institutional affect* highlights the imperative for reforms to consider a plurality of embodied perspectives and needs, and to remain open to ongoing contestation and revision from those actors most affected by them.

While new technologies and changes to traditional material arrangements can embolden some and disempower others, they can also incite resistance among those who are served by them—especially those whose embodiment and whose powers these arrangements have evolved to serve. Judges who are accustomed to being shown respect and deference, and who enjoy control over courtroom proceedings and actors, for instance, are unlikely to be wholly welcoming of material reforms that challenge these affective and material privileges. Indeed, among those who tend to be advantaged by and who sit comfortably within institutional arrangements, investments of faith and trust in the institutional *status quo* are likely to be common. When set against imaginings of long-standing institutions as transcendent, neutral structures as opposed to constructed and contingent, calls for institutional reform or abolition are likely to attract visceral reactions of puzzlement, anger, resentment, and defensiveness. Such reactions serve, in many instances, to stymie action from being taken. The possibility and longevity of institutional shifts will thus depend, at least in part, on exposing, undoing, and refiguring the affective commitments and investments of institutional actors.

Echoes of the Dual State

In view of the current turn to right-wing illiberal populism in many countries across the globe, and in some staple late-modern mass democracies like the United States in particular, it is worthwhile to consider institutional affect on a broader plane. It has often been noted, and has become increasingly evident of late, that an authoritarian takeover may not necessarily come from outside established democratic institutions, but might spring up *within* the institutional landscape of a democracy on the brink (Snyder, 2017; Toscano, 2023).

Facets of an authoritarian turn from within the democratic nation state, driven by powerful (and empowered) actors, can be witnessed when the legal system appoints partisan actors and conducts campaigns against representatives of rivalling political factions; when law enforcement and security apparatuses use their power to enact racist policies to criminalize and intimidate certain populations; and when the state censors elected officials, journalists, or educators. What is striking is the ready adherence of many institutional actors to counter-legal measures, and how readily anti-democratic forces can spring up within the institutional infrastructure of late liberal societies, and harness this infrastructure for illiberal ends.

In the wake of an authoritarian takeover, what we call the "second life" of institutions overtakes the first life: authoritarian measures, double standards, partisan allegiance, and unconstitutional practices become the norm, and are performed openly by emboldened

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actors who no longer see the need to mask their counter-legal actions. Such a shift usually unfolds amid a manufactured sense of emergency or crisis: in frantic response to presumed "attacks on the system" from terrorist elements, criminal migrants, or traitors to the national cause. The mobilization of this imaginary serves to engender an affective atmosphere of insecurity, threat, and looming disaster, which can serve to encourage support for further authoritarian incursions in the name of enhanced security and order (see Seymour, 2024).

A theoretically potent notion of *institutional affect* offers insight into the set of enabling conditions for democratic structures to be dismantled, in plain sight, and often with public support. In the U.S. context, these conditions comprise a complex cluster of imaginaries, material infrastructures, and differently embodied actors with overlapping experiences, interests, and attachments. Enduring narratives of American exceptionalism and the "American Dream"; the continuing sedimentation of colonial-capitalist imaginings in legal and security apparatuses; and rising inequality and institutional exploitation under the weight of pervasive neoliberal imaginaries each comprise forces that have intersected to generate a blend of resentment, wounded pride, fear, and anxiety that is shared across different locations.

Against the backdrop of institutional violence, neglect, and betrayal that is both patterned and systematic, it is not surprising that political campaigns leading on a promise of institutional upheaval should gain a foothold. Under such conditions, affectively mobilizing idioms that embed false promises of prosperity through "draining the swamp" and taking a "chainsaw to bureaucracy" can prove compelling. Counter-legal measures framed as necessary to instantiate those visions—including state-led efforts to censor elected officials, journalists, and educators; unconstitutional forms of discrimination; and the dismissal of legal verdicts by the executive branch—may be perceived as entirely welcome and legitimate. This is especially the case in a context where affective disinvestment in liberal democratic institutions has become pronounced, and where the law itself has become a target of collective ridicule (the brandishing of "I voted for the felon" merchandise among Trump supporters offers one case in point).

The material outcome of this authoritarian turn from within a liberal democracy can be two separate states operating alongside one another, as Ernst Fraenkel noted in relation to Nazi Germany in his 1941 study *The Dual State* (Fraenkel, 1941/2017): one state bound by the laws, regulations, and administrative norms of legal-rational bureaucracy ("the normative state"), and another state that is openly authoritarian, driven by executive measures in response to a putative emergency, and unbound by the constraints of legality ("the prerogative state"). That it even begins to make sense to invoke Fraenkel's theory of the Nazi state in relation to today's embattled late-liberal state apparatuses is a grim reminder of where we stand in 2025.

Outlook

In zooming in on the lived experiences and shared imaginings of an array of institutional actors and addressees, and how these experiences and imaginings are mediated by clusters of interpenetrating institutions (e.g., institutions of law, education, media, healthcare), *institutional affect* offers a valuable framework for understanding the uneven effects that institutions have on different actors, and how and why institutions shift in particular directions and not in others. Yet this framework not only serves a diagnostic function; it also

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furnishes a blueprint for action. In spotlighting subtle dynamics of power that unfold in and through institutions, *institutional affect* can guide collective efforts to re-imagine and re-design institutions, while also drawing attention to the inherently unpredictable outcomes of such efforts. Moreover, in treating imaginaries as temporally extended as well as materially embedded, embodied, and localized phenomena, *institutional affect* highlights the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach to institutional preservation or reform, and foregrounds the practical importance of context-sensitive interventions. Indeed, counter-imaginings that take root and serve to prompt institutional shifts in one socio-historical context may fail to do so in another. Oftentimes, the uptake of alternative visions will depend on their resonance with existing, local imaginaries and strong affective investments therein (see Churcher, 2023; Richardson-Self, 2021).

In framing institutions as localized affective arrangements in which imaginaries, actors, and materialities dynamically interact, *institutional affect* opens up new critical perspectives and lines of inquiry to examine institutional power. Among other things, it expands an understanding of the obstacles to, and opportunities for, institutional transformation, as well as what is at stake, and for whom, when institutions shift or remain intact.

Notes

1 While the examples of institutions on which we draw in this chapter originate mostly in Europe and thus refer to settings defined by modern liberal statehood, the reach of this notion is by no means constrained to these settings alone. Rather, we assume that institutional affect will offer a productive angle anywhere where institutions have sedimented into material environments and are able to exert significant authority over the flow of public life, including in illiberal and authoritarian contexts. Moreover, at this political moment, the question of what defines a modern liberal institution in countries like Germany, Austria, France, and the United States is very much a live one.
2 Guiding ideas are contested and prone to change. Institutional actors might entertain and enact conflicting ideas about what the core purpose of the institution is, causing internal frictions. This is particularly evident in medical and educational institutions where there are often rifts between those who hold mission-orientated visions of medical care and of teaching and research, and those who hold more profit-orientated visions.
3 In 2024, Pelicot's husband, Dominique Pelicot, was found guilty of drugging her and for inviting at least 80 men to rape her with him while she was unconscious. Gisèle Pelicot waived her right to have the trial held behind closed doors, insisting that "it's not for us [rape survivors] to have shame—it's for them" (Chrisafis, 2024). On the case and the trial, see also Garcia (2025).

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13

PROPERTY AS AFFECT

Jonas Bens

Property is the legal relationship between persons and things. But property is not just an abstract set of rules. In practice, property comes to the fore as a normative system that creates constellations of material bodies. Property arranges bodies in relation to each other in the logic of ownership: certain bodies own other bodies. These arrangements are always hierarchical. Property determines which bodies are active persons—those that own other bodies—and which bodies are passive things—those that are owned by other bodies. Some bodies are the subjects, others the objects of property.

Property constellations are affective arrangements. Property generates affective dynamics that people subjectively experience in their everyday lives: the desire to own something to the exclusion of someone else; the satisfaction of owning more than others; the shame of not owning anything; the revulsion at being addressed as an object to be owned rather than as a person; the elation of having freed something, or even oneself, from someone else's possession; the despair of realizing that one may not be able to do so. Perhaps one of the most indicative affects produced by property is entitlement: the embodied experience of rightfully owning something.[1] And entitlement comes with its twin: the righteous indignation that stems from the judgment that another person is not entitled to such ownership at all, that the other person is unfairly claiming property to which they are not actually entitled.

As modern philosophies, especially political liberalism, claim, "owning oneself" is the very definition of being an autonomous individual with the power to act, ready to become an equal member of society—precisely because one's body belongs to no one else. At the same time, the logic of property also generates the most disempowering hierarchical subject positions that modern society has to offer. Male bodies owning female bodies: the logic of patriarchy. White bodies owning non-white bodies: the logic of racism. Human bodies owning non-human bodies: the logic of extractivism. And then there is the most general and emblematic of these hierarchies. Those bodies that own more, own those bodies that own less: the logic of class.

As property—and the specific hierarchies it inscribes in any material arrangement of bodies—has become a guiding logic of modern culture and society, the affects generated by property have become a key mode through which one embodies and experiences life.

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But feeling property always means experiencing hierarchy: people feel empowered if they're on top, and disempowered if they're not. The perspective on affect which I propose in this entry offers a critique of the propertization of modernity. A broader view, beyond the highly intensified and exclusivist notions of modern property, might give us a glimpse of an affective otherwise. What else is there to bring about egalitarian transformation than the affects of property?

The Propertization of Modernity and Its Affects

Modern property is globally hegemonic. It shapes institutions, landscapes, and everyday life. But it is not the only way people have understood the relationship between persons and things. Anthropological scholarship shows that property takes different forms across societies and histories, structured by distinct normative orders (von Benda-Beckmann et al., 2006). The kind of property that dominates today is culturally specific to modernity. It emerged in the global co-constitution of colonialism, capitalism, and modern statehood, where property was defined in a particular exclusivity and intensity (Bhandar, 2018; Mattei & Nader, 2008). Other property regimes have been marginalized in this process, but not erased. At the same time, property has become more than a legal institution for a distinct sphere of society. It has become a guiding logic of modern society as a whole.

One of the most famous definitions of modern property is given by 18th-century English legal theorist William Blackstone in his widely influential *Commentaries on the Laws of England* from 1766:

> There is nothing which so generally strikes the imagination, and engages the affections of mankind, as the right of property; or that sole and despotic dominion which one man claims and exercises over the external things of the world, in total exclusion of the right of any other individual in the universe.
>
> *(Blackstone, 2016, p. 1)*

These phrases capture one of the most important characteristics of modern property, compared to the types of property that prevailed in different historical periods and cultural contexts: its extreme intensity of exclusion. One of the most unique features of modern property is that it even includes the right to destroy the object of property. This arguably goes beyond classical Roman law on which modern property is most closely modeled (von Redecker, 2020, pp. 23–24).

For Blackstone, property is not just any right over an "external thing of the world." It is the "sole and despotic dominion" over a thing, a dominion that excludes "every other individual in the universe." And this extreme intensity in law translates into an extreme intensity in affect. It is this kind of exclusivist property that "strikes the imagination and engages the affections of mankind" like nothing else. The affect of property is the affect of exclusion: as we shall see, both on the side of the one who excludes—the euphoria of owning—and on the side of the excluded—the fear of being denied ownership.

Admittedly, Blackstone's definition is rather dramatic in its articulation of the specific affect of exclusion when it comes to property. Other, and later, definitions are more austere. The German Civil Code of 1900, still in force, states: "Unless the law or the rights of third parties dictate otherwise, the owner of a thing may deal with it as he pleases and

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exclude others from any interference" (§ 903 BGB, my translation). Here, too, we can read the exclusionary thrust of the concept of property.[2] But, close to the surface, there is also an affective intensity. The expression "as he pleases" is in German "*nach Belieben*." *Belieben*, which is difficult to translate into English, goes beyond pleasure—already an affective term—but is more intense. It derives from the German word *Liebe* (love), which German legal theorists of the early 20th century found apt to describe the relationship between an owner and his possessions.

As Eva von Redecker (2020) has shown in her detailed critical history of property, both this extreme form of exclusivity and its tendency to dominate all spheres of modern society are unique to modern property. Similarly unique is the intensity and modulation of the affects it generates. Blackstone, characteristic of modern legal theory, emphasizes the elevating affects, the ones that inspire the modern individuals' imagination to make something of themselves, and not just in economic terms. Liberal political philosophy from Hobbes to Locke makes the desire for property the driving force behind the formation of the modern individual, an idea termed "possessive individualism" (Macpherson, 1962). The ultimate goal is individual self-possession, in John Locke's (2016) famous phrase: "every man has a property in his own person" (p. 15). The affective drive to improve one's environment, primarily through agriculture and industry, is for these modern philosophers the same drive that leads people to want to improve their own lives and themselves as well-rounded individuals.

But these empowering affects of creating one's own personhood through the acquisition of property create, as their flip side, disempowering affects of exclusion. This becomes clear when we examine three key processes in the formation of modern property: the dispossession of land through enclosure, both in Europe and in the colonies, the social death of persons through modern chattel slavery, and modern forms of regulating sexuality and marriage.

One of the most fundamental processes in the development of the modern exclusivist notion of property is the practice of enclosure. A process that began in Europe in the late Middle Ages, England's case is often seen as a prime example. Land that had traditionally been freely used by rural communities through customary use-rights was declared "unused land" and appropriated by feudal lords, who abolished traditional collective access and decided exclusively who could cultivate it and under what conditions (Meiksins Wood, 2016). Similar processes occurred in the colonies, where Indigenous lands were declared "unused" and appropriated by colonizers, ignoring Indigenous systems of land use (Bens, 2020).

These practices of enclosure created exclusivist notions of land ownership that inscribed racial and class hierarchies. The traditional normative systems of European peasants, as well as those of Indigenous land users in the colonies, were subordinated to the emerging modern property regime. In both cases, Europe and the colonies, class difference was incorporated into property law. In the colonies, racialization was particularly evident (Bhandar, 2018), but in Europe too, ethnic difference was fused with class difference, as feudal lords did not usually consider themselves to be of the same "breed" or "blood" as their subordinate peasants (Anderson, 1983, p. 149).

Another process foundational for the development of modern property is the establishment of modern chattel slavery and its brutal enactment in the transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery in the Caribbean and the Americas from the 16th until the 19th century. Modern chattel slavery prescribes enslaved human beings as things under the exclusive

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dominion of the slave owner, with very few, if any, possibilities for enslaved people to become free. Both this intensity in exclusivism and its global scale differentiate modern slavery from other variants in different times and different places. Slavery, and the proceeds it brought for European slave traders and slave holders, played a crucial role in the establishment of both industrialization in Europe and the development of labor relations characteristic of modern capitalism (Robinson, 1983). Many theories of modern capitalism define it as a system based on free labor, treating slavery as fundamentally incompatible with it. Yet in practice, slavery, free labor, and intermediate forms such as indentured servitude developed in parallel and were deployed flexibly to serve the demands of capital accumulation (Williams, 1944).

From its inception, therefore, modern property goes beyond the possession of non-human bodies since humans can also become the object of property. The liberal idea of individuality as self-ownership is connected on a conceptual level to the existence of those people who do not own themselves in this sense: in its extreme form, the enslaved person (Hartman, 1997). Conceptualizing freedom in terms of property in one's own person is therefore inextricably linked to affectively experiencing hierarchies in terms of both class and race.

These classed and racialized boundaries between bodies emerging in the establishment of modern property regimes are also maintained through forms of affective governance, in which state-sanctioned regulations of gender and sexuality are crucial (Stoler, 1995). Property, as a system of attaching bodies to each other, is always intended to last longer than the lives of individual bodies. Possessions are to be inherited by relatives. Property-owning elites therefore have an interest in regulating sexual reproduction to ensure that property arrangements remain intact over time. The most important goal here is to dictate who a woman can marry and with whom and under what conditions she can have children. Such patriarchal gender regulations can themselves take on a property logic, as in the case of coverture, beginning in the late Middle-Ages and extending far into early modern times, again in England: the legal practice of prescribing total legal dominion of a father over his daughter and of a husband over his wife, with the consequence that the woman is not legally able to enter into contract (von Redecker, 2020). In colonial contexts, for instance, miscegenation laws were enacted to forbid marriage between colonizers and colonial subjects along racial and class lines (Hartman, 1997). The logic of property therefore creates specifically modern racialized and classed forms of patriarchal hierarchy (Davis, 1981).

But the regulation of sexuality at the heart of maintaining modern property relations is not only designed to curb affective dynamics, discouraging sexual intercourse beyond racial and class lines in particular. It also aims at producing desires for specific constellations of bodies, shaping in particular what kinds of racialized and classed bodies and combinations of bodies should be seen as sexually and socially desirable (Foucault, 1978). These gender relations expressed through property then also systematically exclude non-heterosexual desires, which might not conform with the maintenance of the property logic (Davies, 1999), since queer gender identities and sexualities tend to subvert clear ownership of bodies over each other.

It becomes visible how in these formative processes of bringing modern exclusivist property into being, racialized, classed, and gendered hierarchies have been baked into the fabric of modern property. At the same time, the logics of property have, over time, come to dominate modern society until today. Still new property regimes emerge and intensify, for example, "intellectual property" or "cultural property," which structure modern society

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far beyond the relationships of humans and material goods in the sphere of the economy (Canfield, 2020). Hegemonic understandings of politics, law, language, the arts, but also of personal relationships and even of the modern self, are conceptualized through and as property: the "propertization" of modernity (Siegrist, 2006).

The propertization of modernity has an affective life. Feeling the relationship to others, even to oneself, as a relation of ownership, means living through and reliving the experience of racialized, gendered, and classed hierarchy—intertwined with processes that started centuries ago. Some of the legal regimes cordoning the emergence of modern property have, for the most part, been dismantled, such as chattel slavery or coverture. Others are ongoing, such as the exclusion of Indigenous legal systems and cosmologies from the political and legal realm. But the hegemonic logics of property have become an embodied schema that people act out daily, even without direct backing from the state.

People feel what Eva von Redecker (2020) calls "phantom possession." Like a person feels phantom pain for a limb they have already lost, sometimes many years ago, the logics of property are embodied, internalized, and affectively experienced. People feel entitled to ownership over certain bodies: female bodies, Black bodies, classed bodies, or non-human bodies such as land and resources. People feel objectified, thingified, degraded, and dispossessed when being addressed through the logic of property in the modus of phantom possession. Examining property as affect reveals a rather perverse conceptual construction of what it means to be a modern subject: at the heart of the modern self and at the core of what constitutes modern subjectivity lie, at a crucial point, affects of property.

But property as an affective relation can also evoke dynamics that are less clear-cut: shame about the desire to own, awkwardness in the moment of realizing that one has reenacted the logics of property by accident, the apprehensiveness that comes with not being sure if one is being objectified or not, the indignation of being forced to embody feelings of ownership or feelings of being owned although one had hoped to have grown beyond it. Property can feel very differently, depending on the context.

Embodying Property

It is February 2025, and I am sitting with my two colleagues—Christian Mader, a German archaeologist, and Philip Atta Mensah, a Ghanaian political scientist and historian—near the main entrance to the courtyard of Fort William, Anomabo, on the Atlantic coast of Ghana. We have come here to conduct research on the slave forts and castles on the West African coast from an anthropological and archaeological perspective, and we have already spent two days here. As we talk, we hear the waves of the ocean crashing against the shore. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, hundreds of thousands of people captured in the interior of West Africa were incarcerated here in the most inhumane conditions, and shipped across the Atlantic to serve as slaves in the plantation colonies of the Caribbean and the Americas. With enslaved people being one of the most profitable commodities on the world market for centuries, European nations and companies were eager to participate in the business of slavery and attempted to build forts and castles on the West African coast if they had the means. The triangular trade in enslaved people between Europe, Africa, and the Americas—along with resources extracted through slavery from the Americas and goods processed in Europe—formed the laboratory of the contemporary global world system and the birthplace of modern property.

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We have a long conversation with a young woman in her 20s who works as a tour guide at the site, although visitors to Fort William are few and far between. Most tourists go to the larger and more prominent forts to the west of here, such as Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle. Two days earlier, when we first arrived here, she had taken us through the slave dungeons, one for the female slaves, another for the male slaves, and a third, the "children's dungeon"—where enslaved people who were particularly willful and rebellious against their enslavement were interned. In other castles they are called "condemned cells." With no light or ventilation, the prisoners in these cells were not expected to leave alive.

"What is it like to work here every day?" we ask her. And she replies with the story of one of her tours. There was this one Brazilian, a white man, whom she had taken through the dungeons of the castle shortly after she started working here. He was visibly shaken during the tour, and when he got to the children's dungeon, he collapsed on the floor, crying. "For ten minutes he could not get up," she explained. "Why do you think he reacted like that?" I asked her. "I think it was guilt," she said.

How can this man feel guilt for the crime of transatlantic slavery, with a physical feeling so strong that he can't keep himself upright? Didn't the transatlantic slave trade end in the 1860s? Didn't Brazil formally abolish slavery in 1888? Ancient history. This visitor does not seem to have any personal guilt about owning human beings. But in his body he feels that he does.

In fact, the logic of objectifying the human body in the logic of incarceration is not a phenomenon of the past. Even Fort William was used as a prison until 2001, decades after Ghana's independence in 1957. Police violence against Black Brazilians, many of whose ancestors have roots in West Africa, is rampant. By 2023, almost 70% of all inmates in Brazil's prisons were Black (Lacerda, 2024).

The visitor's collapse is not just a personal reaction. It is part of a dense material and affective arrangement: the fort itself, built to hold human beings as commodities; the lingering atmosphere of violence; the tour guide who moves through this space every day; the heavy air and the sound of the ocean just beyond the wall—and our own later presence at the site, retelling the story and listening to it. These bodies, histories, and infrastructures together crystalize the property logics that shaped the transatlantic slave trade—and that continue in the racialized carceral systems of the present. What surfaces in this moment is not simply guilt, but a rupture in the felt stability of entitlement—a bodily disturbance in how ownership, personhood, and value are usually ordered and experienced. "Phantom possession" (von Redecker, 2020) may help name how these histories persist in the affective lives of the present, but they are not only spectral—they are material, institutional, and concrete.

In September 2023, I sit in a small church building with about a dozen people from a Maasai village in northern Tanzania for a community workshop. I am there with my colleagues Laibor Kalanga Moko, a Tanzanian anthropologist who grew up in the same village where we are holding our workshop, and Paola Ivanov, an Italian anthropologist and curator at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. We talk about the many "ethnographic objects" of Maasai origin that had been forcibly taken by German troops in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and placed in the collections of museums in Europe, including the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. This workshop is intended to be the beginning of a years-long process of working together to find out what to do with this colonial heritage in Europe and to discuss restitution. Laibor and Paola have prepared a video of the museum's storeroom

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to show the Maasai belongings there, and we have brought printed lists and photographs. The discussion is lively.

At one point the video shows several brass bracelets that Maasai women traditionally wear on their forearms. The woman sitting close to me on the wooden bench heaves a heavy sigh, touches her own forearm, and immediately makes eye contact with the other women in the room. Her eyes, and those of the others, betray a sense of shock. "How can it be that these bracelets are on the shelves of a museum in Germany?" they ask, deeply shaken. As we would find out in time, "objects" such as a woman's brass bracelet are not regarded as things at all. Once fused with a woman's body, both human and non-human bodies become one person, one body. The Maa word for this kind of non-human extension of the body is *imasaa* (Moko, 2023). To call a woman's bracelet a "thing" is considered offensive. Applying the logic of property is perceived as an act of violence (Bens, 2025).

Separated from a woman's body, a bracelet is its own life force with a will of its own. It can even take revenge, making its new "owners," but also the Maasai community as a whole, unhappy (Ivanov et al., 2023). Some participants point to ongoing land dispossession in the neighboring district, where Maasai communities are being evicted with police violence to make way for luxury tourism projects. It is clear to our interlocutors that the same logic of property is at work there.

The shock expressed by the women is not simply about loss. It is about a violent misrecognition: the reclassification of something relational and embodied as a detachable thing. The logic that allows the bracelet to sit on a shelf in a European museum is the same that defines property as alienable, exclusive, and transferable. But here, that logic fails. It cannot account for a form of attachment in which object and person are fused, in which the bracelet is not possessed but lived. The same logic is still at work today, in the violent dispossession of Maasai land for luxury tourism, enforced by police. Colonial dispossession through the implementation of colonial property regimes is then not only a thing of the past—it is a contemporary force that displaces people, fragments relations, and justifies violence. What emerges in this moment is not only the pain of dispossession, but an affective refusal to accept the categories through which such dispossession is made possible in the first place.

Outlook

Modern colonial capitalism is an affective arrangement of bodies structured by the logic of property and its inscribed, culturally specific hierarchies of race, class, and gender. Property as a specific logic of connecting and separating bodies is deeply felt and experienced by people every day. But property feels hierarchical. Its logics can be corrosive, even poisonous.

This is not to say that property always feels bad, it can feel exhilarating, the sense of "owning it" can be enormously uplifting. But these empowering affects of property always come with a dark side, the disempowering affect of "being owned," which has to be felt by someone else at the same time. Property as affect means that where the logic of property proliferates, as it does in much of modern everyday reality, hierarchy must be felt, embodied, and constantly enacted.

The perspective of property as an affective relation raises a crucial question: what other logics, what other normative principles, are available to create a new and less hierarchical constellation of bodies that produce different kinds of affects? What about the logics of kinship, or rather kin making, through which people connect bodies as relations that are not

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necessarily separated by boundaries of race and class (de la Cadena, 2015)? What about cyborg logics in which bodies can be related to each other in more egalitarian and queer ways (Haraway, 1990)? What prospects for a more egalitarian society do they offer? What affective disruptions might they produce?

However these questions are answered, the propertization of modernity, to the extent that the logic of property is seen as the basis for individuality, autonomy, and ultimately political equality, seems to be one of the greatest challenges to overcome for a truly egalitarian society, if that is to be the goal.

Notes

1 The English word "entitlement" is directly related to the idea of property. In feudal Europe, ownership of territories, and the human subjects associated with them, was granted to aristocrats in the form of a title that the feudal lord used as a name. This characteristic connection of persons, things, and an understanding of self and identity through the logic of property is the central theme of this chapter.
2 One of the most unique features of modern property is that it even includes the right to destroy the object of property. This arguably goes beyond classical Roman law on which modern property is most closely modelled (von Redecker, 2020, pp. 23–24).

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14

MARKET AFFECTS

Markus Lange

This chapter outlines the concept of market affects which emphasizes the different ways in which markets in contemporary societies are constituted through affect. Markets are central domains of contemporary societies. They facilitate the exchange of goods between suppliers and buyers and provide the social arenas in which those goods' economic values are determined. Markets are indispensable for entrepreneurial activity and the associated drive to generate profits and stimulate innovation. They shape and reproduce entire industries and allocate economic and financial capital. States entrust markets with governance functions and, in turn, rely on them to refinance public budgets. Markets are even present in non-economic fields such as health, education, and culture, where they exert competitive pressures and efficiency expectations. Markets are also expected to serve socio-ecological transformation requirements. They perform inherently necessary economic functions while simultaneously operating within—and reinforcing—power structures that subject other social spheres to market-based logics.

To grasp markets' functions, dysfunctions, and societal impacts against this backdrop, it is insufficient to treat them merely as self-coordinating economic phenomena, as is often done in orthodox economics. A more adequate understanding requires attention to their relational structures. This especially entails examining the interplay of social and affective relationalities through which market actors exchange, and through which markets as their aggregations are constructed. Social relationality becomes evident once it is recognized that market exchange interactions fundamentally shape economic action under uncertainty. Market behavior often relies on mutual expectations between market actors: they align their decisions with what they anticipate others expect, and vice versa. This social uncertainty is compounded by temporal uncertainty, since market practices inherently involve not knowing whether, which, or how many purchasing and sale transactions will occur in the future. In response, market actors develop, for example, calculations and risk assessments, observe one another to assess quality and detect niches, engage in competition or price wars, defend market positions, and establish status orders.

Such relational market practices are essentially configured by affects—a process expressed in the concept of affective relationality. Affect—like fear of loss, greed for gain, gut feelings,

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or prevailing moods—is not confined to individual actors but interconnects the market community, shaping anticipations of how others will react to specific economic and broader social situations. When affect is shared across market actors, it may give rise to collective phenomena such as market panics or euphoria. Consequently, the market itself becomes a non-human affective agent, whose affective composition is monitored and evaluated to guide economic conduct.

Analyzing the social and affective relationalities of markets, and their entanglements, reveals the underlying structures through which endogenous market coordination problems emerge and are managed. At the same time, this illuminates how markets anticipate their social and natural environments and, in turn, influence those environments.

Social Relationality

An analysis of contemporary capitalist dynamics must integrate the markets that continuously generate and reproduce these dynamics. The monetarily organized markets in focus here encompass a variety of economic exchange processes, carried out by supplying and demanding actors, who transfer products such as goods or services. To uncover the relational nature of markets, we must examine the social practices and structures that constitute economic action within them. If these are also inherently affectively configured, the following elements of social relationality primarily point to fundamental market functions and coordination problems.

A suitable starting point is market interaction itself, namely, market exchange as a social relationship. Anthropological research has often employed the concept of reciprocity to investigate non-monetary exchange processes, such as barter, which involves direct, non-monetary transfer of goods, or the exchange of gifts (Humphrey & Hugh-Jones, 1992). These approaches demonstrate that exchange is linked to moral considerations and faith-based rituals that serve social functions beyond mere economic transactions, for instance, establishing and maintaining social proximity or distance between groups. The introduction of money does not eliminate these dimensions. However, monetary exchange has the potential to occur with fewer normative constraints, making it easier to refuse a transaction or to interrupt or even terminate a social exchange relationship (Graeber, 2011). At the same time, monetary exchange can create new dependencies, as price determination influences who is included or excluded from future exchanges.

When a broader range of trading interactions is considered, up to markets as aggregations of these interactions, the social embeddedness and configuration of market structures become explicit (Granovetter, 1985). Economic sociology, in particular, has shown that market transactions are shaped by social and temporal uncertainty (Dequech, 2011), confronting actors with three central coordination problems (Beckert, 2009): determining the economic value of products, managing competition, and deciding whether to engage in or refrain from cooperation. Markets can be characterized as "strategic action fields" (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012), where the social setting—ideal-typically—appears as follows. First and foremost, a monetarily organized market revolves around establishing an economic value, expressed as a price, for a product to be traded. This price must be accepted by the involved actors, after which the actual product transfer takes place. To achieve this, actors develop interests and preferences, bringing them into market situations. They negotiate prices and observe suppliers to assess whether the prices of their products are accepted by buyers. Suppliers, in

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particular, often compete with one another, monitoring each other's actions (White, 1981), for instance, to determine a product's quality, which may be difficult to ascertain. They seek to defend their market position or challenge that of competitors (Fligstein, 2001), whether by altering the quality of the product or initiating price wars. Between the axes of quality and price, they occupy market niches (White, 1981). This process also gives rise to reputational hierarchies, where high-status actors can secure lasting advantages in profit-oriented market transactions, along with other processes known as Matthew effects (Podolny, 2008). Market trading is thus shaped by mutual expectations: actor A's expectations are influenced by the assumed expectations of actor B, and vice versa. To navigate these and other challenges, continuous "relational work" is undertaken (Bandelj, 2020).

The social relationality of markets primarily means that actors establish networks, form relationships, and interact with one another to facilitate economic transactions, thereby generating dependencies and risks. Actors respond to uncertainty by actively shaping their social market relationships or by calculating how other actors might behave in the future, as well as assessing the potential impact of economic and broader societal events on their market activities. At the same time, market practices are essentially configured by various affective elements. The social relationality of markets is therefore also an affective relationality, which will be shown in the following section.

Affective Relationality

In recent years, extensive research has emerged focusing the role of affect in economic contexts (Pixley et al., 2014; Rick & Loewenstein, 2008). This is important to emphasize because the historical standard model of economics, *homo oeconomicus*, essentially disregards affective dimensions in economic action (Orléan, 2014). It assumes that economic agents are strictly rational utility maximizers, equipped with fixed and transitive preference orders, well-informed about the means available to achieve their ends, and capable of determining the positive and negative costs of alternative actions through mathematical calculation, ultimately selecting the most efficient option. Beyond the research on the affective registers embedded in established economic theories (Chaput, 2019), behavioral economics has emerged as a significant field that critiques these assumptions (Thaler, 2015). This research demonstrates that emotional influences on economic decisions consistently lead to "irrational" deviations from the assumptions of *homo oeconomicus* (Kahneman & Tversky, 2000). Moreover, research shows that unconscious "somatic markers" (Damásio, 1994) and "gut feelings" (Gigerenzer, 2007) play a constructive role in economic decision-making (Sokol-Hessner & Phelps, 2015).

These and other studies provide substantial empirical evidence of the affective dimensions of economic decisions. However, due to their strong focus on individual decision-making, they only implicitly address the social-relational status of affect in markets. By contrast, the approach pursued here, which understands markets as social-relational fabrics, highlights that, for example, the pursuit of profit margins, the development of products for this purpose, or the calculations designed to legitimize rationality in dealing with risks are themselves profoundly shaped by individual and collective affects. Furthermore, direct affective influences manifest when emotions such as fear, greed, euphoria, or panic, as well as moods and feelings, are evoked, disseminated, collectivized, and thus dynamically integrated into the social-relational market.

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This understanding of affective relationality provides a broader perspective on typical economic phenomena that regularly lead to market instabilities. These can include price speculation, the failure of risk calculations that triggered the global financial and economic crisis of 2007–2009, market downturns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, or the emergence of volatility in financial markets due to politically induced threats of trade tariffs, such as at the beginning of Donald Trump's second US presidency. When financial market actors, as in the latter example, hang on to Trump's words and translate his (economically contradictory) statements more or less directly into the buying or selling of financial instruments, this vividly illustrates how existing uncertainty manifests as market panic, rendering seemingly "rational" registers ineffective (Lange, 2018).

The conceptual positioning of affective relationality follows an understanding of affect itself as a "mode of being" (von Scheve, 2018), which initially emerges pre-reflexively and later becomes intentional, meaningful, linguistic, and discursively accessible. However, this does not occur as subjective autonomy but rather as "relational dynamics between evolving bodies . . .[that] increase or diminish their agentive and existential capacities in relation to their surroundings and all other actors and entities present in a situation" (Slaby & Mühlhoff, 2019, p. 27). Accordingly, affect is a reciprocal process that connects human and non-human actors (such as a market). Affect arises between actors and contributes to their constitution.

This conceptualization of affective relationality is further anchored in the evocation of related phenomena, such as rudimentary affective states and their social configuration, social efficacy (von Scheve, 2018), emotion (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019), feeling (Thonhauser, 2019), or sentiment (Bens & Zenker, 2019). An "affective arrangement" can then be described as a specific affective configuration between actors—"an array of persons, things, artifacts, spaces, discourses, behaviors, expressions or other materials that coalesce into a coordinated formation of mutual affecting and being-affected" (Slaby, 2019, p. 109).

Markets can therefore be understood as entities in which economic exchange also occurs as a culmination of affect between actors who influence one another. It is assumed that this happens both unconsciously and unintentionally, but that deliberative, strategic forms of affective influence are also employed to serve the interests of buyers and sellers. In principle, the entire spectrum of affective states is relevant here—from rudimentary core affects to discrete emotions such as fear of losses, greed for profits, panic, gut feelings about fair or unfair prices, or moods regarding expected buying trends. When linked to psychological affect registers, it becomes particularly important for market interactions to understand how these affective states shape the relationships between market actors and influence whether an exchange occurs or not.

Sellers and buyers may bring different affects into market interactions. For sellers, this might involve promoting exceptionally high product quality, which is deliberatively "over-affirmed" through marketing. For buyers, this could lead to affective discomfort—a feeling of uncertainty—if they doubt whether the promoted product truly possesses the high quality that justifies its price. Additionally, trust plays a crucial role, especially when it is unclear whether a market actor will adhere to established rules and trading rituals. If an exchange has already taken place between them, their shared relationship history becomes another component of affective relationality. This may involve the reliability of past transactions and satisfaction or dissatisfaction with products and prices. All of these factors influence the specific exchange situation and negotiations over the current product price, which in turn are associated with situational affects.

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Based on this, it becomes possible for a collectivization of affects to emerge. In terms of collective emotions, this can be understood as "synchronous convergence in affective responding across individuals towards a specific event or object" (von Scheve & Ismer, 2013, p. 406), which induces mutual affects between market actors and processes of affective contagion. Market euphoria in times of strong sales is just as conceivable as market panic when losses persist. If such trading interactions become ritualized, risk assessments may be accompanied by synchronizations and feelings of belonging to maximize "emotional energy" (Collins, 2004). Markets are therefore institutions in which affects are continuously expressed, perceived by others, and disseminated. Evaluating the affective state of a market can be crucial in determining whether it is currently a favorable time to introduce new products or to initiate price wars. The extent to which such affect collectives emerge depends on the existing social and technical configuration of a market, with key dimensions including physical co-presence or absence and the degree of digital and algorithmic infrastructures.

To illustrate some of these elements of affective relationality in empirical market realities, the following section examines financial markets. This is particularly promising for two reasons. First, affective registers are especially pronounced and continuously observable in financial market trading. Second, they play a crucial role in the economization and financialization of other societal and non-economic domains (van der Zwan, 2014). The examples of the interplay between affect and calculation, as well as the paradoxical developments in the establishment of "green finance," each address distinct manifestations of affective relationality within financial market dynamics.

Affective Calculation and Calculation of Affect in Financial Markets

The distinctiveness of financial market trading lies in the intensification of the uncertainty problem: the current economic value of financial instruments such as stocks, bonds, or derivatives largely depends on market participants' expectations regarding future market developments. To navigate this uncertainty, financial market actors continuously observe and evaluate global and market-specific events, construct "imagined futures" (Beckert, 2016), and translate these evaluations into the prices of financial instruments. Financial markets serve as paradigmatic examples of "calculative collective devices" (Callon & Muniesa, 2005), characterized not only by quantitative, economic, or algorithmic calculations of value but also by qualitative, cognitive, and affective ones (Callon & Law, 2005).

Further, a notable feature of financial markets is their capacity for self-referential processes. The assessment of economic value is often shaped by mutual observations among market actors (Esposito, 2011), causing established calculative orientations, such as those based on a company's economic fundamentals, to recede into the background. In such cases, financial market actors make decisions based on their expectations of how others will act, leading to a distinct affective dimension in trading. Market transactions then may be directly influenced by the perceived affective states of individual actors or the market as a whole.

Affective calculations can be understood as calculative practices in which affect takes the lead role in the valuation of events and financial instruments. Crucially, the emergence of such affects is not confined to the individual level. Rather, these affects are embedded in social-relational structures, negotiated among market actors, and collectively disseminated (following Lange, 2021; Lange & von Scheve, 2020). In financial markets, pronounced

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"market feelings" function as an affective "tool kit" for evaluating global and market-specific conditions and imagining short-term market futures. Traders frequently describe their interactions in affective terms, such as "establishing a feeling for the bank" with which they intend to negotiate, "sensing how people tick," or likening a declining market to a "slowly falling knife."

Moreover, fear and greed are widely acknowledged as fundamental emotional drivers in financial markets, shaping market interactions. Fear of losses may prompt traders to take profits prematurely, while greed for gains can lead to holding positions too long, ultimately resulting in losses. The management of these emotions is deeply intertwined with the relational structure of the market field, encompassing normative assumptions about affect as irrational—often countered by amateurish psychological interpretations.

The collective dimension of affect is also evident in the structural organization of financial trading. The digitalization of financial markets has shifted trading activities from traditional "open outcry" exchanges to investment banks. However, the strategic installation of trading rooms within these organizations underscores the continued importance of communicative exchange under conditions of physical co-presence. This facilitates affective interactions, such as the emergence of "floor emotions," where ritualized face-to-face interactions on trading floors serve as key arenas for verbal and non-verbal affective communication. The direct perception of affective states on the trading floor can therefore function as a corrective to arithmetic calculations or algorithmic trading models.

By contrast, calculations of affect refer to practices in which affect itself becomes the object of calculation. The goal is to assess and strategically exploit the affective states of other actors, including trading room collectives, financial sector opinion leaders, and trading partners. Empathy plays a crucial role in this process—not predominantly as a means of fostering prosocial behavior, such as unconditionally accepting a price, but rather as a tool for leveraging another actor's affective state of uncertainty, particularly fear, to negotiate a lower price for a financial instrument.

Additionally, financial markets themselves are conceptualized as affective non-human agents that are continuously evaluated in terms of their prevailing emotional state. This assessment occurs through market charts as key price signals, direct communication of market sentiments among actors, and algorithmic sentiment analyses. One example is the SPX Volatility Index (VIX) of the Chicago Board Options Exchange. The VIX measures the implied volatility for options—such as forward transactions with future payment dates—reflecting the short-term fluctuation intensity expected by market participants. Codified as the "fear index," increases in the VIX are interpreted as signs of rising fear in the market.

Ultimately, identifying the affective state of a market as a specifically configured "affective arrangement" becomes a crucial aspect of market actors' imaginations and calculations, serving as a strategy for managing the uncertainty inherent in financial market practices.

The Paradox of "Green Finance"

The financial sector continuously generates payment flows and provides economic capital in the form of bonds, shares, loans, and their derivative securitizations. Therefore, contemporary capitalist societies depend on functioning financial markets that, in turn, drive the financialization of non-economic areas of society. Against this background, the financial

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sector is often seen as having transformative potential, particularly in relation to socio-ecological change.

However, it is evident that financial market practices have not sufficiently integrated ecological challenges, such as climate change. Efforts have been made to establish "green finance," including the issuance of "green bonds" or social impact investing (Chiapello, 2020). Yet, current market-driven approaches appear to have limited transformative impact. Green funds, often structured as exchange-traded funds (ETFs), are accessible and affordable for private investors. But they tend to merely curate an ecologically appealing selection from larger indices, ultimately leading investors to allocate their money to the same corporations that are directly or indirectly involved in ecological exploitation.

The problem of "green finance" also highlights certain dimensions of markets as affective relational fields. It can be assumed that the individual, social, and collective affective logics typical of financial market trading have not yet sufficiently contributed to an economic shift toward ecological concerns. In principle, the financial sector operates by taking on risks to generate monetary profits. However, this fundamental mechanism has not yet been activated in the context of green finance, as the necessary affective states and dynamics remain absent.

This phenomenon can be interpreted as a doubling of societal "unfeeling" (Slaby, 2024). First, there is a socially dominant absence of obvious and necessary affective responses to the looming ecological catastrophe—responses that could serve as catalysts for social change. Second, financial markets exhibit a further "unfeeling." The intense affective thrills that typically fuels market excesses, such as the immediate evocation of greed for profits, has so far failed to materialize in relation to investments in "green" financial instruments. Herein lies the paradox: the affective elements that usually lead to market exuberance, excessive trading, and exorbitant profits and losses—often with destructive consequences for society—are currently absent in responding to the ecological question. As a result, the prospect of a market-driven ecological transformation, often assumed in political discourse, remains blocked. The capitalist nexus is thus endowed with transformation potential, yet it fails to activate its inherent affective logics in service of ecological change.

Moreover, if ecological sustainability, understood in terms of sufficiency and resilience, fundamentally contradicts the financial market economy's relentless orientation toward economic growth, it remains questionable whether financial markets can ever serve as a viable foundation for such a social transformation.

Outlook

The concept of market affects suggests that social and affective relationality are central to how markets operate—in both their internal and external mechanisms. While studies have presented theoretical and empirical evidence in support of this concept, its theoretical implications, particularly in relation to capitalism-critical approaches, have so far been addressed only implicitly. Likewise, no analytical connections have yet been established between social and affective relationality and alternative economic approaches that reject the principle of continuous economic growth. Given current economic developments, this concept could be further applied to explore how power imbalances, exploitation, and inequalities manifest in supplier networks, process chains, or flows of goods, and which affective dynamics accompany these processes. Finally, in what follows, I will briefly outline a few extensions of market affects that point in these directions.

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On a theoretical level, it seems promising to link the perspective of affective relationality in markets and economies with approaches that, conversely, locate an "affective economy" in the emergence and social efficacy of affect itself (Ahmed, 2004; Lehmann et al., 2019). Such perspectives highlight affect as a resource and a form of exchange, which is relevant, for example, in political contexts or communication media. They could also be adapted to economic settings. This raises the question of whether the market-based exchange of scarce goods and its societal consequences correspond to, or diverge from, the exchange of scarce affective resources, and what dynamics emerge from this interaction.

Regarding the relationship between affect and rationality, the concept of market affects explicitly rejects the notion that affects are irrational. Moreover, the conventional distinction between rational and affective market behavior does not seem to reflect actual market realities, given that the claim of rational market behavior is always constructed affectively. Following Massumi (2015), it may not be rationality that should be regarded as the primary dimension of economics, but rather affect. Economic and market systems can reach affective thresholds, leading to affective implosions or evasions (Cooper, 2010). It could therefore be assumed that practices designed to legitimize rational action, such as econometric models in financial markets, primarily serve to obscure or contain the "affective core" of markets.

Furthermore, markets, as socially embedded structures, not only connect actors but also disembed them (Polanyi, 1967). Market-driven economization and financialization lead to the exclusion of certain actors, preventing them from participating in the prosperity promises associated with markets. Processes of "anti-relationality," such as those characteristic of "racial capitalism" (Melamed, 2015), must therefore also be examined in their affective dimensions. It is crucial to uncover the extent to which markets affect other social fields—perhaps even triggering affective mobilizations that prompt a departure from market-driven logics.

A more progressive approach could also explore the affective relationalities that alternative economic models would need to cultivate in order to integrate economic coexistence with social and ecological sustainability. In this context, de-growth economies and common-good economic approaches could be considered. Markets tend to exert affective influence on other areas of society. Given the urgent need for transformation, it is essential to determine whether affective convergence, rather than divergence, is possible between markets and society.

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15

AFFECTIVE MEDIA

Bernd Bösel

The concept of *affective media* emerges at the intersection of affect theory and media studies, offering a frame for understanding how emotional experiences are identified, processed, and disseminated through media technologies. *Affective media* are media systems that not only convey content, but actively modulate, amplify, and transform the affective responses of their audiences. The concept highlights how media technologies act as far more than neutral intermediaries, as they shape the affective and emotional lives of the individuals and groups using them. This non-neutrality encompasses a number of biases along racial, gender, or political lines, most of which have been examined in communication studies and critical algorithm studies. To understand how *affective media* work, we must therefore learn how media systems implement these biases, especially toward affective life. This requires attending to how media privilege or discount certain types of affects and emotions, how affects and emotions are categorized, and which ideas of a good affective life are propagated.

In this chapter, I distinguish between two opposing tendencies in *affective media*: its "fixation" of affect on the one hand and its "dynamization" of affect on the other. Examples of media that fixate affect include affective computing technologies that claim to identify a user's current emotional state, or digital health applications designed to boost users' resilience or to monitor and control their mood swings. There are numerous examples of media that seek to dynamize affect. These include virtually all social media platforms, which work primarily with algorithms that privilege content with high emotive power. Older media, such as television, radio, and film, have also been described as transmitters and amplifiers of affective dynamics.

The current focus in both public debate and scientific research has primarily been on digital affective media. I suggest that this focus reflects an intersection of the opposing tendencies we have discerned in affective media, that is, of fixation and dynamization. For example, this confluence is apparent in how people use smartphones. People navigate social media platforms on their phones as a means of intensively affecting and being affected, but also as a means of calming themselves down and regaining self-control. It is a controversial question whether these two tendencies are or even can be well-balanced. In any case, the prevalence of data capitalism has to be taken into account when engaging with digital affective media, because the platforms' and startups' prerogatives to maximize financial gains

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shape the way they design and program their applications and interfaces, which in turn has a direct effect on their users.

Fixating Affect

Affect is dynamic. It entails relations, flows, and transformations. Not surprisingly, given their dynamic openness, affective encounters can be challenging and pose questions throughout a subject's life span. There is an existential slipperiness to affect, both in the passive and in the active sense of being affected and affecting. Regulating affect has therefore become a central topic for pedagogy, ethics, and politics, all of which are becoming increasingly mediated via digital media technologies. Popular applications like affect detection software, apps for mindfulness, mood tracking, or resilience apps, offer means for classifying emotional expressions, quantifying moods, and (re-)establishing self-control. Many of these applications are automated, with databases that mostly rely on simplified affect catalogues and on algorithms that provide instructions for a supposedly better life. These technologies thus have a tendency to fixate affect in line with pre-programmed categories, thereby channeling the flow of users' affective lives in standardized ways. Their functioning is essentially based on an affect identification bias which should be added to the already known biases described by critical media and communication scholars.

Among the devices and applications developed to intentionally register affective phenomena, the method of mood tracking has probably come the farthest up to date. Its current popularity resonates with the positive psychology movement that counsels subjects in how to optimize their emotional life within the framework of neoliberal societies. Automated mood recording is increasingly being incorporated into data-based monitoring both by the healthcare system and the corporate sector, where it remains unclear who benefits from it primarily.

The ongoing success of mood tracking has inspired the tech industry to optimize self-monitoring gadgetry, for example through neurotechnological applications (McStay, 2018, p. 132). By collecting "brain data," new wearable technology promises insights into processes that are not directly accessible to consciousness. Affect, especially in its non-conscious form, thus gets encoded and fixated in an additional way. This exacerbates the already existing data protection problem, thus making the previous surveillance capitalism concerns even more poignant, as the current debate on neuro rights shows: "Now that artificial intelligence technology can increasingly infer our thoughts from our digital activities and neurotechnology can decode our emotions and one day soon perhaps even our thoughts, scholars and human rights advocates are calling for updates to international conventions" (Farahany, 2023, p. 70).

Applications like these fixate affect by identifying affective events as instances of concise emotion categories, or by expressing affects in quantified form. In so doing, these affective media translate affective events into fixed symbols (concepts and numbers) and ultimately into data that are computable for information processing machines. This translation operates as a contingent fixation of what is ultimately an ongoing flux of affect, turning the continuous movement of people's affective experience into computable numbers, and thereby creating the "emotion-as-number" (Dror, 2001, p. 359). Everything that symbols cannot represent is thus lost in translation—and it is precisely this insight into this gap between affect and symbolized feelings or emotions that has been a core tenet of the "affective turn,"

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as elaborated by Patricia Clough in the introduction to her edited volume of the same name (Clough, 2007, p. 2).

Histories and Media of Affect Identification

These digital media approaches to affect and emotion build on a long history of categorizing and counseling that have their roots in ancient philosophy as well as religious guidance literature. Since at least antiquity, affective media like emotion catalogues have provided taxonomies and other means for bringing order and direction into the affective lives of groups and individuals, ultimately assisting in or facilitating affect regulation. It is useful to understand this genealogy of "affect dispositioning" (Bösel, 2018) to help clarify how contemporary power dynamics shape the regulation and fixation of affect. Over the course of centuries, the repertoire of affective media has developed more versatile ways of regulating affective life, as will be seen in the following paragraphs. Despite this, scientific inquiry into emotions has often served to identify and control them, as it continues to seek to do to this day.

Beginning with Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (2018) and the *Nicomachean Ethics* (2009), Western philosophy and science have used catalogues of emotions as the standard means of classifying the spectrum of affectivity. By organizing this affective spectrum, emotion catalogues have sought to render it accessible for forming affective dispositions (Mühlhoff, 2019) and for standardized forms of affect regulation. Aristotle's classification principles, together with the fourfold scheme introduced by Stoicism (pleasure/pain, desire/fear), were widely adopted throughout the Middle Ages, and thus also informed the elaborate emotion catalogues developed in the Early Modern period by René Descartes, Baruch de Spinoza, David Hume, and Adam Smith. Descartes' (2015) theory of emotions in *The Passions of the Soul* is particularly modern due to the parallels he drew between emotions, bodily processes, and physiological signs—a parallel that builds the foundation for affect detection software today.

Enabled by the new possibilities of printing, the same period saw the emergence of a groundbreaking addition to language-based catalogues in the form of emotion images. The French court painter and illustrator Charles le Brun was a pioneer of this new affective medium. His *Méthode pour apprendre à dessiner les passions* (1698) contained several dozen drawings of facial expressions that represented distinct emotions. Le Brun's visualizations have been appreciated in art history for their nuanced representations of emotional expressivity.[1]

The invention of photography in the 19th century marked a turning point for emotion images. The photographs of emotional expressions taken by the physiologist Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne, published in his 1862 book *Mecanisme de la physiologie humaine*, attained iconic status. Duchenne electrified individual facial muscles of his subjects in such a way that the involuntary contractions produced the desired emotional expression. Duchenne arranged his photographs, which he also called "portraits of passions," into a "photographic atlas" of emotions (Löffler, 2004, p. 41). Notably, as he merely reproduced what was previously known about affective mimicry, the traditional emotion catalogues remained untouched in his work.

Duchenne's emotion images rose to prominence when Charles Darwin (1872/2009) included them in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, one of the earliest

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books to feature photographs. Darwin used many of Duchenne's images and praised him for his physiological accuracy. In contrast to his predecessors, Darwin approached affect expression from a universalist evolutionary perspective, thus effectively excluding cultural dimensions from the analysis. Darwin's research became the basis for the psychology of emotions in the 20th century, which Silvan Tomkins influentially merged with cybernetics. Tomkins's research can be seen as *the* hinge in the history of affect-processing media (Frank & Wilson, 2020, pp. 141–150). His affect theory, which identified the face as the "primary site of the affects," continued the classical catalogues of emotions and emotion images. It also pointed ahead to the information-technology processing of affects, most notably with automated affect recognition.

Digital Affect Technologies

Tomkins's most famous student, Paul Ekman, took decisive steps toward implementing emotion catalogues and images in the digital age. Ekman's pop-cultural status arose from his research into deception detection, which was featured prominently in TV productions such as *The Human Face* (Lavin et al., 2001) and *Lie to Me* (Grazer, 2009–2011). Ekman (2004) claims that by detecting "micro-expressions," which occur in the face involuntarily, a person's actual emotions can be assessed accurately. Following Tomkins, he advocates a theory of basic emotions that are purportedly associated with universal, transculturally recognizable facial expressions. The affect image is indispensable to this theory. Since the 1970s, Ekman has used images depicting idealized emotional expressions in his co-development of the Facial Action Coding System (FACS), which is widely used today. The FACS effectively naturalizes and universalizes a local cultural practice of expression and spreads it around the globe. Ekman also provided his expertise for the 2015 Pixar animated film *Inside Out* (Docter, 2015). In addition, some US authorities draw on Ekman's research, such as the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) with its program "Screening of Passengers by Observation Techniques" (SPOT).

Despite decades of criticism against it (Feldman Barrett, 2017), Ekman's research has become a central component of digital media environments. Research in "affective computing," a term introduced by Rosalind Picard (1997) at MIT in the 1990s, has achieved its greatest successes to date with the alleged identification of emotions, much of which is based on Ekman's research. The applications of so-called "emotional AI" (McStay, 2018) operate autonomously and are often intrusive. Andrew McStay (2018, p. 1) addresses affective computing as an example of emerging "empathic media," arguing that these new technologies are actually capable of "capturing" emotions. However, as he emphasizes, the term "capture" has an ambivalent connotation, because in addition to the IT meaning of storage, it also means forcibly taking possession of something.[2] His detailed overview of the field of "artificial emotional intelligence" or "emotional AI" keeps track of this ambivalence (see also Angerer & Bösel, 2016), which also applies to the widespread practice of generating affective data. As with other forms of personal data, there are serious concerns here that make strong regulatory measures advisable, since the identification of affects is not an end in itself, but is pursued for either capitalist or policing purposes (McStay, 2020). Furthermore, many critics of affect detection software fear that users might become accustomed to a new level of data-based behaviorism in the long run. As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) argued in her widely discussed book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, companies that

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integrate sensorial technologies into their tools for data analysis might be able to control the behavior of users much more effectively than would have ever been possible in classical social-technological designs. And, as can be argued with a recourse to Althusserian ideology theory, the control of behavior could become the gateway to also effectively control the affective as well as the cognitive life of users.

Dynamizing Affect

As we have seen, affective media can be discerned by the two opposing directions of fixating and dynamizing affect. While the fixation of affect operates in favor of affect regulation and of stabilizing groups and individuals, media that primarily work at dynamizing affect have a tendency to instigate social change and even play a vital role for emerging political movements. As Zizi Papacharissi (2015) has noted, "There are countless stories of how media serve as conduits for affective expression in historical moments that promise social change" (p. 4). During the French Revolution, a never before seen number of newspapers appeared that simultaneously defined and stimulated the ongoing events. During the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, newly emerged social media such as Twitter and Facebook invited outside observers to "tune into" the ongoing upheaval (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 4), while participants used the same media to organize their protests dynamically.

While digital media shape and define our understanding of affective publics and communities in the present, the transmission of affect to large audiences has always been a central function of media. The classical genres of art, like theater, music, or poetry, can be interpreted as affective media devices allowing a collective to experience itself as a community. As Lehmann et al. (2019, p. 146) have elaborated, this mediation of collective affectivity relies heavily on "a diversity of generic forms, *pathos formulae*, and means of expression," thereby constituting an affective economy that keeps bodies and ideas in constant exchange and circulation via the generic affects they co-experience. Insofar as each node in this transmission process mediates the affective flows regarding its own disposition, there is always room for differentiation and dissent even within the experience of belonging to an "affective community" (Zink, 2019).

At the same time, hegemonic media often have the effect of mainstreaming a dominant "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1977) and thus forging a molar affective flow to the detriment of molecular affective becomings (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The printing press has been described as the media-technological condition for the emergence of nationalist consolidation (McLuhan, 2001), since it brought about the standardization of national languages and the production of collective emotions.

Gabriel Tarde's distinction between "crowd" and "public" (originally published in 1901) allows us to consider the role of mass communication media in spreading and amplifying affects more thoroughly. Tarde's illustrative material was the daily newspaper, which fosters people's participation in a community of individuals who do not come into direct contact with each other. Nevertheless, they feel a "bond between them" that lies "in their simultaneous conviction or passion and in their awareness of sharing at the same time an idea or a wish with a great number of other men" (Tarde, 2010, p. 278). In this formulation, publics bond both on an affective and a cognitive level through mass communication—a noteworthy fact since in the 20th century there was a long-prevailing overemphasis on the cognitivist understanding of "manufacturing consent."[3]

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Tarde published his theory of imitation at the same time that the cinema system was beginning to develop, which within just a few decades established a global infrastructure for the distribution of affect chains that can be consumed by audiences around the globe. The cinema is therefore probably the decisive medium for understanding the intensification of affective dynamics in the 20th century. The broadcast media, in turn, have increased the affective synchronization within societies via the real-time distribution of sounds and images in an unprecedented way. Since the early days of radio, media scholars have focused on the strangeness of this virtually permanent synchrony of large audiences, which creates new affective bonds, but also brings about a new divide between the privileged publics and those who are left outside. Moreover, there is a continuing debate about the effects of affective synchronization on time perception and historical consciousness at large (Bösel, 2014).

State-funded television channels have played a decisive role in constituting a public sphere in Post-War Europe, including the production of democratic subjectivities as well as feelings of belonging to communities with their local traditions and ways of living. In Germany, the effects of the partition on media consumption could still be observed decades after reunification (Mükke, 2021). A flawed process of corporate takeovers in the 1990s benefited the profits of West German news corporations while marginalizing and patronizing East German news coverage. This exacerbated the already existing distrust of the media system among citizens of Eastern states, acquired in the years of controlled reporting and strict censorship in the GDR. The resulting affective dynamics contributed to the continuing success of far-right movements like the AfD.

Today, digital networks are intensifying how affect is transmitted and produced. Digital networks have become the defining media of the present, giving rise to a new wave of technically mediated affective contagion. This is seen most notably in the viral spread of affectively intensive online content. Compared to traditional mass media, social media bring a further intensification of affective dynamics into play. Social media thus forge a different form of affect transmission, drawing on the instant "spreadability" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 3) and "shareability" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 126) of content.

The debate that followed the publication of the "Facebook Emotional Contagion Study" in 2014 has led to a more thorough investigation of the connection between unconscious affective processes, algorithms optimized for capitalist goals, and the ethical and political aspects of social media influencing (see also Sampson et al., 2018). The platforms' barely regulated profit orientation relies on the self-reinforcing effect of negative emotions and messages, which, in the absence of effective moderation, encourages the regular occurrence of viral affective dynamics. During the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns, these dynamics reached unprecedented levels, leading among other things to a rise in what Chinese scholars have called a "sentiment outbreak" (Lu & Hong, 2022, p. 12), meaning a sharp rise of negative emotional interactions that mirrored the outbreak of the coronavirus not just on the level of metaphors, as well as to a "pandemic of anti-Asian cyberhate" (Costello et al., 2021). In addition, for several years now there has been a surge of trolling and professional agitation, instigated by both real persons and automated chatbots. This contributes to the much-lamented poisoning of social media atmospheres, while affective disinhibition can even have life-threatening consequences for those affected (Paasonen, 2015; → *Infrastructures of Feeling*).

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As a number of scholars have noted, online affective dynamics should not be reduced to negative affects such as fear and hate. Positive affect can also be at the center of emergent viral occurrences, or even be organized in online marketing campaigns, in political campaigns, and even by movements working outside of the established sociopolitical spectrum. Barack Obama's election campaign of 2008 showed how social media can be used for self-reinforcing affective dynamics focusing on the positivity of concepts like hope and change. It managed, in the words of social contagion scholar Tony Sampson (2012), "to emphatically tap into the infectable emotions of many U.S. voters" (p. 155) and ultimately turned into a "worldwide love contagion" (p. 156).

Online campaigns by grassroots activist groups reached a notable peak in 2012 when the "Kony 2012" video, produced by the NGO Invisible Children, went viral and reached over 100 million views within the first week, sparking a global wave of empathy for abducted child warriors in Uganda. The ensuing debate about the campaign's tactics and ethics, as well as the critical backlash against naïve "clicktivism" (Shresthova, 2016), revealed the deep ambivalence of digitally mediated affective dynamics. The effects of viral online events can neither be predicted nor contained,[4] which may be the reason why the democratic optimism of the early 2010s following the so-called "Twitter revolutions" quickly subsided.

Moreover, beginning with the double shock of the Brexit vote and the first election of Donald Trump as president of the US, online affective dynamics have increasingly been associated with the rise of far-right movements and policies. The disinhibition performed by public figures like Trump or Elon Musk has gradually eroded the standards of online communication. The widespread presence of Alt Right trolls and bot networks exacerbates this situation, as does the reluctance of leading platforms to uphold content moderation policies. Ultimately, the far right has been much more successful than leftist groups at using online affective dynamics to their benefit. This is due to the right's strategic use of tactics such as planned disinhibition, trolling, and bullshitting (Frankfurt, 2005), as well as its disavowal of any form of responsibility—none of which would go well with leftist politics of any existing kind.[5] The effortless spreadability and shareability of digital media seems, at least at this point in the ongoing history of digitization, to work in favor of the far right—as does another digital affordance, which I propose to call "memeability." The etymology of "meme" suggests that these images are designed for self-replication and dissemination, thus being an ideal medium for virality. Internet memes produce affects that are subject to constant modification and transformation—factors that form an essential part of their success (Nowotny & Reidy, 2022, pp. 10–14). Again, far-right and neo-fascist movements have proven to be extremely savvy in using memes strategically as a means of transmitting and amplifying affective dynamics. This raises the question of how left-wing or, more generally, socio-politically progressive projects can learn to harness the reinforcing effects of affective media for their own purposes.

Conclusion

The broad spectrum of *affective media* was presented here following two opposing tendencies: the fixation and the dynamization of affect. The concept of *affective media*—and its two opposing tendencies—builds on insights from critical media and communication studies that media technologies are never just neutral instruments, but produce intended as well

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as non-intended outcomes in their users. Following these insights, the two main sections of the chapter explored some of the ambivalences surrounding current *affective media* applications, and offered some examples. As one example, the chapter analyzed the fixation of affect through automated affect detection software and neurotechnology, and pointed out their reductive and biased qualities. Meanwhile, the chapter explored the much-debated rise of hate speech and other forms of negative affect and affective behavior, as an example of the dynamization of affect through social media.

These reflections on affective media reveal a paradox that lies at the heart of the digital present. The very same media technologies that expose their users to distress and sadness are now also being presented as a cure for affect dysregulation. At the same time, the mechanisms for fixating affect that claim to improve user friendliness (Kuang & Fabricant, 2019) and to provide a perfectly personalized experience ultimately help companies target those same users with habit-forming content. Such content is thus designed to exploit users' psychological vulnerabilities and to implicate them in affective dynamics that are beyond their control. This is all the more disconcerting if we take into account that affect and mood detection only work automatically to a certain extent. A considerable amount of affective data is provided by users answering feedback surveys (Stark, 2021, p. 302). Digital literacy is often invoked in debates, but will only be part of a solution. The same is true for a stronger legislation on data protection, content moderation, and similar areas. We also require more research as well as public debates about the paradoxical tactics of affective exploitation. Only when these tactics are exposed will users get back their agency to counter the most deleterious effects of digitization within the thriving structures of digital capitalism.

Notes

1 Le Brun remained an important reference work for visual artists well into the 19th century (Weissert, 2016, p. 252).
2 In a similar vein, Brian Massumi famously bemoans the "capture" of affective tendencies through language and other "apparatuses of capture" (Massumi, 2015, p. 102).
3 Interestingly, in Walter Lippmann's influential book *Public Opinion* from 1922, there is a lot of talk about emotions and feelings. For example, Lippmann was convinced that political leaders who are "in touch with popular feeling" know that if a new policy is to be launched, "there is a preliminary bid for community of feeling, as in Mark Antony's speech to the followers of Brutus" (Lippmann, 1922/1997, p. 244).
4 Polak and Trottier (2020) open their introduction to the edited volume *Violence and Trolling on Social Media* with a viral public shaming incident from 2013. After tweeting a racist joke (possibly with ironic intent), Justine Sacco was involved in an abusive shitstorm that within hours resulted in her employer firing her. One of the orchestrators of the shitstorm later became a victim of online vitriol and subsequently apologized to Sacco. As Polak and Trottier point out, it is telling that the involved individuals were all "professionally involved in communication online"; yet even as professionals they were "clearly as little in control of the 'gleeful savagery' of online shaming as anyone else" (p. 10).
5 This is a strong parallel to the gap in the right and the left's abilities to make use of existing festival traditions. During the Third Reich, the Nazi party's eclecticism of adopting pagan, Roman Catholic, and even socialist festivities was an important factor in its appeal to the population. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union struggled to foster a similar enthusiasm in their citizens, many of whom had to be coerced to at least go through the motions of belonging to a joyful community (Rolf, 2006).

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16

INFRASTRUCTURES OF FEELING

Ana Makhashvili and Margreth Lünenborg

The concept of infrastructures of feeling explains ways in which collective emotional dynamics emerge, take shape, and circulate within and through digital media environments. It illuminates how online platforms' affordances and architecture shape and regulate the collective expression and amplification of affects and emotions. Infrastructures of feeling encompass both material and symbolic dimensions. They designate a shared (material/physical) environment as well as a shared sensorial knowledge that users draw upon and activate in their affective media practices, particularly when interacting with digital media. Following Raymond Williams's concept of "structures of feeling" and its application to digital media by Rebecca Coleman as "infra-structures of feeling," we understand such structures not as static and complete, but always *in emergence, dynamic, and fluid*. The concept thus tries to capture the not-yet-fixed, emergent structures and, at the same time, that which is structured about feelings (patterns, practices, repertoires) by technologies and their material backbone. While traditional mass media also co-constitute and operate within specific infrastructures, in this chapter, we focus on social media platforms. To analyze the specificities of *infrastructures of feeling*, we suggest to distinguish four dimensions: (1) *Temporality* describes the unfolding of users' interaction characterized by instantaneity and simultaneity. (2) *Relationality* emphasizes the emergence of infrastructures of feeling in relations between users and media-technological environments but also describes digital cultures as rooted in connectivity and sociality. (3) *Intensities* characterize the various frequencies where peak times emerge often unexpected and beyond individual intentionality. (4) While digital communication primarily appears as *disembodied*, the analytical approach of infrastructures of feeling allows to grasp the *embodied performance* as well as the *bodily effects* of digital communication with social media platforms. Memetic performances, filters, and platform regulations of (in)visibility (e.g., nipples, dick pics) organize bodily self-recognition or invite to invent strategies to navigate these regulations subversively.

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From Structures to Infrastructures: Origins of the Concept

Williams (1977) first introduced the concept of "structures of feeling" to traverse the binary oppositions between the social and personal, feeling and thought which, as he suggests, were omnipresent in social theory at the time. His critique was twofold: first, he argued that most social theory was concerned with the fixed and manifest structures that reside in the past tense and second, he argued that those elements of social life that escape such structures, or are not yet fixed, were dismissed as personal or subjective. Structures of feeling integrates both aspects: it examines how feelings are patterned, structured, and rooted in historical and cultural contexts, while also attending to emergent or pre-emergent structures of feeling that are not yet fully articulated or rigid. Hence, structures of feeling refers to those social experiences that are not easily recognized as social:

> 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.
>
> *(Williams, 1977, p. 132)*

By *feeling*, Williams refers to the way things, specifically, political beliefs, meanings, norms, and ideals, are experienced in the presence; whereas *structures* refer to the set of rules, patterns, and internal logics that shape and organize them. It should be emphasized that emergent structures do not exist independently or outside of the social realm but are historically rooted and embedded in broader cultural and social structures. While Williams (1977) defines structures of feeling as "social experiences *in solution*" (p. 133, emphasis in original), he also emphasizes:

> Yet this specific solution is never mere flux. It is a structural formation which, because it is at the very edge of semantic availability, has many of the characteristics of a preformation, until specific articulations—new semantic figures—are discovered in material practice.
>
> *(p. 134)*

Williams's work and the concept itself reflect a cultural studies perspective on affect, which has several implications. Culturalist perspectives on affect are concerned with capturing and examining the dominant feeling that characterizes a certain historic moment, era, or specific cultural products (e.g., literature, TV). Furthermore, they are interested in how emotions are structured, patterned, and culturally situated, and finally, how emotions are related to power. Such a perspective thus entails interrogating how the ways in which people emote publicly can operate as a category of social exclusion that intersects with "race," gender, class, or ability (e.g., Reddy, 1999). In a similar vein, other scholars have examined how different institutions produce and work to uphold "emotional regimes" or "feeling rules" that construct certain ways of feeling as legitimate while delegitimizing others (Hochschild, 1979; Reddy, 1999).

While Williams investigated structures of feeling predominantly in reference to literature, with *feeling rules*, Hochschild (1979, 1983) provided a sociological examination of how

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feelings are regulated and commodified in capitalist societies. Feeling rules comprise social guidelines that define and scrutinize not only *what* one should feel in a certain situation or toward a certain issue, but also, *how* one should feel, that is, the duration, intensity, and modes of articulation (Hochschild, 1979, p. 564; → *Contested Emotions*). But how do certain ways of feeling become hegemonic? Media studies approach this question by theorizing media not only as a site where meaning is produced and information distributed, but where emotions become attached to these meanings and their acceptable modes of articulation are defined (Hall, 1997).

More recently, digital media in general and social media in particular have fundamentally transformed how structures of feeling come into being and the effects they exert to public modes of communication. Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) uses the term "emotional architecture" to describe the relevance of platform structure and design for the regulation and commodification of users' emotional expressions. This concept emphasizes how platforms are deliberately designed to invoke specific emotional responses (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 78). Wahl-Jorgensen argues that all mediated spaces have specific emotional architectures: traditional media as well as digital media. By its inherent structure, its tonality, and opportunities of reaction and interaction, the design and technological affordances of (social) media invite specific forms of user activity, regulate them, and try to reduce the undesired ones. Affordances comprise technological features (retweet button, prefigured emotional reactions such as the like button) that enable and restrict certain types of actions (Geboers & Van De Wiele, 2020; Hutchby, 2001). Social media platforms aim to commodify and monetize users' activities through pre-structured forms of interaction. This structuring works similar to the organization of public space, which can either invite or prohibit certain gatherings like meetings, talks, demonstrations, or flash mobs. According to Wahl-Jorgensen (2019, p. 151), the emotional architectures of social media "are central in facilitating the identity construction of networked selves."

Core Dimensions of Infrastructures of Feeling

Rebecca Coleman (2018, p. 610) first introduced the term "infra-structures of feeling . . .[as] intended to account for the systems or linkages via which the affectivity of the present is encountered, experienced and arranged." We follow her argument to systematically capture the relevance of media as symbolic and material structures organizing, regulating, commodifying, and intensifying users' emotional expressions and affective engagement. To that end, we outline the concept *infrastructures of feeling* referring to four core dimensions: temporality, relationality, intensity, and (dis)embodiment.

Temporality

Coleman (2018, p. 601) argues that "pre-emergence is an especially prevalent quality of today's media culture." While Williams addressed this temporal characteristic in relation to literature and popular media, Coleman emphasizes how this quality of not-yet-fully-articulated feeling has become dominant in digital media. On social media platforms, users share their experiences and feelings about ongoing events as they unfold—or even in anticipation of them—creating a sense of mediated articulation that seems to "produce" these events. Characterizing the temporality of digital media as "real time," "live," and "always on" emphasizes

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"the now" as an ongoing feed of texts and images absorbing users' attention. Taking a step further, we can also distinguish more precisely the varying forms of "now-ness" produced by different platforms and services. In their concept of "mediated presents," Coleman and Paasonen (2020, p. 2) argue that time is not a neutral backdrop to digital media but rather is "actively constituted by—and as constitutive of—(digital) media." While Twitter (now X) organizes a "flexible, temporal present . . . of real-timeness" (Coleman, 2018, p. 613), the video streaming platform Netflix offers "an open-ended, contingent and relational present" by inviting to binge-watching (Coleman, 2018, p. 614). Both variations of now-ness—shrinking and pausing the present—are affectively constituted in a relational interaction of users and digital technology simultaneously relying on and modulating patterns of feeling the now. Highlighting pre-emergence as a core user experience aligns with Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira's (2012) concept of instantaneity in digital communication. In this framework, simultaneous events and the stream of their ongoing mediated communication become inextricably entangled, offering users various opportunities to affectively tune in, take part, anticipate, and feel the unfolding of events.

Relationality

Relationality denotes how infrastructures of feeling emerge in relational dynamics between bodies—media-technological, algorithmic, and human. The ways in which people feel toward a specific issue and articulate these feelings are structured by several relational dynamics: between the event or issue itself, its mediation, users' media practices, and their relationships with other users. Digital infrastructures nudge users in certain directions, toward certain beliefs, norms, and behaviors. Social media platforms, for instance, encourage users to connect with other users offering "an additional boost of sociality when they identify prospective ties based on a shared location or similar interests, thus helping to form technologically assisted networks, and sort and curate content in ways that feel personal and intimate" (Ruckenstein, 2023, p. 61). Relationality is then also an important pillar of digital cultures rooted in connectivity and sociality. Crucially, while digital infrastructures fundamentally shape and regulate how users relate to the world and to each other, these infrastructures should feel neutral when they work properly—that is, ideologically and economically neutral. Indeed, users are intended to experience them as neutral. As Ruckenstein (2023, p. 57) explains, "Structures of feeling, then, are ideologies that are experienced as sensed realities. They align the personally felt with economic aims and political conditions, thereby maintaining modes of interactions, shared experiences, and emotional responses." This does not mean to presuppose a complete unawareness of digital infrastructures on the users' part but to critically examine how infrastructures enable and restrict relations to sustain hegemonic as well as profitable media practices.

Intensity

Intensity is core to understand the dynamics of social media. Describing social media as an "affect generator" (Reckwitz, 2016; Lünenborg, 2022) allows to capture the manufacturing of intensities by the logic of social media itself. At first, intensities can be understood as mere quantities and frequencies of user activities on a given topic or event structured and organized by, for example, a hashtag. The algorithms of digital platforms fuel such

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"trending topics" into the timeline of various users and thus attract their interest and willingness to engage with the ongoing debate. Economically driven, the inherent logic aims at intensification of users' activities to capitalize their data. These strategies accumulate engagement and produce their own forms of intensities. The emergent quality of networked communication leaves the production of such intensities beyond individual intentionality—unexpected or even undesired intensities might emerge out of single user activities. Memes and other ironic or subversive interpretations of content offer various modes of producing intensities that bypass or even contradict original user's intent but attract attention and produce reaction in high intensities.

Beyond mere quantities, intensity can be understood as the ways in which text and content become charged with affect. In written text such charging can formally be produced by an excessive use of exclamation marks, capital letters, or the use of emojis conveying various affective intensities (Makhashvili et al., 2022). Additionally, the use of emotion words, the establishing of emotionally laden metaphors, and similar practices to transmit affect through language are of relevance. Repetition appears to be the most relevant driver of affective intensity. Ahmed (2004, p. 130) has introduced the term "sticky signs" to capture the words and descriptions imbued with and provoking certain emotions. By ongoing repetition, the stickiness of such signs may increase, being a part of what Ahmed (2004) describes as "affective economies." But it might be too simple to think about intensities as just an increase in quantity of content—the more, the better. Platform regulation and accountability, especially when politically motivated, can also manage intensities in different ways: by decreasing them, avoiding excess, or shifting affective engagement to different topics and interactions.

(Dis)Embodiment

Digital infrastructures produce ambivalent and often contradictory forms of embodiment. Some social media platforms enable user disembodiment through anonymity and the exclusion of the body, particularly in text-based social media. Contrary to the expectations of earlier digital optimism, the rather egalitarian access to digital publics did not result in harmonious deliberation and positive connectivity. Rather, these seeming disembodiment and anonymity have, in many instances, led to online violence, hate speech, and novel forms of discrimination. Scholars of social media have invoked concepts like "platformed racism" (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017) or "networked misogyny" (Dickel & Evolvi, 2022) to highlight that racist and misogynist structures are inscribed in digital infrastructures. Online discrimination and oppression operate through three distinct mechanisms. First, it is the neoliberal logic of most social media platforms allowing harmful content as long as they can be considered as "humor"—a logic that usually targets and harms already oppressed or minoritized communities. Second, specific affordances of social media allow sharing, decontextualizing, and appropriating content in unforeseeable or unintended ways. Third, users' interaction with and appropriation of these affordances allow them to convey racist and misogynist content even when platform regulations may not allow it. Thus, through platformed misogyny and racism, some bodies become disembodied and anonymous, while others are made hyper-visible and constructed as racialized and gendered bodies.

At the same time, some social media platforms—especially those favoring visual content such as Instagram or TikTok—are characterized by an overemphasis on the body, as well

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as new forms of modification and regulation of the body, again, usually in gendered and racialized ways. The earlier funny and weird Snapchat filters that distorted faces or projected bizarre objects to the face were quickly complemented by filters rendering bodies slimmer, the skin clearer, and lips fuller. Finally, the regulation of the body also includes the regulation of mental states and moods. This occurs not only through applications specifically designed to track mental health and body-related data, but also, once again, through social media platforms tracking and monetizing their users' moods by, for example, integrating simple emotional reaction buttons (Stark, 2021).

Practical Applications: Examples of Digital Activism

To illustrate the conceptual quality and benefit of *infrastructures of feeling* as an analytic lens to empirically gather the different forms in which digital platforms shape, organize, and regulate emotions and feelings in current societies, we briefly discuss examples from our own research on communication of the far right about migration issues as well as forms of feminist mobilization in the context of abortion rights.

One such example is the case of hashtag #WirHabenPlatz ("we have space") that started circulating in Germany in early March 2020. The hashtag came as a response to the decision made by Türkiye's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to open the borders to the European Union to people fleeing mainly from Syria. As a result, some 18,000 refugees got temporarily stuck and were met with brutal state and police violence at the Turkish-Greek border. The hashtag first emerged to express and mobilize solidarity for the affected refugees and to urge the German government to host the refugees. Our analysis of tweets collected under this hashtag, however, showed that almost immediately the hashtag was hijacked by far-right actors that quickly managed to mobilize the largest and loudest community in the network and redefine the emotions attached to the hashtag (Makhashvili, 2024). The far right not only denounced and ridiculed the solidarity claims, but also quickly introduced new hashtags (e.g., #IstandwithGreece, #DefendGreece, #DefendEurope as well as #refugeesnotwelcome or #refugeesgohome) portraying the affected refugees as a threat rather than threatened. At the same time, the "we" in "we have space" was reclaimed as a German nativist "we" assuming the position of victimhood and thus the right to defend itself from racialized "others." The case illustrates the instantaneous nature of publics emerging within infrastructures of feeling as well as the affective contestations and polarization that happen in real time. Moreover, the intensity of the mobilization (in terms of frequency as well as intensity of emotions) sheds light on ways in which digital affordances can be used to sustain and defend hegemonic structures. It also highlights ways in which affects and emotions are produced relationally, often leading to their radical subversion. Bodies, in this case, mainly appear as discursive bodies—while nonetheless racialized and linked to specific emotions.

As our other case study on the abortion rights discourse shows, in audiovisual platforms, bodies are engendered in more complex ways. Two contrasting legal developments occurred on the same day: while the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, paving the way for restrictive abortion laws, Germany lifted a ban that had prohibited gynecologists from informing women about their abortion services. At this very day, abortion issues—one of the core concerns of feminist movement—were omnipresent on various digital media platforms, causing waves of transnational solidarity as well as sharp offences by anti-abortion activists. On TikTok, a Chinese owned platform with more than

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1.5 billion users worldwide, a so-called "challenge" as part of the hashtag #MyBodyMyChoice emerged in the aftermath of these events (for more details on this online performance, see Lünenborg & Backes, 2025). In more than 100 countries, especially in Germany and France, mostly younger women (accompanied by some men performing as "allies") joined a performance which has been critically discussed as the "coat hanger challenge"[1] ("Kleiderbügel"-challenge). Inspired by a clip from Billie Eilish's performance in which she angrily shouts out "my body, my motherfucking choice," the participants perform lip-syncing, and transitions known as ritualized embodied practices prevalent on TikTok as a video platform. The "playful activism" (Cervi & Divon, 2023) enabled by the platform's affordances invites users to become part of a performance in which they start swinging a coat hanger around their finger wearing casual clothes in the beginning. After a sharp cut—a typical element of transitions—these very women switch their outfit while singing or shouting "my body, my motherfucking choice." In most of the cases, they become visible either with a bloody presentation of their bodies—to represent the effect of an illegal abortion—or in stylish dresses combined with careful make-up and styled hair. The performances stage two contrasting aspects: the vulnerable body of a woman subject to legal regulations that deprive her of reproductive rights and a self-confident statement of female empowerment—understood as the right to perform femininity through self-determined choice of outfit. The coat hanger as a signifier of bloody, risky illegal abortion becomes an "empty signifier" celebrating "happy feminism" as part of neoliberal or "popular feminism" (Banet-Weiser, 2018). TikTok's affordances attract a wide spectrum of users to join this trend and become part of an ephemeral transnational affective community enabled by pop culture (Billie Eilish's song and video statement) and the economic interests of the platform. Relying on bodily performances but modulating and regulating women's bodies at the same time is core to the attractiveness of the platform and of users' engagement. While we distinguish various affective types of performances (the angry, the shocking, the supportive, the joyful; for further details, see Lünenborg & Backes, 2025) as a result of various affective media practices, for the majority of users the political stance of the challenge disappears, and contingency takes over. TikTok's *infrastructure of feeling* capitalizes effectively on a political intervention opening it up to mere female visibility.

Outlook

Recent scholarship theorizing the relationship between digital technologies, algorithms, and emotions has importantly highlighted various affective states that capture the mood on social media. *Infrastructures of feeling* and its dimensions, as outlined here, are not necessarily intended to identify the dominant feelings of digital media but rather to define the conditions under which these feelings emerge and to explicate how they work specifically on different social media platforms and how they shape mobilization on social media. Considering the cases presented earlier as well as further literature on digital activism (e.g., Jackson et al., 2020; Ames & McDuffie, 2023), we argue that social media as infrastructures of feeling engender emotions that are connective, economic, and materialized.

Emotions on social media become *connective*, in the sense that users across different localities can connect and organize around an issue they care about; form a resistance movement (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter, #Metoo); and create translocal communities of care, solidarity, or grief (Jackson et al., 2020). At the same time, connective emotions may be

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subverted—either in subtle ways, by rendering their meanings more ambivalent, or in a more intense form, through practices of hijacking and (re)claiming.

Referring to emotions as *economic* implies that emotions on social media are capitalized on, commodified, and made profitable in various ways, for example, by integrating emotions in the app or platform interface or using algorithms that favor content that invokes specific emotional responses. Furthermore, it means that emotions accumulate and gain power through circulation (Ahmed, 2004), which is a built-in feature of most social media platforms. In this way, the commodification of emotions which Illouz (2012) has described and analyzed in detail is deeply embedded in vernacular practices of media-saturated societies. Users' affective media practices thus produce affective capital that feeds into platforms' algorithmic infrastructures.

Characterizing emotions as *materialized* draws attention to the hard- and software of digital environments pre-structuring and regulating the articulation of feelings. Without following a deterministic understanding which reduces human agency to a minimum, we need to consider the structuring quality of technical implementations—starting from the like-button, followed by the haptic of screen touches and not ending with sensorial media which directly react to bodily expressions (e.g., pulse, breathe frequency, skin tension) and regulate the "mood" of users by choice of music, sound quality, or light intensity.

With the concept of infrastructures of feeling, we follow Williams's (1977, p. 128) intention to navigate the complex relation between "the social as the fixed and explicit" and its contrast with the not-yet-fixed and stable elements "grasped and defined as the personal." Our suggestion builds on Williams's critique of this dichotomy by describing how feelings are manufactured through economically driven, technological, and algorithmic infrastructures. However, these infrastructures also provide opportunities for users to bypass, subvert, and reconfigure affective practices within and through media.

Note

1 Referencing the metal hanger as a symbol of illegal, risky abortion.

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17

AFFECTIVE ARCHIVE

Kerstin Schankweiler

The concept of the *affective archive* engages with the dynamic interplay between affect, memory, and archival practices, thereby tackling the fundamental issue of the relation between affect and history. Archives and historiography are driven by conscious and unconscious mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Within this basal context, the concept of the affective archive highlights that emotions influence what enters the archive and which narratives are subsequently foregrounded, marginalized, or forgotten. Furthermore, it addresses how emotions themselves are shaped by processes of remembering and forgetting, by shared memories as well as by exclusions and absences within archival records. In contrast to notions of archives as "neutral" and static repositories of documents or artifacts, the affective archive is understood as a living, embodied phenomenon where affective experiences can be preserved, reactivated, and actualized. Moreover, the concept also points to the bureaucratically sober framework of many archives as an affective mode of archival work in its own right—one that lends insight into the rationale of knowledge production and history making. Thus, and for analytical purposes, the relationship between archives and affect can be addressed on three levels. The first level includes affects and emotions from the past that are connected with the origin of records (affects *in* the archive). At the second level are affects connected with the archive itself—its collection, its space, structure, and organization (affects *of* the archive or *archival affects*). Third are affects arising from engaging with the archive's content and with the process of making meaning from that content (affects *from* the archive). These three interconnected layers form a rich network of bodies and affects across time and space that is key to understanding historically informed knowledge production. Instead of focusing on an inherent stabilizing and normative quality of the archive, the concept of affective archive highlights the archive's fragile underpinnings, uncontrollable connections, transformations, and alternative constructions of historical narratives. It also elicits ideas of cultural archives in a broader, more conceptual and discursive sense that is not confined to a specific institution and material site. Thus, affects *in*, *of*, and *from* the archive can be addressed across institutional and non-institutional contexts of memory, history-making, and knowledge production, and are subject to various practices and strategies of governing as well as resistance. In the context of affective societies, the

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affective archive reveals how societies emotionally negotiate their pasts and futures, thereby shaping collective social imaginaries.

Approaches to Archive and Affect

Theories of the archive emerged from various disciplines in the latter half of the 20th century, influenced by post-structuralism, especially by the writings of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. At least since the 1990s, the notion of the archive has become a universal metaphor for the history of knowledge that extends well beyond the physical institution of the archive. In this field of "archivology" (Ebeling & Günzel, 2009), affect and emotion, surprisingly, have not been a major focus, although important texts in this context offer points of reference for an affect-theoretical reading of archives. An example is Derrida's (1995) seminal book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, which presents a psychoanalytic interpretation of the archive. The very title of the book—*Archive Fever*—can be read as an affective concept. The fever describes a restless, almost obsessive feeling when dealing with memory, loss, and the fear of forgetting. For Derrida, the desire to archive, to preserve the past and control history, is inextricably linked to a feeling of loss and the impossibility of preserving everything. In this view, affect is the reason archives exist in the first place. Affect is what drives archiving.

An important text that addresses the relationship between affect and archive systematically comes from the field of anthropology: In *Along the Archival Grain*, Ann Stoler (2009) studies colonial rule, which, according to her argument, was deeply preoccupied with sentiment. For instance, colonial officials tried to shape affective states, and to control and use emotional attachments so as to secure political loyalties. Stoler reconstructs this "governing of the affective" (Stoler, 2009, p. 71) in archives of the Dutch colonial administration in Indonesia. She not only examines the official documents of the colonial archives, but also analyzes their "grain," that is, the implicit assumptions, contradictions, and emotions embedded within the archives themselves. To do so, she explores references to sentiment within the documents' content, as well as in their form and style, with attention to how emotions are expressed or suppressed. Stoler's study traces how affects shape the production, organization, and interpretation of knowledge, demonstrating how they were the "substance of governing projects" (Stoler, 2009, p. 60) and their archives. While Stoler's work touches upon the three levels of the affective archive outlined earlier, her important contribution lies in examining how affects operate *in* the archive, thus enabling her to reconstruct affective constellations of the past. Building on Stoler's perspective on archives, it can be argued that any archive can be interpreted as an *archive of emotions*—a repository shaped by the emotional lives and cultural contexts it seeks to preserve. The flipside of this is that emotions themselves can be understood as a kind of archive that preserves traces of history and culture.

Saidiya Hartman (2008) presents a different focus and approach to the archive in her essay *Venus in Two Acts*, in which she examines how enslaved women appear—if at all—in the sparse and violent archives of Atlantic slavery. Engaging with the records found in historical archives—such as legal documents, ship logs, and inventories of property—she highlights "the impossibility of discovering anything about her that hasn't already been stated" (Hartman, 2008, p. 1) from the perspective of the oppressors. Hartman describes the archive as a place of violence, filled with painful and horrifying details about slavery.

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Stressing those affects coming *from* the archive, she expresses "the pain experienced in my encounters with the scraps of the archive" (Hartman, 2008, p. 4). Such emotional responses elicited in those who interact with archive material both accompany and shape interpretation, often becoming transformative forces in their own right. Hartman's essay is not only a historical analysis, but also a deeply personal and emotional examination of the horrors of the past and their impact on the present. To overcome the limitations of the archive and its gaps, Hartman invents the method of "critical fabulation" (Hartman, 2008, p. 11). This involves imagining what might have been (events, relationships, feelings) and telling alternative stories based on the experiences and emotions of the enslaved. This method allows her to incorporate feelings such as hope, longing, love, and resistance into the story—affects that have not legibly entered the archive.

Hartman and Stoler both present critical readings of "governmental," official, and dominant archives, emphasizing their affective dimensions. Stoler does so by reading for the (hidden) affects of colonial governance, Hartman by focusing on what is *not* preserved and by investing in counter-histories "written with and against the archive" (Hartman, 2008, p. 12). What also comes to the fore when thinking about these kinds of official archives is the general distinction between those in power who archived, and those outside of power, who were archived. However, this distinction is a simplification. The relationship between power and the archive is more complex, as the act of archiving was not always a straightforward assertion of dominance, nor was being archived always a position of complete passivity.

The search for marginalized narratives and affects beyond official archives is what drives Ann Cvetkovich (2003) in her influential book *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Cvetkovich's underlying concept of the archive is very broad, and highlights alternative archives, instead of official institutions of the archive in the narrower sense. She introduces the idea that individual as well as collective experiences of trauma are documented in an "archive of feelings" that can be found in personal records, such as letters or diaries, as well as in popular culture records (songs, poems, performances, art works, etc.). She describes the archive of feelings as "an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7). Cvetkovich understands an archive of feelings as a space that holds the experiences of marginalized groups that may be shut out of official archives. It is no coincidence that Cvetkovich focuses on the subject of trauma in relation to affect and the archive, because events that are strongly charged with emotion can trigger the impulse to either document or repress them. For her, the "archive of feelings" is important for making pain, loss, trauma, and related cultural practices visible, as well as for healing or resisting these traumas. Cvetkovich and Hartman share the perspective that the archive has to be transformed in order to change how one can feel about the past, the present, and possible futures. The examination of affect in, of, and from the archive reveals that affective dynamics are residues of archival practices that actively contribute to the transformation of those practices in the present, thereby challenging institutional authority and enabling counter-histories. Moreover, Cvetkovich's "counter-archives" have in recent years brought affect studies into a broader dialogue with the archival fields including migration, labor, human rights, visual art, among others (Cifor & Gilliland, 2015, p. 3).

Visual arts have been a great inspiration for thinking about the archive since the 1990s when artistic practices of archiving became widespread (Foster, 2004; Merewether, 2006)

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coinciding with the rise of theories of the archive. An "archival turn" was even declared for contemporary art (Callahan, 2022). Archival artworks are often characterized by non-hierarchical installations—that is, spatial arrangements in which materials are not ordered chronologically, thematically, or by perceived importance, but instead presented in loose and open-ended constellations that invite associative viewing. This often results in an exuberant, renitent materiality that resists institutional logics of classification and control. Such artworks can be understood as para-institutional archives, exploring how cultural objects, technologies, and spaces generate and transmit knowledge. As explicitly alternative, embodied, and idiosyncratic forms of collecting and preserving, they often scrutinize official archives, their forms, practices, and archival affects (affects *of* the archive), unpacking the complexities of how affect operates within archival processes. In recent times, there has been a revival of archival practices, especially in the Middle East (Downey, 2015). Many of these contend with digital images from political contexts, establishing yet another "archival turn" in the arts.

Affective Archives of Revolution in the Digital Age

The concept of the affective archive gains particular urgency in the contemporary moment, as digital media have sparked an "archival turn" in citizen journalism, activism, and contemporary art. Digital technologies have made archiving more accessible, mundane, and widespread, but also more intensely affective—transforming archives into participatory, emotionally charged sites of memory and political engagement. In what follows, I will focus on practices of archiving in the digital sphere. This will allow me to further explore affective archives in the present at the interface between digital culture, practices of memory, politics, and aesthetics. As an example, I will concentrate on developments in the archiving of human rights violations and revolutions—events characterized by a high intensity of affects and emotional mobilization. Since the rise of mobile phone cameras and "citizen camera-witnessing" (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014), protest movements, political conflicts, human rights violations, and war have become subject to a documenting from below. These practices of "affective witnessing" (Richardson & Schankweiler, 2020) often create an urgent need for broader dissemination and preservation, giving rise to what can be called affective archiving. At the same time, the existence of these archives—repositories saturated with the intensity of events and witnessing—solicits renewed acts of testimony, engagement, and interpretation. Thus, affective witnessing and affective archiving form a mutually reinforcing dynamic in which affective intensity both drives documentation and sustains collective memory.

Since witnesses and activists around the world record what is happening in political conflicts with their mobile phone cameras, digital images often play a central role (Schankweiler, 2019). They are used to formulate messages in a particularly poignant and emotional way, and the messages are shared on social media, creating "affective publics" (Papacharissi, 2014; Lünenborg, 2019). The so-called Arab Spring was a turning point for these practices. Especially in the context of repressive regimes, practices of witnessing and image activism lead to online counter-archives—archives from below—that contradict official records and narratives. While many of these practices aim at democratizing archival access and countering hegemonic narratives, they also employ specific affective strategies to do so—from aesthetic choices that provoke emotional responses to participatory formats that

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foster a sense of collective witnessing and embodiment. "Official" archives and counter-archives seem to be in a constant state of fight against each other that also shapes how we feel (or should feel) about certain events.

If images circulate online, what kind of archive does the internet provide? In light of the affective archive concept, the internet can be understood as a kind of meta-archive that not only stores vast amounts of information but also functions as a highly dynamic and participatory archival environment where affective dynamics shape how knowledge is produced, remembered, and experienced. Especially through social media, affective resonances are continuously generated, circulated, and reconfigured across time, space, and digital networks. At the same time, the content we encounter is heavily filtered through user engagement, algorithmic curations, and platform politics that prioritize certain emotional responses (e.g., outrage, nostalgia, joy). These emotional selections guide what becomes visible, and shape the emotional climate in which digital memory is formed (→ *Infrastructures of Feeling*).

This continuous production and circulation of affective content, however, also destabilizes core archival principles such as stability and endurance. The surplus of digital culture, its participatory structures, its boundlessness, and its underlying economies of attention and inattention risk dissolving the archival impulse into a flood of ephemeral, affect-driven fragments. Rather than preserving collective memory, these dynamics may, paradoxically, contribute to new forms of forgetting and disorientation (→ *Unfeeling*).

The tension between abundance and disappearance thus becomes particularly evident in the digital sphere, where content and affect are not only generated but also continuously erased. Especially in recent protest movements, the unmanageable mass of "image testimonies" (Schankweiler et al., 2019) from zones of conflict has raised pressing questions about the archiving and systematization of digital materials. Although the internet is often discussed as an archive ("the internet does not forget," "nothing truly gets erased"), the actual loss of websites, videos, and social media posts has been an issue since the 1990s, prompting initiatives like the non-profit *Internet Archive*,[1] which has held the official status of a library since 2007.

However, the existence of such archival projects does not neutralize the political forces that drive deletion and censorship, particularly in repressive regimes. Repressing documents and archives—especially those documenting revolutions and uprisings—not only undermines the credibility of possible resistance and alternative narratives, but also attempts to control the affective relations to these events themselves: how they are remembered and how they are emotionally invested. At stake is not only the memory of revolution, but the feeling of revolution itself.

Given the unreliability of the internet as an archive, it is not surprising that a whole series of digital archiving initiatives have been founded in the aftermath of protest movements since the Arab Spring. During the Egyptian revolution of 2011, for example, an immediate concern arose to gather and preserve the many photographs and videos taken and saved by protestors, which were dispersed on thousands of mobile phones. A "media tent" was erected in the middle of Tahrir Square in Cairo where people could dump their material on hard discs. This collection of material later became the basis for digital archives. These "meta-testimonial ventures" (Givoni, 2016, p. 10) raise questions about the archiving, institutionalization, and historicization of digital image practices of testimony and their affective dynamics. In contrast to platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, these created digital

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archives appear as new formats of mediation with explicitly political aims, and often present themselves as a continuation of political resistance (Baladi, 2016; Mada Masr, 2018; see also Ørskov, 2020). This raises the question of the extent to which these projects, as a form of civil and activist archiving, offer new potential in terms of accessibility, participation, and affective relationality, as well as promising autonomy and authenticity (Tan et al., 2016; Azoulay, 2017). It is significant that so many of these archives and image testimonies across such a range of protest events were initiated by activists and eyewitnesses with high affective stakes in that witnessing. Affective witnessing persists as affective archiving, sustaining the emotional and political resonances of collective struggles.

Re-activating the Affective Archive in Art

While some archiving initiatives are associated with human rights organizations and collectives (e.g., *B'Tselem* or *Syrian Archive* [Ristovska, 2019]), there is a striking number of projects initiated by artists or photographers. Examples include the initiative *858: An Archive of Resistance* by the Egyptian collective Mosireen, the project *Vox Populi: Archiving a Revolution in the Digital Age* by the Lebanese-Egyptian artist Lara Baladi—both concerned with the Egyptian revolution 2011—the digital media archive of social movements in Turkey *bak.ma*, which emerged from the Gezi Park protests, and *Activestills*, a collective of documentary photographers and activists who critically accompany the Palestine/Israel conflict.

These artistic appropriations of archives all negotiate institutional power, connected with preserving "official" histories. However, how these archives are presented varies widely. At one end of the spectrum are online presentations, which merely seem to make the material available for further use, without artistic ambitions. An example is the archive *858* by Mosireen. It is a collection of image testimonies from the Egyptian revolution 2011, which were indexed and time-stamped. The archive can be accessed online[2] and follows a reserved aesthetic of the database. The website provides different search options by topic, places, month, date, and keyword. When entering the archive, videos are displayed in a grid (the view can be adjusted to a list, a timeline, a map, etc.). Despite the relatively plain user interface, the freeze frames of the videos in the grid immediately give an impression of the amateur videos, chaotic scenes, and protests recorded in the dark, with slanting perspectives. Importantly, the origin and formation of the archive is explained and reflected in accompanying texts, stating "no archive is innocent":[3] By revealing the emotionally charged struggles and discussions between the members of the collective as they compiled the archive, the affects *of* the archive are reflected and exposed.

At the other end of the spectrum are performative practices drawn from digital archives—for example, the work "Archive" (2014) by Israeli choreographer Arkadi Zaides, who takes the *B'Tselem* archive as its starting point (see Figure 17.1). *B'Tselem* is "The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories," working as an NGO since 1989 and distributing cameras to Palestinians since 2007 for the purpose of documenting human rights violations. Arkadi Zaides got access to the archive that contains mostly amateur videos, and re-enacted the physical movements and gestures of the Israelis depicted in the videos. While the video footage is shown as a larger-than-life projection, a smaller projection gives information about the clips from the archive: number, photographer, location, date, short description. These factual indications, echoing the archival affects of objectivity

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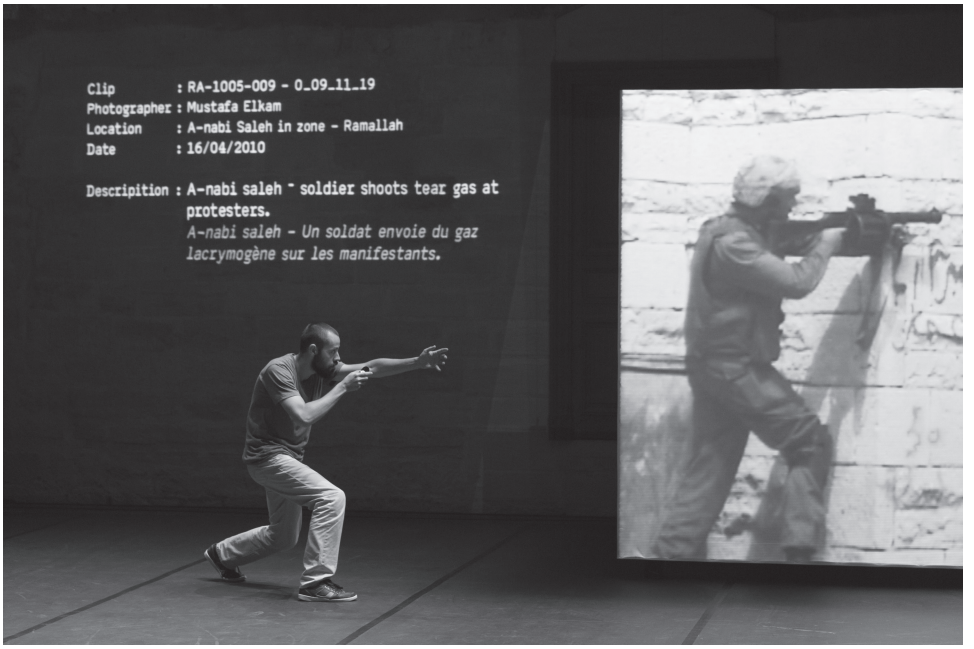


FIGURE 17.1 Arkadi Zaides: Archive (2014)/© Christophe Raynaud de Lage

and sober ordering, stand in stark contrast to Zaides's performance in the space in front of the projections. For example, he embodies youths throwing stones at the border fences, or he re-enacts an Israeli soldier walking with a tear gas gun at the ready.

Zaides performs in everyday clothes, physically pushes himself to the limit, works up a sweat, and eventually takes off his T-shirt. He is all embodiment. In between, he repeatedly establishes contact with the source material by quickly checking the movements on screen, making sure that his own movements are synchronized. Then again, with the remote control in his hand, he stops the material, freezes certain poses, and confronts the represented body with his own again, like probing the gestures. Zaides establishes and explicitly shows an embodied relation between the archived events and himself as a viewer and "user" of these archived videos. At the same time, by re-enacting the events, he transfers the affects of testimonial archives back to his human body, "transforming his body into a living archive" (Kruschkova, 2019, p. 34). The audience watches video material and performance at once, sharing a space with the performing artist. They witness the powerful relation between the archive and Zaides's body and are themselves deeply affected. In this situation, they experience the affective archive of the past—the affects *in* the archive—and the affects *from* the archive simultaneously. By viewing the movements of the Israelis depicted (in the material and in the live performance), spectators are also embodying the position of those behind the camera, the Palestinians who recorded the footage. Although the Palestinians remain behind the camera, seemingly absent, they are still omnipresent. Their movements—both physical and visual—along with their voices and chosen framing, actively shape what the viewer sees, ensuring that their perspective is embedded in the filmed material (Kruschkova, 2019, p. 33). Zaides's embodied performance of the archive serves as a prime example of

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the affective archive in action, highlighting how the past and its affects can be reanimated through the affective resonance of embodied experience.

Art works like these are disruptions and transformations of the archive. The affective archive in art stresses the various constellations of relationality, and subsequently, the possible revisitations, reviews, and assessments of past events. Zaides's performative engagement with archival material suggests that the affectivity of archives is not inherently operative, but rather remains latent, requiring an external, embodied intervention to be reactivated. Archives "matter" only through processes of affective reanimation.

Outlook

Foregrounding the affectivity of archives holds immense potential for making marginalized histories visible and mobilizing affective communities of memory. Yet it also raises critical questions about the role of factuality, evidence, and political credibility. In a post-truth era marked by the erosion of shared standards of truth, the performative power of affect can both strengthen and undermine the political efficacy of archives. Future research will need to engage carefully with this tension, asking how affective archives can sustain emotional resonance without sacrificing the epistemic authority that marginalized groups often rely on to advance their claims. These challenges are likely to become even more acute with the rise of new technologies that fundamentally alter how archives are created, curated, and experienced. Building on the idea that the internet is an affective meta-archive, the rise of AI is likely to have significant implications for our understanding of the archive and its affective dynamics. Future work on the issue of affect and archiving in the digital era will have to confront AI-driven curation. As AI algorithms prioritize and hallucinate based on our individual preferences, it creates a paradox: on the one hand, archives become more personal and meaningful, but on the other, they risk becoming echo chambers, reinforcing biases by prioritizing what an algorithm thinks we want to remember. Thus, AI can shape affective archives and alter how we feel about the past. This challenges the idea of an archive and once again forces us to think critically about who or what controls the archive.[4]

Notes

1 http://web.archive.org
2 https://858.ma/
3 https://www.mosireen.com/-no-archive-is-innocent
4 I am grateful to Michal Givoni for reviewing this article and for insightful comments and suggestions.

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PART IV

Echoes, Hauntings, Prefigurations

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18

AFFECTIVE CONTEMPORANEITY

Anne Fleig and Matthias Warstat

Sharing time is more than merely existing together in the same moment—it is negotiating how that moment is felt, narrated, and remembered. Affective contemporaneity captures this negotiation, revealing how emotions shape our sense of belonging to moments in time and history. It arises from living together in the same temporal frames of reference. These time frames are not necessarily restricted to the present. Rather, we should think of them as complex temporal constellations and transitions in which past, present, and future converge in myriad ways. At the core of this concept lies a special kind of commitment: a conscious and polyphonic engagement with the sort of coexistence that contemporaries share with one another. A coexistence in which emotions are debated, embodied, and represented within the arts and in media environments more generally. In literature, theater, and performance art in particular, the dynamics of affective contemporaneity unfold in open, dialogical forms. These forms shape how varied articulations of affective engagement model specific modes of compassion, solidarity, and shared suffering—but also resistance, rejection, and aversion.

Approaching feelings as dynamic, relational, and subject to change allows us to unfold the concept of contemporaneity in its historical and social dimensions. Contemporaneity is not merely about an intensified sense of presence. Rather, we must understand it relationally—as *shared time* in a double sense: a moment held in common and a condition formed through relationships. From this perspective, *affective contemporaneity* begins with a pluralization of time and an awareness of how feelings are always shaped by their temporal and spatial contexts. These feelings must be negotiated—they do not exist in isolation, but emerge through interaction and exchange. The arts are a particularly fertile ground for exploring affective contemporaneity, not least because different notions of the "contemporary" have played a central role in artistic discourse since at least the historical avant-gardes. Encounters in the arts, and artistic encounters, offer many ways to engage in dialogue about the pressures of time and our divergent emotional responses to them.

This chapter examines how practices and discourses in the arts—particularly in literature and theater—mediate affective contemporaneity. It explores how these practices and discourses position the arts as critical sites that offer alternative ways of organizing time and

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emotional experience. Artistic practices such as writing, staging, performing, reading, and spectating enable people to participate affectively in social, political, and historical time. Such activities allow us to capture the feeling of time as both heterogenous and plural. A key case study in this exploration is *Gleichzeit*, a 2024 book by Berlin-based writer Sasha Salzmann and Ofer Waldman—a writer and musician living mostly in Israel—written in the aftermath of the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023. Originating as blog posts published by the Klassik-Stiftung Weimar, this text provides an illuminating example of how affects are negotiated, constructing public forms of grief, solidarity, and political engagement. At the same time, its epistolary form underscores the literary tradition of correspondence as an intimate yet public mode of negotiating contemporaneity through different kinds of literary texts. Drawing on *Gleichzeit* and other artistic works, this chapter situates negotiations of shared time within broader aesthetic debates. It argues that dialogical forms can produce and negotiate affective contemporaneity.

Shared Time

The concept of shared time is central to the title *Gleichzeit*. The term is a neologism derived from "Gleichzeitigkeit" (simultaneity), yet presented here as a temporal mode of its own—literally, "same-time." In this text, the exchange between Salzmann and Waldman begins immediately after the Hamas attack on Israel and spans the following three months, frequently addressing the German public.

Their shared time is marked by both unity and divergence. *Gleichzeit* captures this tension—the simultaneity of the events the authors experience does not necessarily create affective contemporaneity. Instead, contemporaneity emerges through their exchange of emotions, perceptions, and conflicting narratives. The book's correspondence thus highlights the affective dimension of shared time, beyond simultaneity alone. Affective contemporaneity emerges when people exchange about time and the feelings bound up with it. This exchange can be read as a negotiation of emotions: a process of mutual understanding that begins with the shared present and extends toward the future. Such negotiation is fundamental to the concept of affective contemporaneity, which will be further developed in the following sections. On the one hand, this negotiation involves reckoning with one's own emotions. Waldman writes: "And I, Sasha, where do I stand? In front of me a barrier, behind me a barrier. In the distance, in Gaza, a barrier. I hear the words rustling" (Salzmann & Waldman, 2024, p. 62).[1] On the other hand, it requires mutual recognition and communication. Above all, *Gleichzeit* insists on the possibility of a shared world, where contemporaries do not merely endure time, but also claim the right to participate in it. This assertion of participation lies at the heart of its emotional negotiation.

Literature and dialogue play a crucial role in this process. Writing becomes an open-ended negotiation of involvement and shared affect—not simply an expression of individual emotions like grief or anger, but an exploration of their entanglements. The correspondence unfolds through emails, chats, storytelling, and news reports, and all of these modes of exchange enact forms of mutual care that make affective contemporaneity tangible.

The *same-time* of *Gleichzeit* also reflects the authors' different spatial and temporal positions. Salzmann writes from Europe, at one point recalling a visit to the Holocaust memorial on the Danube in Budapest, while Waldman, in Israel, reflects on that country's uncertain future, invoking the Jerusalem border of 1967 to explore the ruptures and possibilities of

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that moment (Salzmann & Waldman, 2024, p. 68). Their dialogue thus becomes an inquiry into what connects and separates past, present, and future. In this sense, *Gleichzeit* resonates with Sandro Zanetti's (2011) reflections on literature's mediality in trans-temporal dialogues, which he dubs "poetic contemporaneity." Yet beyond this, the text emphasizes an openness to the future that defines the authors' shared present.

Affective contemporaneity also entails a form of belonging, though one that is not always liberating. The example of October 7, 2023, illustrates how shared temporal markers can be both unifying and constraining. The weight of historical dates—which Zanetti (2011), referring to Paul Celan's Georg Büchner Prize acceptance speech, calls "formative events"—structures remembrance and narrative, as explored in our previous work on belonging (Mattes et al., 2019; Acker, 2022). Writing, in this context, becomes both an objection and a gesture of hope. When Salzmann anticipates Hanukkah preparations a year later, their letter strikes us as capturing this dual movement: after immense rupture and feelings of despair, a quiet moment of renewal—baking, cooking, and celebrating at a Berlin kitchen table with a friend from Israel. This, too, is a form of dialogue, pointing beyond the correspondence itself toward the future.

Meaning and Etymology

The concept of contemporaneity already suggests an affective dimension, as the prefix "con-" implies togetherness in time. More than a mere temporal marker of belonging, contemporaneity carries an emotional tonality tied to inhabiting a shared present (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d., entry "contemporaneity"). The German Zeitgenossenschaft, often used to translate contemporaneity, offers a distinct nuance. Composed of "Zeit" (time) and "Genossenschaft" (companionship, cooperative), the term underscores the social and affective dimensions of coexisting in time more explicitly than the English. According to Grimm's German dictionary (Grimm & Grimm, n.d.), contemporaneity had emotional connotations as early as the 19th century. Notably, the Old German "Zeit" likely derives from "teilen" (to share), initially meaning to divide or measure—highlighting the dual nature of time as both abstract sequence and concrete, durational event (Grimm & Grimm, n.d., column 523).

The English contemporaneity dates back to the 17th century, while Zeitgenossenschaft emerged in the late 18th century, a period of evolving modern time concepts. The term "Genosse" (comrade) has an even longer history, denoting shared use, rights, and participation. Comrades stand on equal footing within a shared legal or social framework, such as guilds or professional associations. In the 19th century, the term gained new significance through the rise of cooperative systems—such as housing cooperatives, trade cooperatives, and artist cooperatives. In this context, contemporaneity was understood as Gleichzeitigkeit (simultaneity) and living together with "Zeitgenossen" (contemporaries; Grimm & Grimm, n.d., column 559).

In artistic discourse, affective contemporaneity naturally aligns with terms like contemporary art, contemporary literature, or contemporary dance. These terms can denote works created within the experiential horizon of living generations, but may also imply a deeper engagement with the present. Art is considered contemporary in a more emphatic sense when actively responding to and shaping present concerns, drawing in audiences through affective intensities.

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Similarly, Juliane Rebentisch speaks of a "normative sense of the term contemporary art" (Rebentisch, 2013, p. 13). According to her, this lies in the idea that art should "make its historical present present." For both those who create art and those who seek to understand it, contemporaneity means far more than simply participating in chronological time. Like any "good comrade, companion or associate," the contemporary should "stand by their own time" especially when things become difficult. To be of and with a time—to be "contemporary"—can also be understood, following Giorgio Agamben, as confronting the "darkness" of one's own present. This involves maintaining a certain distance, creating caesuras as the very condition that makes a perspective on the present possible in the first place (Agamben, 2010, pp. 21–35; Groys, 2009, pp. 22–39). In this sense, affective contemporaneity not only represents time, but turns time into something felt, making it perceptible, negotiable, and tangible—both in its constraints and its possibilities.

Research Traditions

Rebentisch's main concern is to distinguish between "contemporary art" and "modern art." She identifies key historical moments—1945, 1968, and 1989—as points of departure from modernist art programs. These shifts include the rejection of progress-driven optimism after Auschwitz, the dissolution of boundaries between artistic disciplines and between art and non-art, and ultimately, the deconstruction of the concept of the artwork itself. In this view, the contours of "contemporary art" emerge precisely through its break from modernity or modernism, perhaps more distinctly in the visual arts than in other fields.

Affective contemporaneity, as discussed in this chapter, should not be conflated with Rebentisch's notion of contemporary art as an epochal category, alongside terms like "classical modernism," "neo-avant-garde," or "saddle period." Nor does our notion directly engage with philosophical discussions on temporal structures in aesthetic experience (Gamper & Hühn, 2014; Primavesi & Mahrenholz, 2005; Müller-Schöll, 2003). Notably, while time theory has been explored extensively, its affective dimension has received little attention—except where time has been framed in explicitly political or activist contexts.

In literature, a key example is *littérature engagée*, where the notion of engagement already implies an affective commitment (Brokoff et al., 2016). Here, the concept of affective contemporaneity could help dissolve the dichotomy between autonomous and engaged art by focusing on the negotiation of feelings in both. Just as affective commitment—an active articulation and sharing of feelings—can be understood as a form of engagement, so too can various forms of autonomy shape how affective contemporaneity is negotiated. Autonomy comes into play when the shared negotiation of emotions involves not only the assertion and validation of feelings but also includes their critical reflection. This dual stance—expressing while questioning—highlights how the willingness to negotiate feelings can go hand in hand with a recognition of their complexity and irreducibility.

In theater discourse, contemporaneity generally builds upon more or less emphatic notions of the present. The terms *Gegenwartstheater* (theater of the present) and *Zeitgenössisches Theater* (contemporary theater) are often used interchangeably, though *Gegenwartstheater* is more prevalent in theory-driven discussions. The term's appeal in theater studies lies in its fusion of temporal and spatial dimensions. Temporally, the present—unlike the past or future—is the time given to *us*, suggesting a shared access to time. Spatially, *presence* implies something becoming perceptible, presenting itself for encounter. This intersection of

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time and space aligns with the performance theory concept of the *here and now*, making contemporary theater feel immediate and tangible.

Such an understanding of time as tangible and spatially situated parallels the notion of presence, which was central to theater discourse in the 1990s and 2000s. Presence typically encompasses three elements: a spatial relationship, a temporal relationship, and social togetherness. Sharing space and time often entails an affective engagement and, to varying degrees, an ethical responsibility: when people gather in the same place at the same time, do they bear responsibility for one another? This question is particularly evident in *Endurance Art* and *self-harm performances*, which test the limits of spectatorship—at what point does the audience feel compelled to intervene? From these situational affective entanglements, the link to *affective contemporaneity* becomes clear.

Hans-Thies Lehmann has repeatedly emphasized the significance of sharing time in the *here and now* of performance for contemporary theater. He describes the core of post-dramatic time dramaturgies as an exploration of shared time: from time distortions and pop-speed synchronization to the resistance of slow theater and performance art's radical assertion of real-time presence (Lehmann, 2006, p. 155). Alongside his resolute openness to the diversity of shared time experiences, Lehmann acknowledges the melancholy of theater as a collective act of consuming *lifetime*: "Theatre means the *collectively spent and used up lifetime* in the collectively breathed air of that space in which the performing *and* the spectating takes place" (Lehmann, 2006, p. 17, emphasis added). Elsewhere, he emphasizes the bodily experience of time's passage: "The body enters the stage to stretch out and die there" (Lehmann, 1999, p. 362, our translation). In this sense, affective contemporaneity emerges as both presence and agony—a shared suffering through time.

Even this brief overview of past debates on contemporaneity in the arts makes one thing clear: the question of who or what is contemporary is always at stake. Is contemporaneity about the writers, performers, readers, and spectators, or does it belong to texts, works, productions, and performances? Does the affective dimension of contemporaneity concern human experience, or is it a quality of texts, objects, and formal structures? How can texts and performances create an affective connection to time? They can certainly highlight the shared, perceptible affectivity of time—and perhaps even actively shape our experience of it—through their rhythmic and metric structures, which inscribe themselves into our perception of time.

Affective Contemporaneity in the Arts

Alongside other social practices and institutions, the arts play a crucial role in making our shared experience of time tangible and sharpening our sense of temporality. They can amplify voices that highlight urgent, politically charged events that shake the very foundations of society. Artistic practices often articulate traumatic experiences of violence and loss—particularly in war and post-war contexts—before other societal forms of communication emerge. The arts are frequently credited with a kind of seismographic sensitivity, attuned to pressing contemporary issues while also instilling them with affective urgency.

Affective contemporaneity manifests differently across artistic forms, shaped by their distinct materialities, codes, and conventions. In literature and theater, the notion can be understood as a process of negotiation, drawing on the specific practices, forms, and media frameworks of each field. The text *Gleichzeit* exemplifies this through its literary dialogic

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form and its openness to multiple textual forms. Within its correspondence, an exchange unfolds about time and its associated emotions, creating fleeting impressions of a shared "same-time." This negotiation takes shape in a polyphony of voices and forms, revealing a cooperative spirit through the deliberate coexistence of diverse temporal references.

A similar process of negotiation unfolds in theater, both through the gestures and embodiments of performance and in the structured interaction between actors and spectators. While dialogue is a defining tradition of dramatic theater, contemporary theater often employs choral and monologic forms of affective engagement, frequently provoking a confrontational exchange with the audience. In response to the migration movements of the early 21st century—driven by war, crises, and violence—theater in many regions, including German-speaking countries, has increasingly addressed the social visibility and recognition of displaced people. Theatre's turn to the experiences of refugees has raised pressing political, dramaturgical, and aesthetic questions (Menke & Vogel, 2018). In response, contemporary theater places special emphasis not only on multilingualism but also on pre-linguistic forms of negotiation on stage.

In *The Situation* by Yael Ronen (Gorki Theater Berlin, premiered September 4, 2015), temporal intensity and duration played a central role in the production. The rehearsal process itself was already structured as a weeks-long dialogue among six actors from Syria, Israel, Palestine, and Kazakhstan (Karim Daoud, Maryam Abu Khaled, Orit Nahmias, Dimitrij Schaad, Yousef Sweid, and Ayham Majid Agha). This allowed them to bring their personal experiences of immigration, loss, violence, oppression, and discrimination into the play's development. What is more, a study of the program suggests a deliberate overlap between the actors' biographies and the characters they portrayed, employing autofictional techniques seen in other productions by Ronen. This effect is often heightened by actors addressing each other by their real names on stage, reinforcing the impression that the performance is directly negotiating their lived experiences. As a result, the feelings and reflections on time—on the present, the past, and events unfolding across different temporalities—carry particular weight, grounded in the real-life backgrounds of those performing.

The demonstrative multilingualism on stage reinforces the (albeit playfully subverted) presence of "authentic" experiences and emotions. While the use of multiple languages—understood by parts of the audience—is now common in theater, *The Situation* initially grounds its multilingual exchanges in a conventional dramaturgical setup: a German language course for immigrants. Here, moments of misunderstanding and affective tension repeatedly draw the audience into the experience. Although the characters seem accessible and authentic at first, it soon becomes clear that each has a distinctly personal and often unconventional understanding of the present, shaped by their individual memories. In the second half of the performance, the actors more directly address these biographical impulses at the audience. This allows spectators not only to emotionally engage with the characters' conflicts and interactions but also to compare them with their own experiences, memories, and perceptions of the conflicts being represented. The linguistic exchange shifts between Arabic, Hebrew, German, and English, yet communication also unfolds through embodied, gestural negotiation, particularly in moments of linguistic breakdown. The performance makes tangible theater's unique ability to create affective constellations in space—constellations that each participant fills with their own temporally specific experiences and associations. In this way, the sharing of diverse temporal experiences becomes a collective event, materializing in the spatial and scenic structures of the performance.

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In the arts, contemporaneity often unfolds as a dialogical process or a space for negotiation. However, what constitutes dialogue and how negotiation takes shape—both materially and medially—vary across artistic forms, individual works, and contexts. While a written correspondence or a gestural exchange may be easily recognized as a dialogue, negotiation in visual art, or music may be less immediately apparent. Nor is it necessarily the case that negotiations of affective contemporaneity have to explicitly address time or temporal experiences. Rather, such negotiations involve a shared act of turning toward experiences in the same temporal frames of reference—and witnessing how others engage with similar experiences. Such a gesture of attunement can also open up possibilities for change and, in doing so, point toward the future. It is no coincidence that affective contemporaneity is most apparent in texts, performances, and works that engage with pressing political issues, events, and societal experiences. Works like *Gleichzeit* or *The Situation* present experiences that are subject to diverse perspectives and interpretations. Yet, it is precisely the inherent potential for conflict that makes these pieces deeply affecting, drawing people in and making disengagement difficult.

The concept of affective contemporaneity encompasses diverse attempts to make feelings shareable in the arts and media—to partake in the suffering of others and to express solidarity with their concerns. While the cooperative idea of a comrade in time primarily suggests unity and mutual support, the negotiation of time-related emotions can just as easily spark new conflicts—arising from contradictory memories, irreconcilable visions of the future, competing affiliations, and conflicting calls for solidarity. The very plurality and heterogeneity of temporal experiences in such exchanges—a turning toward something or someone—inevitably generate disparities that may not be resolved within the moment of encounter. Thus, affective contemporaneity is a space not only for compassion and solidarity but also for division, hurt, and resistance. What is shared can both connect and separate. Ultimately, affective contemporaneity signifies encounters—an openness to dialogue that acknowledges, navigates, and endures the conflicts it brings to the surface.

Outlook

The concept of affective contemporaneity, as illustrated through literature and theater in this chapter, requires further refinement to enhance its analytical scope, particularly in the following areas: first, social negotiations over which urgent, supra-individual emotional states define a given time. Second, efforts to establish a shared basis for exchanging time-related concerns, fears, and wounds through affective forms of attention. Third, affective processes in which different temporalities—shaped by memory and future projection—are brought into a constellation and made collectively accessible. We have no doubt that both texts and performances can operate within all three dimensions. Through their distinct aesthetic strategies, these artistic practices create formal constellations for negotiating experiences in time; offer affective pathways into conflicts and anxieties that resonate widely in a given moment; and render the past, present, and future tangible as interconnected layers of experience.

While affective contemporaneity in the arts ultimately refers to *aesthetic* forms and constellations that enable a particular connection to time, we propose that it could also be developed as a primarily *social* category. In this sense, affective contemporaneity would represent a specific quality of interpersonal relationships and interactions, potentially

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extending its relevance beyond the arts to other fields in the humanities and social sciences. What is conveyed in the arts through forms, texts, and performances might also emerge in other contexts through different means: a shared sense of time—one that surrounds and shapes us—along with its implications, demands, and urgencies, which can be exchanged and understood collectively.

Note

1 The German source materials we cite have been translated for the purpose of this publication.

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19

HAUNTING

Fabian Bernhardt

Haunting, in its many forms, has long occupied a shadowy space between the tangible and the intangible. It disturbs temporal and spatial boundaries, unsettling distinctions between past and present, here and there, real and imagined. Traditional approaches to haunting have often struggled to capture this complexity. Some treat ghosts as literal figures of the supernatural. Others reduce them to metaphors for historical trauma or ideological repression. While these approaches have offered valuable insights, they tend to fall short of capturing what haunting *feels* like—its affective intensity, its atmospheric charge, its tendency to recur and linger without resolution.

Affect theory provides a powerful framework for engaging with haunting because it foregrounds these experiential qualities. Thus, affect can offer a way out of the binary between taking haunting either too literally or too metaphorically. It allows us to approach haunting not simply as a disruption of meaning or a return of the repressed, but as a "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1958)—one that is diffuse, recursive, and often unsettling, resisting clear interpretation. Like haunting, affect theory attends to what is not quite present yet insistently felt—to silences, minute gestures, atmospheres, and repetitions. It shifts the focus away from representation and narrative, and toward the affective forces that shape and disturb our sense of being in space and time.

In this chapter, I argue that affect theory is especially well suited to map the vast and shifting field of haunting. It circuits some of the shortcomings of older accounts by refusing the separation of feeling from politics, and of lived experience from history. It also helps us recognize how haunting often operates through latency and rupture, through moments that may appear minor or inexplicable but are, in fact, charged with historical time. To be haunted is to be seized by something that returns without being fully graspable. Modern philosophy—particularly the epistemological frameworks developed during the Enlightenment—rendered haunting illegible. Rationalist thought, with its emphasis on clarity, order, and empirical evidence, displaced the spectral as superstition, dismissing it as an epistemic failure or a residue of "primitive" belief. Within this regime of reason, what could not be measured or fully known was relegated to folklore or pathology. Through affect theory, we can begin to attend more carefully to these ghostly intensities—the affective

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forces that move through bodies, the memories that refuse to settle, and the feelings that reverberate across generations, binding the living to the dead.

Thinking about Haunting as Affect

Haunting resists easy conceptualization, posing a deep methodological challenge. For it hardly seems possible to approach haunting in an abstract way—as a volume on "key concepts" would suggest—without betraying precisely that which seeks shelter under this term: the repressed, unfelt, and excluded dimensions of troubled pasts that are unjustly consigned to oblivion. In traditional philosophical understanding, a "phenomenon" is defined as that which appears (Heidegger, 1927/2006, p. 29). Haunting, however, is bound to phenomena in which appearing and disappearing often coincide in one and the same movement. Mark Fisher (2017) refers to these phenomena as "the weird and the eerie," and Avery Gordon (1997/2008) calls them "ghostly matters," while Colin Davis (2007) brings them together with "the return of the dead." Just as these phenomena never attain the status of stable empirical objects, haunting itself fends off the all-too-firm grip of conceptual control. If haunting could be properly defined, it would lose exactly the qualities that make it haunting in the first place. The essence of haunting is disconcertion. What characterizes the *experience* of being haunted is precisely that it appears unexpectedly. A vexation or disturbance forces its way into the field of our attention against our will. Referencing Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1993/1994) has transposed this interplay between presence and absence into a concise formula: "Enter the ghost, exit the ghost, re-enter the ghost" (p. xix).

Derrida's formula highlights the ephemeral character of ghostly apparitions, a quality that haunting shares with affect, while also flagging another of its temporal traits: that which withdraws is at the same time that which tends to return again and again. Recursion and repetition are integral parts of what it means to be haunted. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, haunting originally meant "to practice habitually, familiarly, or frequently" (Oxford University Press, n. d.). Since the late 16th century, the term has been used for both "unseen or immaterial visitants" and for "memories, cares, feelings, thoughts" that "come up or present themselves as recurrent influences or impressions, esp. as causes of distraction or trouble" (Oxford University Press, n. d.). To be haunted, thus, means to be troubled by something that is not fully graspable. Ghosts—in the literal sense of the word—are by no means the only sources of this trouble. Memories, feelings, and glitches can become just as haunting. We inhabit societies deeply marked by the affective afterlives of colonial violence (Bernhardt, 2022, 2024) and historical trauma. The ongoing legacies of slavery, genocidal violence, ecological exploitation, and economic inequalities continue to cast a long shadow (Good et al., 2022, p. 439).

Together, these conditions give rise to what Avery Gordon calls "ghostly matters" (1997/2008). Ghostly matters indicate that there is—and always will be—something that refuses to be silenced. In her book of the same title, Gordon points out the intricate ways in which haunting, knowledge, and affect relate to each other:

> The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us *affectively* [emphasis added], sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling

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> of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.
>
> *(Gordon, 1997/2008, p. 8)*

Ghostly matters shatter established modes of sense-making. Neither fully dead or alive, neither wholly absent or present, neither clearly visible or invisible, ghosts elude conventional classification. Just like the ghost of the dead king in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the experience of being haunted indicates that something is "rotten" in the current state of affairs—and that something needs to be done in order to right the wrongs of the past and the present (Gordon, 1997/2008, p. xvi; Tuck & Ree, 2013, p. 654). Lingering in a sphere of opacity, the experience of being haunted is both an affective state and a form of epistemic unruliness:

> Whenever ghosts appear, there are doubts: with their appearance come doubts as to whether we have seen or heard "correctly," doubts as to whether we can trust our senses and our minds, doubts as to whether we have understood what the ghosts want from us and why they are appearing to us.
>
> *(Aggermann et al., 2015, p. 9, my translation)*

What manifests epistemologically as doubt is, at the same time, an undeniable affective reality. To be haunted is to *feel* that something is awry—even if one cannot yet name what demands attention. If the essence of haunting is disconcertion, then affect is the medium through which this disconcertion first come to the fore. Behind each apparition there is some kind of affect: a feeling of unease and irritation; a startle and frightened flinching; an inkling of guilt, shame, or sorrow; the vague premonition that no past ever completely passes away.

Thinking about haunting as affect requires a kind of conceptual approach that resembles the one Édouard Glissant (2008) calls "thinking from traces" (p. 21, my translation). For Glissant, thinking from traces is a way of "thinking without system, which is neither dominant, nor systematic, nor controlling, but instead . . . a non-systematic, intuitive, fragile, ambivalent thinking that best does justice to the extraordinary complexity of the world in which we live" (Glissant, 2008, p. 21, my translation). This proposal resonates very much with the sentence by Patricia Williams that Avery Gordon quotes at the beginning of *Ghostly Matters*: "That life is complicated is a fact of great analytic importance" (Williams, 1991, as cited in Gordon, 1997/2008, p. 3). Life is complicated—and haunting is part of life. Doing justice to this double proposition calls for a way of thinking that does not get us stuck on the fanciless question of whether specters exist or not, but instead tries to probe what we might learn by taking the affective experience of being haunted seriously rather than dismissing it as pre-modern superstition.

Mapping the Field of Hauntology

Within dominant Western epistemologies, haunting and all that is connected to it are not regarded as a subject of legitimate research (Kant, 1766/2016). The exclusion of ghostly matters from the realm of formal knowledge production is part of a longer history rooted in the formation of modern Western rationality and its colonial underpinnings. From the 18th century onward, the question of how to deal with spirits and ghosts was used to legitimate

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and further establish the "colonial distinction between civilization and savagery" (Ruin, 2019, p. 10). As Hans Ruin (2019) points out, a hierarchy was established in which "a culture of 'spirit' was deemed superior to cultures that worship the 'ghosts' of ancestors" (p. 10). While there is much more to explore about this history, for now it suffices to say that the ghosts themselves cared little about these distinctions and a discourse about haunting has nevertheless emerged.

The academic discourse known as "hauntology"[1] has from the outset been an interdisciplinary endeavor, comprised of four main thought traditions with distinct approaches to haunting: (1) a *deconstructivist* school, (2) a *psychoanalytic* school, (3) a *cultural theory* approach (mostly grounded in critical theory), and (4) an approach based on *ethnographic and anthropological research*.

(1) The deconstructivist school of hauntology was shaped by Jacques Derrida's book *Specters of Marx* (1993/1994). Published after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this book investigates the afterlives of the utopian Marxist project following the proclaimed "end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992). Derrida coined the term "hauntology," and argued that attending to ghosts is an ethical project bound up in the question of justice. This is because ghosts are linked to the sensitive moral question of "inheritance" pertaining to "certain *others* who are not present" insofar as they are no longer alive, or are not yet born, and whose demands for justice exceed what the given laws can fully account for (Derrida, 1993/1994, p. xviii). Derrida (1993/1994) contends that it is "necessary to speak *of the* ghost, indeed *to the* ghost and *with* it" (p. xviii, emphasis in original) when ethics and politics fail to appropriately recognize these absent others. Ultimately, the deconstructivist line of hauntology centers on the question: how can we live together with ghosts?

(2) The psychoanalytic school of hauntology can be traced back to Freud himself, and especially to his exploration of the "uncanny" and the affective qualities that constitute it as a feeling (Freud, 1919/2003). In his effort to establish psychoanalysis as a serious science, Freud remained reluctant to pursue this path further. However, other psychoanalytic thinkers did so after him. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (1976, 1978), for instance, took up the question of how traumatic experiences and family secrets are passed on from one generation to the next. Their concept of the "phantom" reorients Freud's uncanny by suggesting that certain symptoms, in fact, do not spring from an individual's own life experience, but from conflicts and traumas that were secretly transmitted to them from someone else. A similar approach was taken by Selma Fraiberg et al. (1975) in their clinical work on impaired infant-mother relationships. While the deconstructivist tradition of hauntology focuses on learning to *live with ghosts*, the psychoanalytic tradition is more invested in patients' learning to *get rid of ghosts* so as to lead a life less burdened by past traumas and family secrets (Davis, 2007, p. 89).

(3) Much of the work in the field of hauntology draws on a blend of deconstructivist and psychoanalytic concepts that circulate in cultural and critical theory. This body of scholarship comprises a vast range of disciplines—from sociology (Gordon, 1997/2008) and cultural criticism (Fisher, 2017; Metz & Seeßlen, 2012) to Indigenous and postcolonial studies (O'Riley, 2007; Tuck & Ree, 2013). Although not explicitly labeled as "hauntology," there is important work in African American and Black studies on the affective afterlives of transatlantic slavery (Hartman, 2007; Sharpe, 2016) which can

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also be considered part of this group. As different as these works are in their theoretical approaches, they share a common interest in revealing the subcutaneous ways in which systems of oppression and violence continue to shape the present.

(4) The anthropological branch of hauntology is itself split in two. On the one hand, there is a vast body of classical ethnographic literature dealing with ghosts, ancestral spirits, and the presence of the living dead (for an overview, see Lincoln & Lincoln, 2015; Good et al., 2022). While a number of these older works have exoticized their objects of study, a newer school of anthropological hauntology is defined less by its subject matter than by its approach (Good et al., 2022, p. 438). A notable example of this shift is Marilyn Ivy's *Discourses of the Vanishing* (1995), which explores the spectral dimensions of modernity and national identity in Japan, focusing on the phantasmatic effects of premodern cultural disappearance. In an influential online article entitled "Ten Things about Ghosts and Haunting," Kassandra Spooner-Lockyer and Katie Kilroy-Marac (2021) lay out the programmatic guidelines of this newer anthropological hauntology. They point out that, while "haunting is a universal condition" (2021), ghosts themselves are not universal. Rather, they are "singular and specific" and "can only be understood within their own proper historical and ethnographic context" (Spooner-Lockyer & Kilroy-Marac, 2021). Anthropological hauntology provides a corrective to the Eurocentrism that the deconstructivist and the psychoanalytic schools can fall prey to. Many of these ethnographies make clear that, in many regions of the world, ghosts are not just a conceptual metaphor, but a reality and lived experience. When hauntology remains entirely within the horizon of Western tradition, it risks missing essential insights that can further our understanding of haunting more broadly.

The Living, the Dead, and the Unborn

As mentioned earlier, the experience of haunting is not reducible to the presence of ghosts in a literal sense. Nonetheless, ghosts are an unmistakable indication that haunting is taking place (Gordon, 1997/2008, p. 8). This shifts the focus of attention to the following questions: what causes ghosts to appear? Under what circumstances do ghostly apparitions occur more frequently? Finally, *why* do ghosts appear at all, and what business do they have to resolve with the living?

Haunting pertains to the relationship between the living and the dead. Whenever we think about history, heritage, tradition, memory and forgetting, we contend with that relationship between the living and the dead. This relationship demands to be cultivated in a special way (Assmann, 2005). In his book *The Dominion of the Dead*, Robert Harrison (2003) argues that the bond between the living and the dead marks the origin of human culture as such. In fact, there is no known human society that remains completely indifferent to its dead. This is evidenced by the vast complex of burial rituals, death and mourning rites, ancestor cults, and other forms of remembrance spanning a diversity of historical and cultural forms.

The omnipresence of these rites suggests that no one who has died is simply dead. Rather, it is through specific cultural practices that the deceased is fashioned into a dead person. It is up to the living to perform this task. As Robert Harrison states, following the Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino, we rely on cultural rules of transition to tame that which hastens toward death in mortal nature. Doing so transforms the biological fact of mortality

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into a social and cultural fact (Harrison, 2003, p. 124), allowing us to humanize death. Regardless of whether one believes in some form of afterlife, or assumes that only nothingness awaits us after death, the act of dying can be conceived as a transition between two different ontological states. The living must create the conditions under which this transition takes place. In one form or another, all mortuary practices aim at marking a separation between the dead and the living, while at the same time maintaining a connection between them.

If this separation does not take place, for example, because burial rites were not carried out properly, or not carried out at all, then this can result in a return of the dead. Harrison (2003, chapter 9) explains the importance of the burial by arguing that what is material about a person (their dead body and corporeal remains) and what remains of them in immaterial form (the memories and stories they leave behind) must come together in the act of burial in order to be separated from each other in a way that allows the bereaved to eventually detach from the person who died. The importance of transforming the biological fact of death into a social fact becomes particularly evident when a burial *does not* take place. Think, for example, of dead bodies carelessly left by the roadside due to war, hunger, or other catastrophes. Or think of the *desaparecidos* in Latin America: the tens of thousands of people who were kidnapped, tortured, killed and thus made to "disappear" by the military dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and other countries (for an overview from a legal perspective see Ott, 2011).

The example of the *desaparecidos* highlights another prime set of conditions that are liable to bring ghosts onto the scene. Ghostly apparitions are particularly prevalent in the afterlives of past atrocities and collective experiences of injustice and violence. There is nothing more haunting than the absence of justice—in fact, the idea of justice itself resembles more a half-starved ghost than a tangible reality (Bernhardt, 2021, p. 239). Notably, the history of the Shoah and the history of colonialism continue to produce ghosts, as a number of scholars have noted (see, for instance, Dziuban, 2019; Gurnah, 2020; Morrison, 1987). Other historical experiences of violence have also generated spectral afterlives, as in the cases of the "forgotten war" in Korea (Cho, 2008), the "haunting of Vietnam" (Gustafsson, 2009), or the "spectral voices of Nine-eleven" (Gunn, 2004). Absences, wrongs, violence, oppression—these are what ghostly matters are made of. However, wars and large-scale experiences of violence are not the only causes of haunting. Haunting also pervades everyday life in more subtle forms (Rahimi, 2021).

According to Avery Gordon (1997/2008), haunting is forward looking insofar as it produces "a something-to-be-done" (p. xvi). But how can we find out what this something is? Since the answer to this question can hardly be generalized or universal, I would like to venture below my own admittedly subjective and speculative reflection.

Most ghosts come from the past. However, what they demand of the living also points to the future. Just as grandparents often get on better with their grandchildren than with their own children, the dead also seem to get on better with the unborn than with the living. As I see it, if they ask us—the living—to do something, it is because they want us to continue their work for the benefit of the unborn. Paul Ricœur described history as a "cemetery of unkept promises" (2004, p. 128, my translation). I believe that ghosts haunt the living to remind us of those very promises that have gone unfulfilled. Certainly, this is about righting wrongs, the imperative of remembering, and a certain form of mourning. But not only that: when ghosts remind us of broken promises from the past, it is because they want us to fill those promises with life again. They ask us to finish what is unfinished so that *something*

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new can begin. The question of what we owe to the people who lived before us is therefore inseparable from the question of what we owe to the people who will come after us. Reflecting on the bond between the living and the dead remains incomplete so long as it omits the unborn.

Outlook: Unborn Futures

Haunting, as this chapter has argued, is a matter of not only spectral return, but also atmospheric charge, recursive rhythms, and affective latency. It is less about the literal presence of ghosts than about the lingering pressure of unresolved memories, glitches, and impressions that refuse to stay in the past. These forces disturb modernity's epistemic insistence on clarity and coherence. They expose the limits of Enlightenment rationality, which relegated haunting to the realm of superstition, as if it were an error to be corrected rather than a structure to be felt. But haunting is not a failure of knowledge; it is a different way of knowing—through repetition, through disturbance, through the body's response to what cannot be named.

The unborn, in this sense, emerge as a particularly charged figure: not merely futures that failed to materialize, but also futures still waiting to unfold. Their haunting does not arise from memory, but from possibility—from the weightless weight of what has yet to arrive. As figures of suspended potential, the unborn draw our attention to speculative temporalities, to the folds and fractures in time, and to the affects that ripple through these openings.

This perspective opens up broader questions. How might we understand haunting as a mode of attachment and uncompromised affective plasticity (→ *Affective Stasis*)—an affective mode that links bodies to futures still unborn? What happens when haunting is not tied to the past but to speculative temporalities? Future research might take up these questions in relation to affective futurities, where anticipation, dread, and longing intertwine (→ *Prefigurative Aesthetics*). Extending this framework further, one might examine other spectral intensities that shape our present: the spectral labor of algorithms and artificial intelligence (Kluge, 2024), the slow violence of environmental collapse (→ *Unfeeling*), the latent tension of infrastructures, and institutions on the verge of breakdown (→ *Institutional Affect*). These are not simply echoes of what has been, but hauntings in motion—unfinished, unfixed, and essential to the ways we are inhabited by time.

Note

1 Hauntology is a portmanteau word of "haunting" and "ontology" and was coined by French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1993/1994). In academic language, the discourse known as hauntology is sometimes also referred to as "spectralities" or "spectral studies"; see, for example, the contributions in the *Spectralities Reader*, edited by Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (2013).

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PREFIGURATIVE AESTHETICS

Theresa Schütz and Doris Kolesch

As the current crises in Western liberal democracies escalate and the climate catastrophe intensifies, we can observe that positive feelings about the future are increasingly replaced by feelings of uncertainty or fear. Where the subjective perception of reality is becoming more and more gloomy, the performing arts, especially in their potential for making other possible worlds imaginable, are gaining new political relevance. They become important *practices of worldmaking* insofar as they generate concrete scenarios, practices, and futurities. This contribution is interested in how artistic practices not only imagine "other" worlds, but concretely contribute to the creation of new ways of feeling. To theorize aesthetic strategies in contemporary dance and performance that enable and stimulate the exploration of embodied feelings in times of crisis and catastrophe, we propose the concept of *prefigurative aesthetics*.

The concept of prefigurative aesthetics serves as a heuristic tool for analyzing performances that approach and affirm theatre as a space of possibility and potentiality, and in which new ways of relating are anticipated without already being fixed or normatively aligned. The concept speaks to this *anticipation* of new subjectivities and sensibilities for the future. It also highlights the precarious status of an emerging form that is indeed "pre"-figurative, insofar as it *has not yet fully taken shape*.

Prefigurative aesthetics sensitize spectators to the fundamental diversity of *feeling futures*. They deconstruct the linear concept of future in Western epistemologies and demonstrate how the dimensions of past, present, and future are intertwined—especially when it comes to structures of feeling and emotion repertoires. Therefore, we explore first and foremost the temporality of prefigurative aesthetics by reflecting on the use of certain formal means such as *slow motion*, *crip time*, or *horizontality*. Our thesis is that these resistant aesthetic strategies of slowing down act as counterstrategies to the hyper-accelerated generation of affect in everyday life. They offer audience members spacetime[1] to explore their own physical and emotional states of being. Leaving behind a separation of body and mind, prefigurative aesthetics also point to the need to bring the unfelt, the repressed, or the embodied nonconscious back into physical and emotional awareness so as to enable new modes of feeling (→ *Unfeeling*). The concept thus offers both diagnostic and reflexive potentials to

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analyze a current trend within the international performing arts scene, namely the capacity to unlock processes of individual, collective, and structural healing.

Prefigurative aesthetics are *care-centered aesthetics*—with care serving as a motivation, a topic, a formal structure, or an artistic self-positioning in the performances we describe in the following section. Since financial, temporal, social, and emotional resources are lacking in late capitalist Western societies, the performing arts scene takes on the task of creating spacetime for shared practices and rituals of caring, grieving, or affectively re-connecting with oneself and with others. In what follows, we therefore highlight how exemplary practices of care serve as sustainable forms of creative collaboration in the performing arts in Western Europe.

Genealogies of the Concept

Our concept draws on current discourses on "prefigurative politics," but is also informed by aspects of the genealogies of "prefiguration," which has a multi-layered history. Discourse on prefiguration reaches as far back as Christian biblical exegesis. Within this body of commentary, the books of the Old Testament are understood as a prefiguration of things to come (Auerbach, 1984). According to Hans Blumenberg, a similar use of prefiguration, which he considers a form of mythical thinking, can still be found in the 20th century—for example, in processes of (self-)heroization of political leaders from Alexander the Great to Adolf Hitler (Blumenberg, 2014). In both cases, prefiguration functions as an instrument to assert a continuity between past, present, and future at a certain (political) point in time, insofar as something or someone in the present is interpreted retrospectively as having been foresighted in the past.[2] What we want to emphasize here is the double meaning of the prefix "pre-," which can mean *preceding* as well as *anticipating*. In this respect, prefiguration points to a complex structure of intertwined temporalities that is of interest to us.

In the 1970s, research on social movements, mainly in the Global North and often on the political left, used the term "prefiguration" to describe the enactment of alternative or even utopian social relationships, behaviors, or institutions within the scope of political protest. More recently, the term "prefigurative politics" has been used to highlight the strategic, transformational, action-oriented gesture of these practices (Raekstad & Gradin, 2019).[3] The term's action-oriented stance was also evoked in the wake of the alter-globalization movement in the early 2000s (Maeckelbergh, 2011). In these cases, prefiguration has a clear *future-oriented focus*. It is understood as the anticipation or even partial realization of the political or social goals that a protest movement advocates for. The "prefigurative"—in the sense of enacted alternative forms of togetherness—refers here to *that which should be newly formed* (in the sense of the Latin "figuratio" = to form, to configure, to shape). That is to say, possible new forms of social coexistence.

It is this newly shaped, materialized "object" that is indicated by the term *figure* (Latin "figura" = shape, image, appearance) in (*pre-*)*figuration*. A concrete figure emerges from the interplay between foreground and background, contour and background, form and movement, and identity and difference. This figure can include manifestations of human, animal, plant, or more-than-human living beings, as well as objects and constellations in space, or rhetorical, visual-graphic, and sonic forms. In a *figuration*, this figure is dynamized and brought into a specific temporal and spatial relationship. Drawing on Norbert Elias (1992) and Pierre Bourdieu (2024), figurations can also be understood as ephemeral forms of

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articulation and manifestation of a complex network of socio-cultural practices, bodies, discourses, rules, emotional repertoires, and affects.[4] Within these complex networks, it becomes possible to visualize and embody abstract norms, power relations, identities, or concepts in concrete space and time. Emotional qualities and affective dynamics are a constitutive component of figurations that represent essential patterns of orientation, selection, and evaluation. These patterns shape how individuals and groups behave in and toward certain environments; move within them; and accept, reject, or transform them. However, these patterns of orientation may no longer appear appropriate, especially in the context of the climate catastrophe and the crisis of liberal democracies. As they become destabilized and up for negotiation, these figurations themselves become subject to prefiguration.

And it is precisely this need to prefigure new and sustainable ways of feeling in the face of multiple crises that can be observed in the field of contemporary performance and dance. Like prefiguration, related concepts such as "premediation" (Grusin, 2010), "pre-emption" (Coleman, 2018; following Williams, 1977), and "preenactment" (Czirak et al., 2019) aim to analytically explore interrelated temporalities, seeking "to attend to that which is at once gestured towards and yet not fully graspable in or by the present" (Coleman, 2018, p. 608). While these concepts have different emphases, they all regard the future as something in a state of potentiality, also relating explicitly to affect as "a virtual capacity" in Massumi's sense (Massumi et al., 2019). Our hypothesis is that this vague potentiality takes shape (with)in prefigurative aesthetics.

Theater and performance have always been about producing feelings and emotions. What seems new, however, are the many examples in which performers conduct artistic research about certain affective states, such as numbness, overwhelm, fatigue, anger, or even dimensions of post-traumatic stress (→ *Affective Stasis*). The body becomes the central means of raising (self-)awareness about the complex temporalities of structures of feeling and their social performances and choreographies, in order to grasp the "plasticity of feeling" (Bösel, 2021, p. 29) in an empowering way.

Overview: Prefigurative Aesthetics

When researching prefigurative aesthetics, three trends can currently be observed within the international performing arts: 1) a convergence between artistic and political forms of prefigurative politics, 2) forms of (secular) respiritualization, and 3) aesthetic modulations of temporality. In the following section, we will briefly sketch the first two trends and their pitfalls, before analyzing the third trend in more detail.

1) The convergence between artistic and political forms of prefigurative politics can be seen especially in politicized art forms exemplifying the social turn, such as socially engaged, community-based, or activist art. On the one hand, this is due to a substantive overlap among capitalism-critical approaches. These include critiques of power, domination, and institutions in both the performing arts and left-wing politics. On the other hand, both share an interest in exploring alternative forms of coexistence, such as alternative economies, horizontal leadership, and radically democratic forms of organization (Serafini, 2015).

The recent projects by Sarah Vanhee ("Bodies of Knowledge"), Jonas Staal and Florian Malzacher ("Training for the Future"), Gob Squad ("Dancing with our neighbors"), or Milo Rau ("Wiener Kongresse") are strong examples of the artistic-activist field of prefigurative

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politics. In these works, performers and audience participants simultaneously perform and enact the ways social relationships can be shaped differently. These participatory formats involve people from fields outside the arts, and encourage an exchange with the audience on future-oriented topics. Mainly, they understand and activate art spaces as a gathering place.

Artists and artist collectives such as Łukasz Twarkowski, CHICKS*, or Nesterval articulate a similar intention, but explore it through different aesthetic approaches. They create immersive performances that invite their guests to experience multi-sensorially designed micro utopias. These two forms of artistic worldmaking practices may also be called *preenactments*. Firstly, they commit to anticipating a possible future that is preenacted within an artistic frame. Secondly, they tend to circumscribe the social imagination of all participating members by preenacting a framework for what future coexistence should look like—in the sense of proclaiming or prescribing.

This strand of prefigurative aesthetics shares a transformative claim with prefigurative politics. At the same time, it also shares the problem that the modes of participation are regulated, leaving limited space for negotiation. Furthermore, a major problem is the unresolved structural asymmetry between performers/curators and participants. Our investigation into these artistic works also shows that the presented worldmaking and its range of (political) orientations is relatively narrow. They even tend to reinforce selective feelings about the future—such as disorientation, worry, or even melancholy or nostalgia—instead of opening up spacetime to negotiate ambivalent, repressed, or unfelt feelings toward possible futures.

2) A second trend in prefigurative aesthetics within the performing arts could be summarized by the term *respiritualization* in a secular, eclectic sense. Participatory performances of this sort use the theatrical event as a space for intense sensory experience, rather than for discourse or aesthetic worldbuilding. This includes experiences of trance, absorption, frenzy, or states of euphoria. Recent works by Tianzhuo Chen, Sisters Hope, or Heinrich Horwitz' "Flipper" are designed as durational performances that loosely structure a shared spacetime by various scores or rituals that guests and performers enact together. Guests are invited to socially gather in search of a new kind of spirituality—in dancing, meditating, chanting, drinking, eating, and so on. What they have in common is their focus on the poetic, and on sensual, embodied emotions, thus offering an experiential critique of society's overemphasis on the rational. In doing so, they continue the traditions of historical theatre avant-gardists like Antonin Artaud. But this continuation is only partial because in today's artistic climate, there is less of an emphasis on triggering affective or emotional shock or peaks of intensity, than on creating flows, fluidity, and feelings of timelessness. In contrast to the first trend, the prefigurative here does not refer to specific possible futures or their preenactments, but to states of intense feeling deriving from shared kinaesthetic and somatic practices.

3) The third strand of contemporary performance that brings prefigurative aesthetics to the fore are works that engage with the aesthetic modulation of temporality. These mainly include contemporary dance performances, such as recent works by Joana Tischkau, Cherish Menzo, Gisèle Vienne, Viktor Szeri, Lara Kramer, or Michael Turinsky. Generally, they are not participatory, and take place in the "traditional" Western theater separating stage from audience. Such works highlight the physicality of bodies and the materiality of embodied feelings. Of particular note is that they all work with a temporary or rhythmically varying "immobilization" or calming-down processes of the bodies on stage. Aesthetic strategies

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such as slow motion are used to decelerate the audience members' perception while simultaneously allowing them a singular focus on the slow, concentrated movements of the bodies and the emergence of embodied feelings. Sometimes this slowing-down brings in something grotesque (Menzo); at other times, it serves as a tool for queering (Tischkau), or functions as an opportunity for kinesthetic explorations of certain feelings like fatigue (Szeri, Kramer) or dissociation (Vienne).

Choreography in these examples is focused less on sequences of movements than on the exploration of being moved—through traces of embodied feeling in the performers' movements. To achieve this, artists draw from different somatic practices, supporting the dancers in being completely in the present. Precisely because nothing is forced, states of being are made possible. This reveals a prefigurative aesthetic that does not merge into specific emotional repertoires and their legible gestures, signs, or forms of expression, but instead enables new ways of feeling. Performers and audience members are given the opportunity to engage together and individually with the emerging sensations, which are not directed or contained, but left as they are.

Example: "Soiled" (2022) by Michael Turinsky

To grasp the concept of prefigurative aesthetics more concretely, we will examine the performance "Soiled" by the Austrian philosopher, dancer, and crip choreographer Michael Turinsky. In the first part of the performance, the audience in the darkened auditorium is invited to listen to two human voices. Without visual stimuli, both the sense of hearing and the imagination are activated. The quality of the performers' voices resembles the affirmative vocalizations often used in ASMR.[5] Gently, delicately, and almost meditatively, the voices name positive childhood memories, such as time spent with their grandparents in the countryside. Positive memories of childhood can thus be evoked in audience members. An "un/shared" (Price, 2016) affective attunement is liable to take place, since individual audience members will be triggered differently, and consequently have varying physical and emotional experiences.[6]

The second part consists of Michael Turinsky himself, visible from the first row, reading out his "Soiled Manifesto." A "we" is constituted, consisting of "the humans," "the terrestrians," "the enlightened," and "the erected" (Turinsky, 2022).[7] Then, three key questions for the future are formulated:

> How can we sustain ourselves/our bodies/our soils/and nourish embeddedness in the/organic field . . . how can we these days/regenerate not perpetrate/and care for the living interminglings that keep us flourishing . . . how can we allow for the low in all of us. . . .
> *(Turinsky, 2022)*

The genre of the manifesto also formulates a goal: "there's something about progressive/linearity/that needs to be/re-cycled . . . becoming human/less." Phenomenologically, it is significant that this text is spoken by Turinsky himself. As a choreographer and performer with a disability, being usually accompanied by his wheelchair and assistant, he takes up a speaker position of potential vulnerability in an ableist society focused on efficiency and speed.

The manifesto lecture is followed by the longest third part, in which three half-naked bodies move horizontally across the bottom of a white pool. Pumpkin seed oil drips down

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from above and coats the bodies, making their movements unstable, while at the same time protecting them from friction. The oil puts the bodies into a state of slipperiness, in which flowing and gliding movements take hold. A female voice from the auditorium describes these movements for both sighted and non-sighted audiences in a poetically associative manner. She speaks of bodies that move "like children," "like ferns," "like seeds," or "like fish." Memories of the descriptions from the first part return. The bodies are constantly slithering, resisting the verticality of an upright gait and the associated notion of able-bodied human superiority over other entities. The audience can observe bodies that seek stability in themselves, in each other, and in the materiality of the organic: "a pumpkinship/ this time" (Turinsky, 2022).

In its approximately 70 minutes, "Soiled" opens spacetime for the audience to perceptually experience the dissociation between sight and hearing. The bodies in the pool do not embody characters, and their phenomenal bodies are not assigned any specific identity. Therefore, they prefigure a new subjectivity (to come). They evoke a down-to-earth, grounded sensitivity to relational, also non-human others. Perhaps they are a community of suffering in the brown rain of degraded ecosystems. Perhaps they are children playing without recognizing the surveillance setup. Or perhaps they are merely bodies indulging in a decadent bath of expensive Styrian pumpkin seed oil, enjoying the sliding and slipping movements that persist even in the face of disaster. The commitment to the horizontal can also be interpreted here as a form of embodied resistance. This performed horizontality evokes forms of protest such as sit- or die-ins, as well as dehierarchized forms of organization and life. At the same time, horizontality here aligns with disability aesthetics. In lying, moving, and pausing horizontally, the performers embody a resistance to bodies that function within the tightly circumscribed framework of capitalist meritocracy. They also queer the cultural spectrum of associations that link reclining bodies with laziness or dysfunctionality.[8]

Prefigurative aesthetics are also manifest in this work's staging of "crip time" (Kafer, 2013). Audio descriptions that fabulate, remember, or glide take their time, thus refusing efficiency. In disrupting the sense of time, the piece enables the experience of slow time and invites the audience to think about another time in the future, and about "other" temporalities more broadly, beyond the dominant time regime of modernity. That dominant time regime, which separates past, present, and future, is continuously fractured within the three parts of the performance. The performance also fosters a sense of a surplus time that resists "chrononormativity" (Freeman, 2010, p. 3). This refers, for example, to the caution with which the bodies of the mixed-abled cast explore the pool. When looking at the stage design, which evokes an oversized hourglass, the observer will notice that oil also runs more slowly than sand flowing. Furthermore, the arrangement of the bodies in palpably tender relationships of being together sensitizes spectators to the potential of coming crip horizons. The large hourglass serves as a vanitas symbol in the set design, reminding the audience of their own finitude, and of the limitations of ecosystems to withstand the overloads of imperial Western lifestyles in the Anthropocene for much longer.

However, "Soiled" does not reproduce familiar emotional repertoires in response, such as fear, exhaustion, or insecurity. In their horizontal movements of gliding, sliding, and searching for a foothold, the bodies of the performers might have an immediate kinesthetic impact, thus shaping the audience's un/shared experience as potential forms of crip time, too. Normative perceptions of spacetime are cripped when audience members are invited

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to pause, to listen to their own bodies and perceptions, and to trace and reflect new feelings coming up.

Finally, the prefigurative aesthetics of "Soiled" includes not only the work's formal aspects of horizontality and crip time, but also its aesthetics of production. Like many performances in the contemporary international disability arts scene, "Soiled" is committed to a working method called "aesthetics of access." This term was popularized by the British theater company Graeae Theatre. It aims at a sustainable form of collaboration in the performing arts, in which the access needs of all participants are prioritized. Starting with the performers' mixed abilities and needs, it also raises awareness that not everyone in the audience experiences performances the same way. Therefore, access tools such as audio description for blind people are not add-ons, but aesthetic tools in their own right (Mühlemann, 2021). Aesthetics of access reflect care-centered forms of collaboration in which the needs of different bodies are taken seriously. They are thus an important artistic form of contemporary institutional critique that creates a fundamental sense of the diversity of bodies and their capacities.

Outlook

The concept of prefigurative aesthetics is a response to the multitudes of contemporary performances that explicitly explore the complex temporality of embodied emotion through artistic means. The search for new ways of feeling in times of affective and emotional exhaustion is expressed in many forms and formats, particularly in contemporary choreographic works at the interface between dance and performance. One of the common features of prefigurative aesthetics highlighted is its *modulation of temporality* toward deceleration, and its simultaneous heightening of the *complexity and plurality of feeling futures*.

Thinking about prefigurative aesthetics through crip theory is also fruitful beyond Turinsky's example. On the one hand, crip theory, with its perspective on critical phenomenology, can serve as an important corrective to affect theory, which merits further empirical and theoretical research. Crip theory can intervene in affect theory by questioning how the relationality of the bodies affecting and being affected may entail a homogenizing or even ableist premise (Smilges, 2023). In affect theoretical approaches to the body, differences, and asymmetries are often made invisible within the ontological concept of relationality. Staging crip time is an essential tool for modeling temporality in prefigurative aesthetics. Through aesthetic strategies of slow motion or deceleration, a theatrical spacetime opens up for exploring unfelt, repressed, or even new ways of feeling. On the other hand, crip theory also raises awareness about the possibility of a turning point: While people with disabilities have all too often been denied a future (Kafer, 2013, pp. 28–34), we are currently moving toward a future in which disabilities could become the norm. This includes not just medical definitions of disability, but also social and relational ones (Kafer, 2013, pp. 5–8). In the face of pandemics, wars, ageing societies, the climate catastrophe, segregating biopolitics, and forced migrations, more and more bodies are at risk of falling outside of a socially ableist norm in the future.[9]

In tracing the concept's genealogy, we have found that the appeal of prefigurative aesthetics is closely related to the current *phase of disorientation* around issues like the climate catastrophe, the crisis of Western neoliberal democracies, and the rise of right-wing or even fascist politics. In the face of these crises, the arts are once again becoming an important

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field of exploring alternative modes of coexistence and practices of sharing feelings within safe spaces. What comes together in prefigurative aesthetics is, first, the search for a physical engagement with complex emotions that are difficult to grasp linguistically. Second, they are committed to care-centered modes of production, highlighting self-care as well as care for the social and planetary climate, and for sustainable forms of coexistence in the future. The concept of prefigurative aesthetics thus emphasizes how artistic modes of collaboration deeply shape emerging aesthetics and their affective registers.

Notes

1 The term "spacetime" goes back to Margret Price's research, who, in analogy to overcoming the dichotomy of body and mind in the concept of "bodyminds," accentuates that spaces and times are experienced as "reality whose meanings are made through relations among words, bodies, objects, technologies and environments" and as such a material-discursive experience cannot be separated (Price, 2024, p. 23).
2 Researchers in the German Collaborative Research Center *Heroes—Heroization—Heroisms* also build on this understanding of the term when they speak of "heroic prefigurations," which are still used today as a powerful "instrument of justification in weakly justified situations of action" (CRC 948, 2022).
3 Mathijs van de Sande (2018), among others, argues that questions of prefigurative politics already played a role in the second half of the 19th century, especially in the disputes between Marxist and anarchist positions. See also Boggs (1977) who is considered the namesake of the concept. For a systematic overview, see also Sörensen (2023).
4 In his studies on courtly society, Norbert Elias uses the concept of "figuration" to describe the social modeling of psychological processes and physical practices in and through plastic, spatial structures and their changes (Elias, 1992). Bourdieu's concept of the field is also aimed at such structured social spaces characterized by power relations (Bourdieu, 2024, pp. 107–114).
5 ASMR stands for "Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response" and refers to the perception of a tingling, pleasant, and relaxing bodily reaction caused by noise, sound, or voice stimuli. Digital ASMR especially in the form of videos has gone viral in recent years. In addition to reducing stress, ASMR can also convey a feeling of closeness and care, reminiscent of someone speaking very gently to you.
6 With Price's term "un/shared" we want to highlight that we do not generalize our perspectives and experiences here.
7 The live performance was attended by Theresa Schütz on November 13, 2022, as part of the NO LIMITS festival at HAU2 in Berlin. A recording is available, and a personal exchange with choreographer Michael Turinsky took place on January 30, 2024, as part of the workshop on "Prefigurative Aesthetics" in the scope of our research project at Freie Universität Berlin.
8 "Soiled" joins a current corpus of contemporary feminist performances such as "Rest" (2021) and "Rest Rebellion" (2023) by Angela Alves, "Pleasure" (2023) by Criptonite (Nina Mühlemann and Edwin Ramirez), "A Crash Course in Cloudspotting" (2021) by Raquel Meseguer Zafe, or "The Nap Ministry" (2016) by Tricia Hersey. They all share a critique of capitalist notions of productivity and efficiency as well as of ableist assumptions of bodies by unfolding rest, quitting, or slowing and lying down as forms of resistance to dominant societal norms and hierarchies.
9 Besides crip theory, important theoretical inspirations for current critical and alternative artistic approaches to temporality come primarily from Black, Feminist, and Queer Studies (including reflections on queer futurity, indigenous futurisms, afrofuturism, Black feminist futurity, etc.).

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21

COLONIALISM AS AFFECT

Paola Ivanov and Laibor Kalanga Moko

In this chapter, we propose "colonialism as affect" as an analytic tool for understanding the affective reverberations of colonialism across time and space. The concept highlights the inextricably affective nature of colonialism, especially as seen in its archives and ethnographic museums, and in the affectively fraught consequences these collections continue to exercise today on formerly colonized communities from whom these belongings were appropriated. Scholars working on colonial archives and collections in particular can apply the concept of "colonialism as affect" to understand how colonial projects from the past have mobilized affect and emotions—such as fear, desire, attachment, and resentment—as tools of governance, leaving affective traces in the present. However, the concept specifically foregrounds how these traces take on a new affective life of their own, shaping ontologically diverse (cosmo-)political encounters and negotiations between the former colonizers and the former colonized. Our affective approach emphasizes colonialism's ongoing dynamic power in the lives of people, and the ways colonial operations generate and mediate affective intensities that structure our relational world.

A specificity of the concept thus lies in how it captures the ontological relationality of colonial violence across time and space by taking seriously the affects and emotions of the colonized and the descendants of those affected by colonial violence. This also means considering the relational affects between different entities, beings, phenomena, things, people, and so forth. An affect-oriented perspective on the relationships between humans and non- or more-than-humans illuminates how colonialism persists in the present as an ongoing affective force operating according to its own temporality, defying the logics of modernity. Colonialism as affect thus reveals the coevalness of colonial violence, and examines relationalities between entities, without assigning a racialized ontological privilege to the world-view of the colonizers (→ *Qadma*'; Blickstein, 2019). The violence of colonial dispossession in places like Tanzania—where we did our fieldwork—entailed not just material loss, but also affective ruptures of grief, longing, obligation, and a sense of alienation that persists across generations (Moko & Bens, 2022), including painful (cosmo-)politically and ontologically specific relational ruptures.

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Furthermore, as an analytic tool, "colonialism as affect" can contribute to decolonial efforts. It can do so, for example, by guiding and elucidating the stakes of ongoing intense debates about the restitution of colonial collections in European ethnographic museums, and by centering the lived and felt experiences of the colonized. It showcases how affects that become manifest in these contexts are not incidental to, but constitutive of, enduring colonial power itself. In so doing, the framework can contribute to decolonizing efforts within these museums and other *dispositifs* of knowledge production in the Global North. Building on our research into felt experiences of colonialism, the concept outlined in this chapter highlights the need for future research to take a more decolonial approach to affect studies and a more affective approach to decolonial research in anthropology, art history, museum studies, and related fields.

Colonialism and Coloniality

Our approach to colonialism as affect builds on, yet differs from, existing scholarship. Scholars across disciplines have studied colonialism in depth, drawing a variety of conclusions about what colonialism is. Their definitions reflect distinct political, legal, sociocultural, economic, or psychological perspectives. Nevertheless, most agree colonialism is a practice in which one group exercises power to dominate, subjugate, dispossess, and exploit another. Colonialism is thus foreign rule or legal-political domination of a distant territory and its people (Bens, 2020; Mamdani, 1996; Scott, 1995); the exploitation of people and natural resources by the colonizers through forced labor, land alienation, and resource extraction (Mintz, 1985; Rodney, 1972; Wallerstein, 1974; Wolfe, 2006); or the construction of racial and cultural difference based on an ideology of superiority (Cooper & Stoler, 1997; Dirks, 1992; Stoler, 1995).

Many scholars have concentrated on the study of colonialism as a historical phenomenon, analyzing its establishment, development, impact, and (for some) its ending or (for others) its postcolonial legacy over time. However, a purely linear temporal perspective can lead to a portrayal of modern colonialism as a historic relic of the past, primarily associated with the European age of exploration and expansion from the 15th century onward, and with imperialism from the 19th century. Within this perspective, ongoing traces of colonialism are often seen as the postcolonial after-effects of a concluded event, rather than present-day events in their own right.

Scholarly periodization tends to focus on factual accounts of specific cases with clearly demarcated temporal and spatial boundaries. In our view, this risks deemphasizing the affective dynamics of these cases, which often transcend such boundaries (as we shall argue in the following section). Some argue colonialism emerged in ancient times when the Greeks, Romans, and other groups expanded their territories by conquering other societies (van Dommelen, 2012; Wells, 2015). Others believe that modern colonialism began in the late 15th and early 16th centuries when European empires such as Portugal and Spain began to expand to other continents (Blaut & Frank, 1992; Osterhammel & Frisch, 2005). Particularly regarding Africa, another group of scholars argue that colonialism began in the mid-1800s and was formalized in 1884/85 following the Berlin Conference, where European powers established principles for partitioning the continent (Griffiths, 1986; Mbogoni, 2012).

The debate is complicated by colonialism's many forms, including political, legal, economic, cultural and, as we argue, affective. These different forms can further confuse the

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debate about when, if, or how colonialism has ended. Some scholars with a legal-political lens strongly believe that it formally ended in the 1960s, when many countries colonized by European empires gained political independence, as was the case in much of Africa (Táíwò, 2022). Others, particularly focused on cultural and economic aspects, do perceive coloniality in the present. They believe that, although in many cases colonialism has formally ended, patterns of power, control, and cultural domination are enduring (Rodney, 1972; Thiong'o, 1986). This strand speaks of "coloniality"—of power, knowledge, structures, and institutions—to describe lasting legacies of colonialism. Coloniality stresses that, even where colonialism is not an ongoing project, it has shaped the modern world in terms of racial hierarchies, economic inequalities, and epistemic injustices (Mignolo, 2013; Quijano, 2007). These repercussions on both the colonized and the colonizers are intrinsic to postcolonial states today. Postcolonial and decolonial studies in anthropology critically examine these enduring effects (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997; Pierre, 2013; Stoler, 2002), calling for decolonization or decoloniality that provincializes and subverts dominant structures by valuing subaltern epistemologies and ontologies (de la Cadena, 2015; de Sousa Santos, 2015; Escobar, 2018; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). While these are valuable approaches that are highly relevant to "colonialism as affect," our own research on affect and colonial museum collections, described in the following section, has not always found resonance in the temporal logics of these studies. Many of these postcolonial or decolonial perspectives tend to regard the persistence of unequal power relations and exploitation as a result of historical colonialism, rather than a manifestation of its dynamic and affective operation in the present.

At the same time, this temporal approach has also influenced the ways some scholars have mapped colonialism in terms of affect and emotion in crucial ways. Frantz Fanon's seminal works (2004, 2008) offer an exploration of colonialism's psychological and emotional impacts on both the colonized and the colonizers. Colonialism, Fanon argues, dehumanizes the colonized, causing trauma, feelings of inferiority, self-hatred, and hopelessness. The colonized are ultimately left with a pervasive sense of worthlessness due to systemic oppression and constant assertions of the colonizers' superiority. For Fanon, resisting colonialism is an affective dynamic in which the colonized unite their hearts, muscles, and sweat (Fanon, 2004, pp. 192, 311) to channel anger and frustration against the colonial powers into greater revolutionary violence against those who use these emotions to rule. This brings about a historical transition to both political independence and "cathartic" release (Fanon, 2004, p. 239).

Ann Laura Stoler, not unlike Fanon, highlights how colonialism intersects with affect and emotions by examining the ways the Dutch colonial state penetrated and regulated people's intimate spheres and governed their emotions (Stoler, 2008, 1995). Her work on colonial archives reveals how preoccupied the colonial administration in the Indies were with mastering the affective states of both the colonized and the colonizers. She argues that a colonial common sense informed policies and everyday practices that were deeply grounded in the management of sentiments (Stoler, 2008, p. 59). She also shows how colonial authorities sought to exert power and maintain the racial categories critical to its rule by regulating intimate, sexual, or marriage relations between its agents and subjects (Stoler, 1995).

Several other authors have also addressed the affective aspects of colonial relations in recent years—for example, the myriad technologies of affective colonial governance, including the curation of specific colonial sensibilities and sentiments, or how processes of

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colonial racialization in post/colonial societies are inscribed in the affective lives of people (Ahmed, 2004; Blickstein, 2019; Mbembe, 2001; Navaro-Yashin, 2012).

Understanding Colonialism as Affect

While we build on these historical approaches to the affective dynamics of colonialism, this chapter concretizes those insights into an understanding of colonialism *as* affect—a present-day phenomenon inscribed in the affective lives of people, especially those of the colonized and their descendants, in their encounters with colonial archives, records, and ethnographic museum collections. As a force in the present, we can only observe the affective workings of colonialism clearly if we approach it with two considerations.

First, the persistence of colonialism must be examined in its affective arrangements, that is, the constellations of "affect-intensive site[s] of social life" (Slaby, 2019, p. 109). Affective arrangements are wide-ranging "heterogeneous ensembles of diverse materials forming a local layout that operates as a dynamic formation comprising persons, things, artifacts, spaces, discourses, behaviors, and expressions," all of which are arranged "in a characteristic mode of composition and dynamic relatedness" (Slaby et al., 2019, p. 4). The entities in an arrangement interact affectively with each other and with the material environment, creating an atmosphere in which affective dynamics—including those pertaining to colonialism—come to the fore.

The colonial affective arrangement we conceptualize in this chapter builds on a "cosmopolitical" ethnographic case study that takes into account different kinds of ontologies and relations. It includes people of different cultures, power, and status; formal and informal institutions such as ethnographic museums, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local communities; as well as non-human entities, such as ethnographic collections, livestock, the wildlife, the land, technologies, and the environment. All these actors affect and are affected by each other in different ways as they interact. As a result, colonialism becomes visible as a force at play that provides access to affect.

Second, we need to define colonialism not as a linear historical event lodged in the past, whose direct effects belong to a bygone era, but as a structure fundamentally—and affectively—entangled with modern capitalism (Mintz, 1985; Robinson, 2000; Wallerstein, 1974). Colonialism is both a structure of governance and a "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1977, p. 132). As a structure of governance, colonialism entails powerful actors—be they a country, an organization, an individual, or a group of people—who dominate and exploit the resources of the powerless. As a structure of feeling, colonialism also refers to the affective logics of this exploitative relationship based on asymmetries of power, and to how those whose resources are exploited in everyday interactions feel and live through that domination. Defined in this way, we see that colonialism transcends time, discharging affective intensities and emotions in varying specific arrangement settings. It is in this sense that affect theory allows for a better understanding of how colonial power dynamics operate, and how they play out in the here and now. Seen in and through affect, colonialism dissolves circumscribed temporal and spatial dimensions, extending beyond factual historical records into the realm of embodied experience and emotions that connect past, present, and future. Looking at colonialism and coloniality from the perspective of affect theory unmasks colonialism's true face in everyday practice.

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Affective Lives of Colonialism: Ethnographic Examples

Our ethnographic research into Maasai relationships to museum collections taken from their ancestral communities provides a powerful example of colonialism as affect. Since 2020, we have worked on collections of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin which originated from Maasai communities. We explored how our Maasai interlocutors in northern Tanzania reacted to colonially acquired belongings in the Berlin collection, drawing on visual methods such as photo elicitation and filming (Harper, 2002) to provoke their response. When shown photographs of "objects" taken during German colonialism over a century ago, most of them felt palpably uncomfortable. The photographs moved them in an embodied and emotional way. Many believed that collectors had killed the original owners to obtain inalienable belongings that were of critical importance to their bodies, families, and ritual practices. In their world-view, the "objects" were ontologically transformed by this colonial violence into dangerous entities called *ing'weni*, vested with vengeful *iloikop* (Ivanov et al., 2024). *Ing'weni* is an ontological status acquired by inalienable belongings which have been used on people's bodies and in rituals after the death of the owner. *Iloikop* are the traces of a murdered person which he or she leaves behind to avenge the person and the family of the person responsible for his or her death (→ *Haunting*). Our Maasai interlocutors also used the affectively charged term *iloikop* to refer to a victim's corpse, blood, and body parts, including belongings worn on them. Moreover, people felt that colonialism had a direct impact on their present lives via these "objects" kept far away in Berlin. Their status as dangerous *ing'weni* and as carriers of *iloikop* caused misfortune back home through infertility, disease, and disasters such as prolonged droughts.

The concept of "*eng'oki*," which emerged during our field research in 2024, helps clarify both the trans-temporal and trans-spatial dimension of colonial affect and its moral and normative basis. Our interlocutors used this term to describe offences or punishments resulting from the violation of moral norms or behaviors in dealing with people, other living beings, and situations in the world. The victims can pronounce *eng'oki* by cursing, or it can remain unpronounced yet affect the wrongdoer. For example, if a family member gets sick and dies without receiving help for treatment, the kin may suffer from *eng'oki*. Similarly, witnessing a murder and not reporting it to the victim's relatives is also considered *eng'oki*. *Eng'oki* lingers in the air and manifests itself as incurable sickness or misfortune.

In September 2024, we gained more insight into the affective force of colonialism across time and space through a workshop we held in Tanzania with Maasai community representatives in Olkolili, Boma Ng'ombe (Siha district). We shared archival files from Berlin's Ethnological Museum, containing information about the Maasai collection. After reviewing the documents, the participants discussed the colonial violence behind many acquisitions. Again, most believed collectors had killed the original owners in order to plunder their belongings. They emphasized that *eng'oki* affects people today—Europeans, Maasai, descendants of the perpetrators of colonial violence, and those who witnessed these atrocities, whether in the past or first-hand. We consider this experience to be a form of "affective witnessing," since affect is inherent to the act of bearing witness to colonial violence (Richardson & Schankweiler, 2019). Interestingly, the witnesses also include people who are aware of the presence of collections from colonial contexts in museums, yet do nothing to address the issue. The affective stakes have taken on more complexity now that we have informed the Maasai representatives of the truth and the whereabouts of the pieces. Bearing

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this knowledge, and having witnessed the items in visual format, *eng'oki* can also affect the representatives if they do not act. In this context, colonialism becomes an ongoing affective phenomenon that spans multiple generations and spaces.

Furthermore, our interlocutors linked their encounter with the Maasai collection at the Ethnological Museum to current incidents of violent land grabbing by huge capitalist foreign investors—mostly from the West and the United Arab Emirates—and the ways in which they themselves were affected by it. When we asked who they thought had taken the "objects" and how, some of our interlocutors did not distinguish between past actors and present ones currently appropriating their lands. This view challenged those perspectives that analyze colonialism along a linear historical framework. It seemed to us that our interlocutors were affected by the same violent force—colonialism—manifesting itself in the same old logics.

The fact that "objects"—inalienable belongings—taken more than a century ago raised current issues in the capitalist economy calls into question the rigid periodization of colonialism. Rather than focusing on whether colonialism has formally ended or not, we argue that scholars need to look at colonialism as affect, by accounting for its present affective and emotional dimensions in the quotidian lives of persons and communities. By doing so, we can discern its continuity, based on both new and old logics of exploitation.

Our research thus highlights a need for scholars to consider ongoing discrepancies in how people perceive the spatial and temporal dimension of colonialism, and the ontological and affective status of non-human entities. These discrepancies surface in transcultural encounters between former colonizers and former colonized in the realm of what some anthropologists call "cosmopolitics," that is, political negotiations between actors on the basis of divergent ontological understandings of the world and plural normative orders connected with them (de la Cadena, 2010). We can see a prominent example of this is in the rise of transcultural collaborations and debates around the violent colonial histories of ethnological collections in the Global North, and the question of their restitution. We gained first-hand observations of this debate through our work on the exhibition "Histories of Tanzania," which opened in November 2024 in the Humboldt Forum. The Humboldt Forum has been at the heart of such controversies in Berlin—as it houses the exhibitions of the Berlin Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, and is itself a replica of the former Prussian royal palace in the city center.[1]

Through this work, we were able to experience how the exhibited belongings were perceived by the representatives from various Tanzanian communities from which they originally came. The representatives did not perceive these belongings as a "cultural heritage" from the past that could simply be restituted, as the capitalistic, hegemonic museum logic prescribes (Bens, 2025). On the contrary, these belongings were affectively charged, inalienable and ever-present "constitutions" of the land, guaranteeing the natural, supra-natural, and social equilibrium. These qualities brought the colonial violence of the belongings to the fore.[2] For some of our interlocutors, the consequences of their deprivation were the disruption of the order of nature, society, and the cosmos, and to this day the misfortune of the affected communities. A genuine decolonization of museums and other knowledge institutions of the Global North is hardly possible if scholars do not acknowledge this affective colonial coevalness and engage with the demands of the communities.

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Colonialism as Affect: An Outlook

An affective approach to colonialism, in particular, seeing colonialism as an affective force, opens up several further research directions. First, it allows anthropologists and other scholars to analyze colonialism as an affective arrangement that amounts to far more than just a historical legacy. Colonialism is a force that continues to shape how people—particularly those from marginalized communities—viscerally and relationally feel about the world. This perspective moves beyond a focus on structural, institutional, and material traces to illuminate how colonial logics continue to affect social and natural environments through emotions, sensibilities, and relational embodied experiences. As our examples show, when people from the communities of origin encounter ancestral belongings, they do not just perceive historical artifacts. Rather, they feel the weight of dispossession, erasure, and unresolved injustice. These ongoing feelings and relational consequences are central to how colonialism operates in the present.

Second, "colonialism as affect" centers the experiences, temporalities, and world-views of the colonized communities, whose knowledge and ontologies have often been ignored or subsumed under dominant or colonial frameworks (→ *Qadma'*). By centering affect, scholars can take these perspectives seriously as real and valid ways of feeling, knowing, and being in the world. As we showed, the "objects" in ethnographic museums in Europe are living entities that can feel and react to colonial violence to which they have been subjected. This conception challenges Western ideas of property and heritage and indicates that colonialism is not only about history, but also about ongoing struggles over meaning, value, and existence (→ *Property as Affect*).

Third, the concept of "colonialism as affect" has important implications for cultural politics. It helps to better understand the "cosmopolitical" negotiations that take place in our interconnected world. These negotiations are readily apparent in debates about restitution of looted belongings, and in rising collaborations between Indigenous communities and ethnographic museums, which ideally should serve to overcome the coloniality of the latter. In light of the ongoing affective presence of colonialism in colonized societies and its comprehensive impact on the natural and social environment, the representatives of the communities we have worked with in Tanzania are asking for an equally comprehensive process of reconciliation. Reconciliation should bring benefits to the communities themselves and not be limited to the simple restitution of "objects," as assumed by the restitution debate, which has so far been dominated by Euro-normative perspectives. In this context, material or monetary contributions should not be understood as reparations, as the dominant Euro-normative capitalist perspective would suggest. Rather, as highlighted in our research with the Maasai (Moko, 2023), these are contributions toward restoring the reciprocity broken by colonialism, and thus also the social, natural, and cosmic equilibrium that has been disturbed.

The concept of colonialism as affect is a tool for rethinking how Indigenous world orders, as well as their ontological and affective foundations, can find space to develop and work toward a transformation of social, political, and economic structures in today's increasingly transnationally connected world. It helps us to understand how hegemonic emotional repertoires and ontological assumptions, which are still inscribed in the societies of the Global North, can be transformed in order to overcome persistent colonial power asymmetries with the Global South, and move toward a more viable decolonization.

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Notes

1 The exhibition was realized by the State Museums in Berlin (Ethnological Museum and Central Archive) in cooperation with the National Museum of Tanzania and the Humboldt Forum Foundation (https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/programm/dauerangebot/exhibition/geschichten-tansanias-137350/). Paola Ivanov was one of seven curators from Tanzania and Berlin. In preparation, dialogues took place in Tanzania with descendants of the original owners of the "objects" to be shown in the exhibition and with representatives of the communities from which they were appropriated, including a "community conference" in Dar es Salaam at the end of 2023. One of the aims of these dialogues was to obtain the consent of the communities to exhibit the objects at the Humboldt Forum.
2 The comparison of an expropriated, power-laden object now in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin with the cosmic and social "constitution" of a country comes from the current guardian of the object, Sarah Kamili Mandwa Mazoea from Urughu (Singida region). The statements of the representatives on the objects from the respective community and on the consequences of their expropriation, as well as their demands for the future, are presented in the exhibition audiovisually.

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PART V

Friction, Stasis, Suppression

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22

AFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENTS

Hansjörg Dilger, Maren Wirth, and Kristina Mashimi

This chapter introduces the concept of "affective engagements" to analyze two key aspects of research *on* and *with* activists or other civil society actors: first, the concept helps to understand how these various actors engage in social and political transformation through specific affective dynamics; second, it sheds light on how researchers may choose (or not) to engage with their research interlocutors in studying these processes. In our view, the two aspects are inextricably intertwined: research on social and political struggles inherently challenges the positionality of researchers, even when they claim to refuse to take an explicit position on the issues they study, especially in terms of their own involvement in producing the social and material conditions against which activist or other civil society actors tend to rally.

Regarding the first aspect, we examine how activists and other civil society actors engage in struggles for social change. Drawing on phenomenological approaches, we understand engagement as a dynamic exchange between individual actors and the social and material realities they seek to transform. We extend this framework by incorporating affect, showing how the orientations, commitments, and practices of these actors are shaped by often highly ambiguous power structures. Unlike cognitive or behavioral approaches,[1] we locate affect in the embodiment of the relationships between individual and collective actors and their social-material environments in politicized contexts (Desjarlais & Throop, 2011).

The second aspect concerns the relationship between researchers and their interlocutors. We build on discussions of collaboration and engaged research in social and cultural anthropology. These include methodological approaches in which researchers move beyond a distanced, neutral stance to actively participate in the struggles of their fieldsites and work alongside their interlocutors toward societal transformation. We demonstrate how an affect-focused approach can illuminate the diverse, often equally ambiguous arrangements of engagement between researchers and activists or other civil society actors. This perspective reveals how these relationships can be crafted and negotiated, particularly through moments of friction and conflict. This can be the case both when researchers choose to actively support social struggles and when they do *not*, for example, when allegedly "non-engaged" researchers are criticized for their presumably "neutral" stance on a highly politicized issue.

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Through this dual focus on affective engagements, we shed new light on multiple relationalities: between researchers' and activists' or other civil society actors' orientations, their unfolding in social and material settings, and the power dynamics that shape these interactions in struggles for socio-political change. By examining how all actors embody these unfolding practices and relationships, we reveal both the pitfalls and emancipatory potential of engaged or collaborative research approaches.

Situating Affective Engagements

The notion of "engagement"[2] plays an important role in philosophical debates about the relationship between human beings and the world, and thus goes beyond the various common sense uses of the term. Sartre (1978) uses the notion of being "engaged in the world" (p. 24) to describe a general "human involvement/integratedness" (p. 24). This is not the same as the political or social engagement that we want to theorize in this chapter (cf. Gillissen, 2008, p. 16). However, further defining engagement in "Being and Nothingness," Sartre explicitly includes engagement as a form of political commitment in his definition:

> Engage (*engager*) includes both the idea of involvement and the idea of deliberate commitment. Thus the human being is inescapably engaged in the world, and freedom is meaningful only as engaged by its free choice of ends.
>
> *(Sartre, 1978, p. 630, emphasis in original)*

In phenomenological literature, the notion of engagement is also intertwined with the ontological determination of human freedom. In addition to Sartre, the *Wörterbuch der phänomenologischen Begriffe* refers to Merleau-Ponty who locates individual choice and the human capacity to influence the world at the interface of freedom and a given worldly situation (Vetter & Ebner, 2005, p. 141). Such forms of engagement are always shaped by processes of power. Consequently, Sarah Ahmed (2007) takes up Merleau-Ponty's focus on the body to argue that the spaces that bodies can inhabit and the freedom of choice they have are *always* regulated by pre-existing power structures and the ways in which these structures ascribe meaning to certain bodies and not others (Ahmed, 2007, pp. 156–158).

In this chapter, we build on phenomenological approaches to highlight the embodied and relational aspects of activists' and other civil society actors' engagements with social and political transformation, and expand this perspective by focusing on the affective dynamics of power (see also Ahmed, 2004, 2007). We argue that affect is essential for understanding the frictions and ambiguities that shape activist engagement in highly politicized contexts, as it "helps to highlight the unpredictability and indeterminacy of critical moments" both in "the development of whole movements" (Laszczkowski, 2019, p. 491) and in the research on them. We draw on Jolaosho's (2018) work to elaborate on the plurality of historically situated and affective orientations to goals and practices within activist movements and the tensions that can arise from them. This focus on embodiment and emotional expression allows us to understand how affective dynamics can challenge and disrupt the "dominant sensory order" (Jolaosho, 2018, p. 435) and trigger long-term transformations in practices and relationships of entire movements. We also follow Jolaosho's take on Strathern's notion of the "awkward relationship" between feminist scholarship and anthropology to point to the similar challenges of engaged anthropology and activist movements in overcoming

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"epistemological boundaries" (Jolaosho, 2018, p. 425; see also Zilberg, 2016). However, we argue that this perspective should be applied more specifically to the *actual practices* of collaborative and engaged research that have a long tradition in the discipline of social and cultural anthropology but have mostly been discussed in terms of their normative implications (Low & Merry, 2010).

Consequently, we maintain that the concept of affective engagements helps to open up a more systematic perspective on activist mobilizations and the engaged or collaborative research modalities that can be pursued in these contexts (→ *Affective Mobilization*). While we agree that a distinction can be made between studies that treat activism as a mere research topic and studies that actively participate in activist practices, we argue that the boundaries between them are often fluid (Podgornik-Jakil & Bens, 2021, p. 299). Thus, while some scholars claim that anthropological writing is in itself a site of resistance to systems of dependency and power (Scheper-Hughes, 1995), others argue for a distinction between social critique and activist engagement (Hale, 2006).

Similarly, while some researchers actively support the aims and objectives of the activists they work with (Laszczkowski, 2019), with some participating and identifying *as* activists (Gomes, 2013), others call for a nuanced and "objective" analysis of social situations characterized by oppression, inequality, and so on (D'Andrade, 1995, p. 407). In our view, there is not one "correct" way of positioning oneself in research on and with activists or other civil society actors, especially as their engagements can also be directly opposed to a researcher's own moral or political values (Diefenbach, 2023). However, we argue that a focus on affect offers a unique perspective for understanding the kind of relationships researchers and their interlocutors may choose to engage in. It illuminates how different orientations and values converge or collide in research on and with activist and other civil society actors, which can become the starting point for a shared reflection on the initiation, modification, or even discontinuation, of socially and politically engaged research practices (Dilger et al., 2023).

In what follows, we analyze our research on decolonial activist mobilizations and the debates they have raised about socio-political transformations between Tanzania and Germany, specifically around the restitution of cultural belongings and human remains from colonial contexts (Ivanov et al., 2024). We focus in particular on the diverse affects that were mobilized and expressed during a symposium on the repatriation of human remains titled "We Want Them Back,"[3] which took place in Berlin in November 2023 and which Kristina Mashimi and Maren Wirth attended. This scenario allows us to explore different challenges that need to be navigated in order for collaborations to flourish.[4] We argue that the concept of affective engagements helps elucidate the different nuances, dynamics, and practices of activist interventions and engaged research approaches in this context.

Mobilizing Affective Engagements

> I needed to get this off my chest because I have been listening to the previous discussion, and I sat there in the corner feeling increasingly annoyed, almost intense, to the point where I started feeling that I'm getting a headache and that there is a knot starting to form in my stomach.
>
> (Sima Luipert, Namibian human rights activist and descendant of a Herero and Nama genocide survivor)[5]

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In the last decade, decolonial activist engagements for the restitution of cultural belongings[6] and the repatriation of ancestral remains that have been violently appropriated during German colonialism have given rise to new research and civil society collaborations and social formations. Actors with different biographies, professional backgrounds, and affective and political positionalities are working together to negotiate appropriate ways of dealing with the German colonial legacy. Individuals approach the issue as activists, civil society actors, researchers, historians, filmmakers, politicians, or descendants of those who were murdered or abused, and engage with one another on the basis of their shared, but often also divergent, commitments to social and political transformation.

"This will be a political, an important and, yes, also an emotional day," said moderator Boussa Thiam when opening the symposium "We Want Them Back," an event organized by Decolonize Berlin, an association committed to "the critical examination of the history and present of colonialism and racism, to the recognition and reappraisal of colonial injustice, and to decolonization throughout society."[7] The symposium was part of the "Repatriation Days," a week of events in November 2023 organized around the visit of descendants from former colonies in Africa who came to Berlin in order to demand the repatriation of their ancestors. The invitation announced an exchange between "people affected in search of their ancestors and guests from Namibia, Ghana, Tanzania and Zimbabwe as well as representatives from civil society, politics, academia and cultural institutions."[8] Yet, the affective dimensions of this exchange were indeed contested.

Sima Luipert, the Namibian human rights activist and descendant of a Herero and Nama genocide survivor, quoted earlier, expressed her discomfort on stage, gazing fiercely into the audience: "The Germans need to understand the impact that this kind of discussion has on us, the descendants." Luipert argued that scientific processes and language were being "weaponized" to block meaningful change, and that the results of research into the provenance of cultural belongings and human remains never reached the communities concerned. In her view, the use of "fancy words" and the symposium itself, which she perceived as mainly an academic process, ignored the emotions involved and the impact of these emotions on the people concerned: "I do not understand why people need to be so fancy all the time, just give us back our family members," she concluded. By publicly talking about her own experience, as well as the affective dissonances (Mühlhoff, 2019) she encountered when confronted with the perspectives of the White German panelists representing German museal and state institutions, Luipert challenged the normative "political rationalities" (Stoler, 2009, p. 59) of the restitution debate. She not only presented a counter narrative, but deliberately mobilized her own emotional disagreement to strengthen her argument for the immediate and unbureaucratic repatriation of the ancestors to their descendants.

Sima Luipert's affective response was also shared among other descendants who were on the panel with her: Khalid Salewa from Tanzania, a descendant of Mangi Ngalami, who was hanged along with 19 other political leaders by the German colonial administration in Moshi in 1900, explained: "It is very emotional for a lot of us and something that we can't really abstract from when we talk about it. . . . It is something that has affected our families for generations." Later on, Anael Gerald Moshi Meli, another of Meli's descendants, remarked, "There are people who are doing this as part of their profession . . . but for others, this is their families and this is their lives." Consequently, Luipert's highlighting of the affective dimension of the symposium shifted the dynamics of the whole panel, as her feelings and observations resonated with other descendants. The shared relational

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commitment enabled activists and descendants alike to collectively strengthen their claim for repatriation and regain their power of interpretation based on shared affects and emotions. It became possible to address aspects that otherwise might have been neglected: in particular, the historical situatedness and contradictory temporalities of European institutions, and the communities and families of those murdered by colonial forces, who cannot "move on" until they have properly mourned and buried their ancestors (see also Hagerty, 2023).

During the course of the event, Kristina Mashimi and Maren Wirth both felt a discomfort with the heightened tension in the room. There was a clear friction between the highly formalized and technical ideas and emotional repertoires (von Poser et al., 2019) of the White representatives from German institutions, who focused on legal requirements, limitations, institutional structures and bureaucratic procedures, as well as the predominantly Black activists' and descendants' engagements, which were deeply personal and emphasized the urgency of the issue. As White academics and researchers on the topic, Kristina and Maren felt puzzled when listening to Sima Luipert's intervention. Being part of and drawing on broader academic discussions, they felt complicit in the use of "fancy words" and dealing with the topic on the basis of their profession when engaging with decolonial struggles. Simultaneously, they politically align with many of the addressed goals and partly share the affective response to the injustice as well as to the often bureaucratic reactions of German institutions and their representatives vis-à-vis the demands of the descendants.

Adding to this are other, more intimate dimensions: Kristina, for instance, felt both anxious and excited when coming to the event. She was looking forward to immersing herself in political and intellectual debates again, after her prior weeks had circled around the new addition to her family—her son who was born only eight weeks earlier. Married to a Tanzanian who was also with her and her newborn that day, she was more than familiar with the debate—long before she had begun to follow it more systematically for her research. Unlike Kristina, Maren was not very familiar with the afro-diasporic community in Berlin when she attended the event. She entered the venue feeling nervous and uncomfortable, scanning the rows for familiar faces. While she resonated with the views and demands of the panel, her outsider status and anonymity within the social context of the symposium left her in the role of a mere spectator. It is crucial to take these entangled positionalities into account in order to epistemologically grasp the affective engagements of researchers in this context (Stodulka et al., 2018).

In all these struggles, White Germans and Black activists and descendants are therefore not two monolithic groups. White German activists, and partly also academics, have worked side by side with members of African diaspora communities and descendants from the African continent abroad in their struggles for restitution and repatriation. Furthermore, government representatives and members of other German institutions such as museums who participate in forums like the "We Want Them Back" symposium are also partly committed to social and political transformation. However, the affective engagements of all these actors—that is, their specific orientations, practices, and emotional involvement in seeking this transformation—usually differ from those of the activists and descendants (which are of course also diverse) who face the direct impact of colonial history. Particularly in institutional settings, these discordances can lead to affective ambiguity and friction (Dilger & Warstat, 2021) when, for example, highly formalized (and often overly bureaucratic) institutional perspectives collide with activist interventions or

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descendants' family narratives. Indeed, the usage of certain concepts and terms who are often framed as neutral have often been criticized, particularly by individuals who have experienced racism (Feagin, 2009).

However, while such tensions can complicate collaboration between differently positioned actors in both social and political struggles and the research that is being done on or with them, they can also be the starting point for a shared reflection on the rationalities and practices of specific kinds of collaboration (Dilger et al., 2023). This is the case, for example, when activists and museum representatives begin to (re-)negotiate the storage and handling of belongings and human remains—even if the ultimate goal of activists may be the restitution of all these human remains and cultural belongings. In the context of collaborative research with academic partners, in turn, actors with different backgrounds and professional or personal orientations can decide to work actively on these dissonances, paying close attention to and taking seriously atmospheric shifts and affective dynamics, thus allowing for a reflexive reevaluation of the collaboration, and for coming to terms with what really matters to all involved.

Understanding Social, Political, and Collaborative Engagement through Affect

Looking at social and political struggles through the lens of "affective engagements" allows for a conceptually and empirically nuanced analysis of the complex dynamics that fundamentally shape *any* kind of activist, civil society, or community movement and the ethnographic or qualitative research that is conducted on and with these actors. As we have shown through the example of the symposium, the affective involvement of individual actors in these struggles is an important factor for understanding their commitment to social change, and the time, care, and resources they invest (or do not invest) in it.

While in this specific context these affective engagements have strengthened bonds between different actors, in other situations they can also create friction and conflict, and ultimately lead to withdrawal from or the redirection of these struggles (Jolaosho, 2018). However, affective engagements do not only shape the interactions *within* activist spaces, but also between civil society actors and political representatives and other publics. Furthermore, while we are only at the beginning of our collaborations with activist actors, the symposium has shown that these engagements will be equally relevant to our own research practices and interactions, and that the success of these collaborations will depend on the ways in which affective ambiguity—and possible tensions or conflicts—in this context are actively managed (Dilger et al., 2023).

Consequently, while it is important to take into account the subject positions (Podgornik-Jakil & Bens, 2021, p. 299) and biographies (Barassi, 2018) of activist and civil society actors involved and the (often marginalized) people with whom they interact in spaces of political struggle and collaboration, in our future work we also aim to examine more systematically our own relation to these struggles and our potential involvement in the transformation of the social and material publics that activists and other social actors seek (Clarke, 2010). Activists and anthropologists alike perceive publics as important in advancing their often differing social and political agendas (Fassin, 2013). Consequently, engagement in terms of intervening in and shaping public(s) can result in very different (often collaborative) formats, practices, and approaches that are currently being used and experimented with in social and cultural anthropology (Dilger et al., 2025).

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For future research, we suggest further deepening the focus on the embodiment of affective engagements based on the intersectional backgrounds of *all* actors involved. As the example of the symposium shows, how different civil society actors engage with social or political issues is strongly influenced by their gendered, classed, and racialized positionalities. In the context of the symposium, the affective engagements of the various actors were also influenced by their relation to decolonial struggles and the restitution of cultural belongings in transnational settings. Similarly, Kristina's and Maren's own experiences show that the backgrounds of the academic actors involved in a collaboration—which can include family backgrounds as well as personal biographies or professional orientations—will shape the specific conditions and actual course of such collaborations.

A conceptual focus on affective engagements can help clarify not only the practices and relationships that are formed in concrete situations and socio-material contexts against *all* the backgrounds of the individuals involved, but also the broader dynamics that characterize the emergence and trajectories of socio-political struggles. In light of the widespread call for decolonization and the related growing emphasis on "collaboration" within and beyond academia (see also Smith, 2021), we therefore consider "affective engagements" to be an important analytical tool for actively embracing the messiness of social realities that define our anthropological practice today.

Notes

1 The concept of engagement has also been developed in psychology, user studies, and media and communication studies, referring to the "cognitive, affective and behavioral attributes that lead to connection, participation, and involvement" (Johnston & Lane, 2019, p. 1). However, such approaches have neglected the embodied dimensions of engagement and the socio-material contexts of power in which engagement takes shape, both of which are crucial to the formulation of our argument.
2 The term "engagement" has diverse meanings rooted in French existentialism, encompassing moral phenomena like commitment, obligation, and risk (Prechtl & Burkard, 2008, p. 137). While its usage ranges from formal agreements (as in marriage) to military encounters, in socio-political contexts it primarily denotes commitment to a cause, whether through political participation in democratic processes or civic involvement in community issues (Stevenson, 2010).
3 Decolonize Berlin (2024, January 29). Symposium "We Want Them Back": Was sind die Forderungen von Betroffenen an den deutschen Staat? [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alrZ2valPHY (accessed on October 2, 2025).
4 The preliminary research for this chapter was conducted in the subproject "Affective Engagements: Activist Mobilizations in Decolonial Debates on Cultural Goods and Social Transformation between Tanzania and Germany," as part of the CRC "Affective Societies" at Freie Universität Berlin. Hansjörg Dilger is the project leader and Kristina Mashimi is a postdoctoral researcher. Maren Wirth joined the project team during Kristina's one-year maternity leave. Kristina and Maren attended the symposium together.
5 See below for the context of this quote.
6 On the use—and contestations—of different terms used in the debates on "objects" and "things" taken during the colonial period, see also Ivanov et al. (2024) and (→*Colonialism as Affect*).
7 https://decolonize-berlin.de/de/home (accessed on August 27, 2024).
8 https://wewantthemback.berlin (accessed on August 27, 2024).

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23

AFFECTS OF CRITIQUE

Aletta Diefenbach, Matthias Lüthjohann, and Hans Roth

Critique (Gr. *kritikē téchnē*; Fr. *Critique*; Ger. *Kritik*) is derived from the ancient Greek verb *krínein* (to distinguish, to decide, to judge). It refers to a form of judgment that examines the truth, value, and legitimacy of certain statements, beliefs, forms of life, and ideologies. As an articulation of dissent, critique is a relational process. Critique marks a difference, or a new positioning. It thus simultaneously associates itself with, and disassociates itself from, a particular "thing." Critique is related to what it criticizes, even when it positions itself in total opposition to its object (Jaeggi & Wesche, 2009, p. 8). Given its social relationality, critique is hardly detached from or opposed to affect. On the contrary, critique must be understood as an affective process in its own right.

As a heuristic for studying the affects of critique, we propose to distinguish three dimensions: critique emerges from affect, critique is affective, and critique affects. Firstly, by saying that *critique emerges from affect*, we are highlighting how affective intensities are transformed into articulations of critique, or else are muted, fended off, or deflected. Critique is a demanding process that is mobilized and accompanied by many different affects and corporealities, including feelings of injustice and indignation, shame, compassion, or resentment. These dynamics also point to an important area of inquiry: the absence of critique, and the conditions under which affect fails to translate into critical expression. Secondly, the articulation and formulation of *critique is itself an affective practice* that shapes and (re-)assembles the public sphere. These public dynamics themselves might be modeled and molded by design, and rhetorically and performatively crafted and refined to various degrees. The forms and formats of critique, however, also carry affordances, entanglements, and traditions that can go beyond the scope of those who employ them. Thirdly, *critique affects*. It generates effects and fosters transformations in ways that are often anything but straightforward, and can include unforeseen side-effects and untidy dialectics.

To elaborate on this argument, in the first part of this chapter, we look back at how some long-standing academic understandings of critique have come under close scrutiny at the start of the new millennium, reflecting a shared sense of crisis and impasse across social movements within and outside the academy. In the second part, we then focus on two different responses to this crisis of critique which can both be understood as a "critique of critique": the sociology

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of critique, and the cultural studies-oriented field of affect studies. In the third part, we build on these two kinds of "critique of critique" to conceptualize the three different dimensions of what we call *affects of critique*, which include social and cultural forms of negotiations, conflicts, and transformations. We end our contribution in part four, by highlighting how the study of *affects of critique* can be further developed through a renewed theoretical attention toward questions of form, including formats, formulations, and infrastructures.[1]

Critique and Its Discontents

In the context of the European Enlightenment and Romanticism, particularly within the philosophy of German Idealism as developed by Immanuel Kant and Georg W. F. Hegel, the concept of critique became central to transcendental philosophy, moral philosophy, and aesthetics (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*). In the 19th century, Karl Marx further politicized and historized the concept of critique (*Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*, *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*). This endeavor was extended into the 20th century by thinkers such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, who sought to emancipate society with their project of a "critical theory of society" (Horkheimer, 1937). Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu developed a sociological critique of society based on an analysis of the hidden mechanisms underlying the ordinary judgments of taste (Bourdieu, 1984). Furthermore, in the late 1960s, post-structuralist approaches to critique questioned the very notion of reason and the (dialectical) truth-claims that characterized the Kantian and Hegelian traditions. Instead, post-structuralism understood critique as a deconstructive or genealogical practice that challenges the very foundations of systems of thought and social categorizations, such as gender and race (Derrida, 1976; Foucault, 1984; Gilroy, 1993; Butler, 2002). While the task of critique in these traditions of thought differs considerably, they share a common commitment to using theory as a way to intervene in practices of domination.

This endeavor of critique had always thrived on its controversial nature. However, beginning in the 1990s and intensifying in the early 2000s, a growing sense of crisis with regard to both academic and societal critique became one of the shared pivotal points of debate in philosophy, sociology, and literary studies (Anker & Felski, 2017; Jaeggi & Wesche, 2009). These diagnoses of a "crisis of critique" generally followed a twofold trajectory. On the one hand, they reflected on the persistent and increasingly complex character of (post-)modernity's inequalities. These include the emergence of neoliberal, post-Fordist capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999/2018), the growing influence of cognitive and neurosciences (Massumi, 1995), the (neo-)liberal appropriation of feminist and queer politics (Fraser, 2009; Sedgwick, 1997), colonial continuities (Spivak, 1988), and the ecological crisis (Latour, 2004). On the other hand, these diagnoses also asserted that some practices of critique developed in the previous decades had become entangled in the very social transformations they set out to oppose—including certain New Left (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999/2018), feminist (Fraser, 2009), queer (Sedgwick, 1997), or deconstructive (Latour, 2004; Massumi, 1995) modes of critique. In this respect, the crisis of critique questions the capacity of institutionalized academic critique to adequately grasp these on-going transformations and to provide a critical analysis of the present.

This discontent with the state of critique led to new questions: had academic critique become, on the one hand, incapable of intervening in social realities—failing both to grasp

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and challenge the shifting configurations of power that would render such intervention possible? Or had critique, on the other hand, been too self-assured in its preoccupation with theory, and blind to the practical realities of violence and oppression? Proclaiming critique to be in crisis, thus, combined a polemical assessment of institutionalized forms of critique with an urge to *renew critique*, both within the academy and in social movements and infrastructures. The latter part is worth emphasizing, in our view. Diagnosing the crisis of critique should not be understood as a gesture of obliteration, polemical historicization, or abandonment of the critical project altogether. Rather, these diagnoses of a crisis of critique inspired theoretical responses which widened the scope of social analysis and scrutinized the epistemological underpinnings of critique as a scholarly practice within the humanities and social sciences. Eve Sedgwick's reassessment of critical modes of reading remains an instructive example of this effort to renew practices of critique in queer and feminist studies, in order to stay alert to current social dynamics (Sedgwick, 1997). In this context, we understand the development of both the sociology of critique and the field of affect studies as two distinct responses to the crisis of critique (Diefenbach et al., 2023). Both approaches set out to revise and pluralize our understanding of critical resources. Whereas the sociology of critique emphasizes the role of actors in their everyday lives and especially outside research institutions (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), affect studies thoroughly worked toward renewing critique by recovering the sensual and affective dimensions of the public (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Latour, 2005).

Affect Studies

Affect studies combine heterogeneous theoretical strands emerging from poststructuralism and (queer-feminist) cultural studies, conceptualizing affect not as fixed discursive form or psychological state, but as bodily dynamics of affecting and being affected. Similar to science and technology studies and new materialist theory, this understanding of affective dynamics includes non-human bodies as well as non-animate ones: what a body can do, and what its limits and its forms can be, should be understood as an open question. This emphasis on the openness and dynamics of the social decidedly renounces forms of critique that seek to *expose* ideological distortions and hidden power structures in order to *explain* the present conjuncture. Relying on such a powerful explanatory model, be it a Bourdieusian "field" or a Foucauldian "order of discourse," to name just two, proves to be ill-equipped in the face of increasingly flexible cultural-industrial apparatuses and rapid social change. "[T]heories of signification" (Massumi, 1995, p. 88) and the "methodological centrality of suspicion to current critical practice" (Sedgwick, 1997, p. 5) make it hard to attend to the unsemanticized, sensory intensities of the neoliberal present. Brian Massumi even argued that "affect is unqualified. As such, it is not ownable or recognizable and thus resistant to critique" (Massumi, 1995, p. 88). Note, however, that Massumi and others took issue with critique because they saw it as predominantly based on language and practices of explanation.

Over the course of the debate, this reassessment of the role of language for theory still grants language a crucial role, but not an all-dominant one. With this more nuanced turn toward inter-bodily dynamics, affect theory most notably intervened in discussions on the public sphere. Grief, euphoria, or depression, for example, should not be taken as individual responses to social structures or transformations, firmly belonging to the private sphere or the internal world of subjects. Instead, they must be analyzed as "public feelings"

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(Cvetkovich, 2007) that constitute subjectivity and sensibility in their own right. Public feelings of grief, in particular, delineate the objects of compassion and the subjects of suffering (Berlant, 2004; Butler, 2009). Feminist and queer cultural studies have insisted that, in conceptualizing affect, we must reconsider the public beyond the model of affect-free deliberation and scrutinize how affective dynamics are themselves situated within contested social and political contexts. In so doing, they have brought to the fore an understanding of the relational character of affect which decidedly takes as its starting point a contested public "outside" (Haase et al., 2005; Inan, 2020), as the "in-between" of affect's unfolding, and thus implies a constitutive publicness of affect itself (Kasmani et al., 2022).

Sociology of Critique

The field of affect studies highlights the multitude of transitions between discursively coded emotions and unqualifed feelings. At the same time, the transformations of critique as a social phenomenon—including its waning or absence—have themselves become an object of study in the social sciences and social philosophy. Approaching critique sociologically, according to Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, requires considering the critical capacities of *all* actors, and understanding social order as meaning-open and permanently questionable (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). According to the sociology of critique, social coordination cannot be maintained by coercion, repression, or economic calculation in the long run, but must instead be justified through publicly recognizable norms and values. The plurality of norms in a lifeworld is what allows us to invoke standards in everyday situations and use them as justifications for critique. This approach is decidedly bottom-up and pluralistic because, in principle, all actors can engage in critique. Likewise, the forms of justification are not fixed: established orders of justification can erode or eventually vanish, and new ones can be institutionalized. Critique and justification, the sociology of critique maintains, are a relational business in two ways. First, both engage bodies and voices in disputes, invoking and assembling a public on a small or large scale. Second, within that everyday practice, critique also projects a relational framework of society at large.

It is from such "critical situations" and their efforts of coordination that the sociology of critique derives a powerful theory of social change. Everyday forms of critique are embedded in larger "orders of justification" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). These forms of critique can thus institutionalize new societal lines of conflict and new orders of justification in the long run (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999/2018). This sociological approach to critique is brought forward—in a way similar to affect studies itself—as a renewal of the scholarly understanding of critique. Sociological approaches to critique have sought to relativize epistemic hierarchies that elevate sociology to a privileged place for emancipatory social critique, granting actors themselves too little agency. Therefore, rather than trying "to unveil what is hidden under false appearances" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, p. 345), the sociology of critique seeks to take the actors' own critique seriously.

With new authoritarianisms taking hold worldwide, the crisis of critique seems to be far from over, and has even become more acute. This makes it all the more important to understand how critique arises as well as how it is prevented, how it appears in very different ways, and how it is negotiated and processed by social forces. In what follows, we would therefore like to emphasize the productive side of the academic crisis of critique and show how combining affect studies and the sociology of critique opens up conceptual perspectives

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and tools to study how critique socially unfolds through affects. We introduce and offer examples for the three dimensions of *affects of critique* that we consider pivotal to studying critique empirically.

Affects of Critique

The first dimension of *affects of critique* concerns the question of why and when critique emerges. We argue that *critique emerges from affect*, since affective intensities are transformed into an articulation of critique. In other words, critique is mobilized by affects. These affects include feelings of injustice and indignation, but may also entail affects such as shame, compassion, or resentment. In this sense, critique is a response to a certain state of the world: it takes issue with acts and actions as well as arrangements and structures that are perceived to be inadequate, unjust, wrong, problematic. Critique can respond to situations that are lacking in something or are overpowering, too dissonant or too consonant, to name just a few possibilities of its relational scope. Indignation, feelings of injustice, or simply of "wrongness" are therefore especially likely to trigger critique. While we focus here on social critique broadly construed, it is important to note that affects of critique, as a heuristic, can also include other forms of critique. For instance, it might serve to study forms of critique that engage with the value of works of art or literature, without necessarily linking them directly to social structures and without necessarily involving feelings of (in-)justice in a straightforward way.

The feelings that affect social critique may arise from violated values that regulate a social relationship between persons or groups. The word indignation describes this dissonant affective dynamic: the subject experiences some kind of suffering because something worthy ("dignus") is not recognized ("in-") according to its worth (Honneth, 1994/2018). This could occur on the symbolic level, as with a group identity, or with an object that is being devalued. However, the German "Empörung," or indignation, further indicates that the affects of critique cannot be reduced to degradation or devaluation alone (Diefenbach, 2024; Bens et al., 2020). There are also affectively mobilizing upheavals such as anger, rage, or resentment directed at the perpetrators of violence and oppression, and which often entail a desire for empowerment and for restoring the dignity of the violated good (→ *Outrage Politics*). The subject can feel these various affective movements physically and at the level of lived experience. This is why indignation often manifests as pain, powerlessness, agitation, or anger, as well as a trembling body, or a bodily urge to move and act.

However, these dynamics of degradation and empowerment may be blocked or hindered in their full development, and this hindrance is also essential for understanding the absence of critique. There can be various reasons for such an absence of critique, of course. For instance, resources that might have led to an experience of injustice may be lacking, or moral dilemmas and reinterpretations might occur. The actor then experiences other affective, mostly less empowering or individualizing states, such as resentment, shame, ignorance, disillusionment, apathy, or depression. Concepts such as the early Marx's notion of "alienation," late Freud's "civilization and its discontents," the "pathologies of modernity" described by the Frankfurt School, or recent diagnoses of "burnout, fatigue, exhaustion" (Neckel et al., 2017) pertain to affective states that block the transformation of suffering into critique. The affects that trigger critique depend on socially shared cultural meanings and norms and need time to unfold collectively and to become institutionalized. Critiques of

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patriarchy and unequal gender rights, for instance, were and still are predicated on a laborious collective process of reinterpretation, sometimes including very intimate and private experiences of worthlessness and inferiority under male or heteronormative oppression. Practices of consciousness-raising, for instance, are one example of a collective practice that reflects upon and makes use of the fact that critique is affected (Hilger, 2023). Those practices set out to transform individual suffering, including self-inflicted variants, into a collective sense of injustice and a public vocabulary of feminist critique.

Accordingly, the social articulation of critique itself is highly contingent on affective, bodily, and sensual phenomena. These *affective forms and practices of critique* are the second dimension of *affects of critique*. They include language, voice, posture, and stance, which themselves rely on relational support (Butler, 2015), as well as on the material infrastructures of publics, such as the topographies where protests assemble, the technologies of print, and, more recently, the affordances of digital formats (→ *Infrastructures of Feeling*; Fleig & Scheve, 2019). These material conditions of critique are not affect-free. On the contrary, they form affective arrangements that enable, support, and shape the articulation of critique. They often do so below the threshold of content, meaning, and well-defined emotion. It is helpful to think of the public and embodied infrastructures of critique as affective arrangements. Doing so helps us better analyze the dynamics of critique as well as their inhibition. For an affective arrangement to be "on" (Slaby et al., 2019), that is for critique to "take off" or "catch on" publicly, it is not enough to rely on the rational force of arguments. What is more, a heterogeneous assemblage of practices, places, objects, and bodies needs to be able to produce and convey a sense of urgency and possibility (*Möglichkeitssinn*). Authoritarian administrations have understood well what this entails: in order to counter and silence critique, it is effective to employ a range of strategies to dismantle these affective arrangements. This is the case, for instance, when parks and public places of protest are transformed into highly surveilled consumer areas (Ayata & Harders, 2023).

The topographies, infrastructures, and formats of critique cannot be separated from its meaning and content; they are poorly understood if one sees in them *merely* contingent preconditions, packaging, or design. Rather than doubling the affect/ratio dichotomy with a form/content one, we understand both to be part of the arrangement of critique. We do not suggest collapsing form into content or affect into ratio altogether either, but rather shifting some of the weight within the study of critique toward affect and form. Not least, this allows us to better understand and take into account the dissident voices of critique. Writers such as Elfriede Jelinek and Libuše Moníková, for example, brought forward fierce polemics against consciousness-raising and the prevalence of the autobiographical perspective in the 1970s and 1980s, using both satirical and essayistic literary forms (Lux, 2022; Vukadinović, 2019). As they emphasized, literary critique would be too narrowly understood—and in their view ultimately wrong-headed—if matters of form were dismissed. Both critique and literature are highly misunderstood when they are taken to be simple expressions of feeling. By the same token, these articulations of feminist dissent *within* a movement of critique should not be "counted out" (Ahmed, 2000) of the study of critique, but instead regarded as a transformative part of the conflictual history of feminist critique and its public.

This brings us to the third dimension of *affects of critique*, which is assessing how *critique affects* in a broader and long(er) term perspective. To elucidate the historical transformations of critique, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) introduced the concept of orders of

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justification (Fr. *cités de justification*). According to them, practices of arguing and disputing are always linked to orders of justification and their historical constellations. Actors orient themselves around these *cités* and navigate between them in order to question a situation, to reach a compromise or to appease critique. While Boltanski and Thévenot originally refer to a total of six "common worlds" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, pp. 159–211) of justification (*the inspired world, the domestic world, the world of fame, the civic world, the market world, the industrial world*), one of the strengths of their approach is that it also helps analyze the emergence of new forms of critique. A paradigmatic example of this is the shift from traditional forms of social critique, based in the civic world and the industrial world, to a so-called artistic critique, as described by Boltanski and Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. In our view, and contrary to the widespread reception of their study within the artistic field itself, their observations have less to do with a deliberate appropriation or imitation of alternative and artistic ways of living and working by neoliberal actors and organizations. Rather, the changes in contemporary capitalism are to be understood as a structural transformation that shapes the economic field and art institutions in equal measure, such that both fields come to mutually influence each other.

The temporal dimension of affects of critique does not only relate to situational dynamics, such as immediate emotional reactions or phenomena of collective contagion. It also refers to longer-term constellations and questions of historical context that govern the social legitimacy of certain forms of critique and make other forms of critique appear inappropriate, "too" emotional or "too" intellectual. The racist stereotype of the "angry Black woman," for instance, goes back to the time of slavery. At the same time, it is still being used today to silence criticism articulated by Black women and to label them as aggressive and impertinent (Cooper, 2018). However, this historical framework also opens up the possibility to re-appropriate and re-interpret the stereotype from a Black feminist perspective: rather than reducing anger and rage to what is deemed an "acceptable level" by a White public, such negative emotions can also become the basis for counterhegemonic emotional orders and forms of critique. These counterhegemonic emotions contradict dominant narratives and values on a cognitive and conceptual level, as well as in aesthetic and sensual-affective ways (Ahmed, 2021).

Outlook: Questions of Form

Affect studies and the sociology of critique have both established themselves interdisciplinarily. Despite their similar diagnosis of a "crisis of critique" they have rarely been discussed together (Zink, 2023). In this chapter, we have brought these two fields of research into dialogue and proposed to conceptualize *affects of critique* as a heuristic for generating research questions and investigating negotiations, conflicts, and social transformations. The three suggested dimensions also invite academic critique itself to reflect upon its own affective dynamics of positionality, knowledge production, and communication. Together, this can yield new interpretations for today's widespread diagnoses regarding a crisis of the culture of debate or an emotional overheating of the public sphere. Our perspective on the affects of critique thus turns against seeing emotions and affects as mere characteristics of the "political other." Furthermore, it turns against reducing critique to a singular form of rationality. Rather, we draw attention to the different styles, forms, and formats of critique, and their specific dynamics. Only by closely examining their affective dynamics can

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the transformations of the public sphere be qualitatively differentiated, thus enabling the contours of new forms of critique to also become recognizable.

Such a perspective calls for pluralizing the rationales of critique or, as Boltanski and Thévenot put it, critique's respective "orders of justification." Moreover, from our point of view, both the sociology of critique and affect studies suggest taking seriously the questions of form, style, and format when it comes to the emergence and transformations of critique. In this context, the category of form serves as a concept in social theory and sociology on the one hand, and in aesthetics on the other. These two usages most notably intersect in the Marxist tradition where, building on Marx's reflections on the commodity form (see also Lehmann et al., 2019) and Georg Lukács's work on the historicity of aesthetic forms (Lukács, 1971), the category of form has played a crucial role in numerous (post-)Marxist approaches to literary theory and cultural studies (Jameson, 1971; Eiden-Offe, 2019). Likewise, a *sociology of forms* (Simmel, 1908) can provide insights into the different modes of association that are brought forward by conflict and critique. The relationality of critique, in other words, can be understood as being molded and shaped by the forms which the practitioners of critique engage with and put to use. Paying attention to these uses of form can widen the scope of the sociology of critique beyond its focus on rational discourse. It can deepen our understanding of long-term social transformations and movements, helping us trace how they are themselves shaped and bound together by conflicts about the form, format, and style of critique. Investigating the different forms and formats of critique therefore does not mean prioritizing the well-rehearsed and traditional repertoires of literary criticism. Instead, it highlights marginal or "minor" categories and their collective value (Ngai, 2012). This implies a pragmatic understanding of form, one that encompasses concepts of style, genre, and format, and is critical of the legacy of "top-down" thinking about form in aesthetic traditions (Levine, 2015). Rather than opposing form and content, much like the opposition of thinking and feeling, turning toward questions of form should not mean bestowing form with an epistemological privilege. On the contrary, new attention toward matters of form can work together with more recent critiques against the presumption of the "universality of affect as a mode of intersubjective relationality" (Palmer, 2017, p. 33). Neither form nor affect should be understood as some kind of pure social relationality, free of historical contexts. Histories of violence, and histories of critique itself, have deeply shaped how affective relationality is organized, not least by inventing, putting to use, and institutionalizing forms and formats.

To understand forms of violence and oppression in their full weight and specificity, we should avoid overly "metaphysicalizing" them, that is to say, explaining them away by gesturing toward an overarching or underlying principle. The explanatory force of critique in the humanities and social sciences, therefore, must be kept in check by paying urgent attention to the experiences of oppression and violence inherent to particular forms and practices of critique, such as the aggressive, antagonistic, and degrading dimensions of certain kinds of humor and satire (Roth, 2023). Likewise, in studying forms of critique we should not hastily "materialize" them either, or take them to be the necessary expression of suffering. It is instead to the messy, thorny interstices between these poles that the study of critique should devote its work. The three dimensions of critique's affective life that we have suggested as a heuristic in this chapter can shed light on the dynamics of critique and their historical transformations, as well as their forms, formats, and styles. It is precisely because of their polyvocality and polymorphism that histories of critique are an ever more essential resource for contending with our present.

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Note

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24

AFFECTIVE STASIS

Fabian Bernhardt

This chapter explores the concept of "affective stasis"—a theoretical tool to grasp the paradoxical connection between motion and immobility in affective states. The starting point is the observation that affective experiences are not always characterized by dynamic intensity. Instead, there are social and political constellations in which feelings appear blocked, frozen, or stuck—states in which neither affective release nor transformation occurs. Although affect theory in its critical strand is paying more and more attention to such negative states (→ *Unfeeling*), they still remain conceptually underdeveloped. The chapter therefore proposes affective stasis as a key concept for systematically analyzing such phenomena.

I started developing the concept of affective stasis as a way to capture how affect not only fuels change and transformation but also inhibits it (Bernhardt, 2021; Bernhardt & Slaby, 2023). While affect is often theorized in terms of movement, intensity, or transformation, I argue that certain affective states are marked by stagnation, blockage, or paralysis. Affective stasis thus refers to a lack of affective plasticity, that is, the diminished capacity of individuals or collectives to adapt, modulate, or reconfigure their emotional responses in relation to changing contexts. It signals the collapse of affective responsiveness and flexibility, often as a consequence of systemic pressures or structural constraints. To conceptualize this dual nature of affect, I rework the ancient Greek notion of stasis—a term that historically connotes both political upheaval and immobility—from a perspective that incorporates social philosophy, political phenomenology, and critical theory. In classical Greek political thought, stasis refers to internal conflict, a condition in which the political body of the polis turns against itself. This dual meaning of stasis—as a moment of heightened tension and of paralysis—serves as a productive model for understanding affective phenomena that are characterized by the paradoxical simultaneity of emotional intensity and inertness. Such states are neither purely pathological nor merely passive. Rather, they function as indicators of deeper social, political, or psychological impasses.

The chapter argues that affective stasis reflects specific historical and structural conditions. It points to social and political constellations in which certain feelings and emotions cannot circulate but instead become stuck or immobilized. Analyzing these affective standstills provides valuable insights into contemporary phenomena such as political polarization,

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collective fatigue, or social exhaustion. Affective stasis is therefore not only a symptom of these conditions but also an analytical lens for examining the ways in which states of immobility can break open and turn into events of disruptive change. With this perspective, the present chapter contributes to an expanded affect-theoretical vocabulary. It moves beyond classical dynamic models of affect and engages with emerging approaches that take inactivity, latency, or suspension seriously as critical categories (→ *Haunting; Unfeeling*). The concept of affective stasis helps sharpen our understanding of the paradoxes within affective life—paradoxes that manifest across political, social, and individual domains, particularly where affective plasticity is compromised or lost.

Revisiting Ancient Greek Semantics: Stasis

To understand what stasis is about, it is helpful to jump back in history and start with the word's ancient semantics. In modern day English, the term "stasis" is most frequently used in the domain of medicine. In medical terminology, stasis basically refers to a "stagnation or stoppage of the circulation of any of the fluids of the body" (Oxford University Press, n.d.c) that normally—when the vital functions are running smoothly—are in motion. Not every form of immobility, thus, is to be understood as stasis. Stasis only entails the immobility of something that is *supposed* to be in constant motion. Depending on the type of bodily fluid, medicine distinguishes between different forms of stasis, such as hemostasis, or lymphatic stasis. Such congestions can be dangerous and pathogenic. Prolonged constipation, for example, can result in a gradual self-poisoning of the body. Outside the domain of medicine, the word stasis can also refer to a "state of motionless or unchanging equilibrium" (Oxford University Press, n.d.c)—although it is difficult to say whether this equilibrium represents an actual state of concord or rather reflects the resigned assertion that under certain conditions, "carrying on the same way as before is the best result to wish for" (Gopnik, 2021).

Compared to modern English, the semantic range of stasis in ancient Greek was much broader. Depending on the context, stasis (στάσις)—the plural being staseis (στάσεις)—could take on a wide array of meanings which branched out into an ever more finely differentiated semantic field. One of the standard school lexicons of ancient Greek, the so-called "Little Liddell," gives us a basic impression of this field:

> **στάσις**. . . a standing, the posture of standing. 2. a position, post, station: a point of the compass. . . 3. the state or condition in which a person is, Lat. status. II. a party, company: esp. a party formed for political purposes, a faction, party. 2. sedition, faction.
> *(Liddell & Scott, 1906)*

The most decisive lexicon of ancient Greek, the "Liddell-Scott-Jones," adds more details to the picture (Liddell et al., 1940). Under the primary definition "placing, setting," the lexicon references the act of erecting a statue, "standing stone, pillar," and "erection, building" in general. As sub-items of the meaning "standing still, stationariness" the lexicon lists "standing, stature," "rest," "constipation," and "sluggishness." The latter term indicates that stasis was not only used for the immobility of physical objects, but also for a form of immobility that is genuinely affective. There were numerous contexts in which the word was used to denote "the place in which one stands or should stand, position, posture, station." In navigation, for instance, stasis could mean the "position in relation to the

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compass," in rhetoric the "*position, opinion* of a philosopher," in sports it could refer to "a boxer's *position*," and in the realm of law to the "*position* taken up by a litigant" (emphasis in original). Outside these specific contexts, stasis could also generally mean the "state of affairs" or the "*position, state, condition* of a person . . .; esp. of moral, social, political *position*" (Liddell et al., 1940).

What holds all these different meanings together is the fact that they are all in one way or another related to the question of *where* a particular body stands and *how* this particular body is standing. Stasis, thus, can be conceived of both as a *positional* and a *postural* term. All its meanings in one sense or another refer to the position of a specific body within a specific setting or environment—no matter whether this is a courtroom, a boxing ring, a political assembly, or the social fabric as whole (stasis in the sense of "status"). This means that stasis is always about *situatedness* in a comprehensive sense, not only understood spatially, but also in a social, political, temporal, moral, or affective way.[1] Conceptualizing stasis as situatedness involves thinking through the ways position and posture, standing and stance, are interdependent. Think, for example, of boxers and litigators. In boxing, a southpaw is more likely to attack with their right arm, which means that, in their basic fighting position, certain actions and reactions are more preordained than others. The same holds true for the position taken up by a litigant in a courtroom. A defense lawyer who argues that their client is innocent is unlikely to pursue the strategy of claiming diminished culpability. In other words, where you stand and how you are standing has a structuring effect on your agential possibilities influencing which actions you will or will not perform. This comprehensive idea of situatedness is well captured in the English translation of stasis as "stand, standing, stance" (Kennedy, 2011, p. 98). In fact, the ancient Greek word "stasis" and the English words "standing" and "stance" etymologically share the same root (Frisk, 1960a, 1960b).

Stasis, however, is not only a positional and postural term, but also, and even in the first place, a *political* one. The political realm—that is, the material and imaginary space of the polis—was the field in which the notion of stasis became particularly relevant in the ancient world (Agamben, 2015; Börm, 2019; Gehrke, 1985; Hansen, 2004, 2006; Loraux, 1997; Ober, 2003). This becomes apparent when we consider its meaning as faction, sedition, discord, and dissent. For, contrary to their idealized image, the Greek poleis were by no means places of harmony and concord. On the contrary, there were frequent internal conflicts and fissions that threatened to destroy the unity of the polis from within. It was characteristic of these conflicts that two hostile groups were facing off, competing for political power (Börm, 2019, p. 13). In the thesaurus of ancient Greek politics, stasis referred not only to these factions, but also to the polarization and disintegration of the polis itself, as well as to the quarrels that arose from this division. Often, these conflicts grew extremely violent. Stasis became a word for uprising, revolution, and civil war. In the ancient world, such upheavals were widespread. According to Josiah Ober (2003), "stasis was a terror that perpetually stalked Greek political landscape" (p. 251). In the same vein, ancient historian Hans-Joachim Gehrke (1985) refers to stasis as an "essential phenomenon of Greek history" (p. 266). Taking the polis as central reference, the various meanings of stasis can be arranged into the following sequence:

> The word *stasis* actually means "stance"; but it underwent shifts of meaning as follows: (1) stance, (2) standpoint, (3) group of people with the same standpoint, (4) in the plural:

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> two or more groups with opposing standpoints, (5) the split between groups, and (6) civil war.
>
> *(Hansen, 2006, p. 125)*

It is important to note that there is a connection between the political meaning of stasis and its usage as a positional and postural term: the unwillingness to give up one's political standpoint—in other words, a certain form of *immobility*—was one of the reasons why conflicts within the polis frequently grew into violent civil wars.

In this section, I have delineated the semantic field of stasis in ancient Greek. But what exactly does *affective* stasis mean when we try to transpose this notion to the historical present? The ancient semantics alone do not amount to a proper concept. Accordingly, in the following section I will sketch out how to forge the semantic substance of the ancient term into a conceptual framework that helps us illuminate the hidden workings of affect in social and political situations of paralysis and stuckness.

Toward a Conceptual Framework: Affective Stasis

Affective stasis is neither a single emotion nor a distinct feeling. The concept rather denotes an extensive *affective condition* that can imply very different feelings, emotions, moods, and atmospheres. As a working definition, I propose to understand this condition as characterized by a significant *lack of affective plasticity*. Affective plasticity refers to the ability to affect and be affected in heterogeneous and ever new ways. This involves, among other things, the capacity to become affectively attuned to other people, to resonate affectively with different surroundings and to flexibly attend for different "affective arrangements" (Slaby, 2019). On a more basic level, affective plasticity refers to the fundamental capacity to become affectively engaged at all: a vital responsiveness, sensitivity, or porosity for all things affective in general.

Although such a marked lack of affective plasticity can be described in psychological terms, it is important to pay tribute to the semantic traces that connect the notion of stasis to the political sphere. Affective stasis is not a mere physical affliction that comes and goes according to organic or psychological causes. Rather, it has to be understood as resulting from broader social, political, and historical conditions. There are governmental technologies and institutional arrangements that, wittingly or unwittingly, produce affective stasis. Think, for example, of prisons, refugee camps, or detention centers.[2] The political production of affective stasis, however, can also come along in much more subtle forms that work without any visible form of coercion (for examples, see Bernhardt, 2021, pp. 18–31).

Conceptually, affective stasis is clamped between two opposite poles: *immobility* on the one side and *disruption* on the other. To get a basic sense of this polarity it can be helpful to recall the divergent meanings of stasis in the medical and the political spheres. These two uses mark the opposing directions that define the scope of what stasis can be: on the one hand, the congestion or stagnation of fluids within a single body (medicine); on the other, taking a stand, hardening of the frontlines, revolt and civil strife within a community composed of many individual bodies (politics). The shift from one pole to the other does not take place smoothly, in a gentle glide, but discontinuously. Between immobility and disruption there is a *critical threshold*. This threshold marks the tipping point, the delicate moment beyond which things can no longer just go on as they are and the "state of affairs"

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(which is also one ancient meaning of stasis) abruptly changes. This tipping point shifts the analytical attention to the question of why and how exactly a state of impasse tips over into its eruptive opposite. Before approaching this question, it might be helpful to gain a more thorough understanding of the polarity inherent to affective stasis.

Both poles come along with specific affective qualities. The general "feel" of the immobility pole can be described in terms of deprivation: a loss of intensity, vigor, or emotional fluency. This loss can prompt feelings of boredom, stagnation, languishing, and sluggishness. Sometimes, a lack of affective plasticity can also take the form of idle complacency or subcutaneous frustration. When tending to this pole, affective stasis acts passivating and stiffening. In this regard, affective stasis resembles the condition conceptualized by Frantz Fanon (1967) as "affective ankylosis" (p. 122). Like stasis, ankylosis is a word from ancient Greek. Nowadays, it is used as a medical term of art. In the domain of medicine, "ankylosis" refers to the stiffening of a joint or the coalescence of two bones (Oxford University Press, n.d.a). Both stasis and ankylosis thus refer to a condition in which something that is supposed to be moving—lymph, blood, the hinge of an elbow, a finger joint—loses its mobility. Fanon transposes the term from the organic to the psychological, in order to indicate an affliction that parallels the stiffening of joints in the affective and cognitive realms: a rigidification of psychological dispositions that gives rise to mechanical routines spanning perceptual, emotive, and judgmental capacities. Affective plasticity implies that a person's subjectivity is usually capable of expanding to accommodate new affective experiences and "emotion repertoires" (von Poser et al., 2019). In a state of ankylosis, however, it becomes fixated upon a small range of schematic responses, mechanically triggered by typical prompts, impervious to variation, and blind to contrary evidence. As Alia Al-Saji explains Fanon's use of the term, affective ankylosis refers especially to the immobility of racializing affect which "is not only frozen in its response but repetitive in its form" (Al-Saji, 2014, p. 141). Again, it is important to emphasize that this "stuck affectivity" (Blickstein, 2019, p. 158) does not simply arrive out of the blue. Affects of racialization are constituted by long-term sociogenetic processes—the "deep history" of colonial modernity itself.

The affective qualities connected to the other side, the pole of disruption, are more difficult to grasp since the feelings connected to it remain, for the most part, latent and blurry. Initially, much like an approaching storm, the coming disruption can only be presumed to occur, based on indirect hints such as subtle changes in the affective atmosphere. One feels that something is "in the air" without being able to pin it down precisely. These affective qualities lie not in the disruptive event itself, but rather in that which comes right before it: a sudden tension, a nervous twitch in the eye, an electric crackle, a fist closing. Phenomenologically, this state can be described in terms of a deadlocked tension, a charged condition perpetually at the verge of an outburst but usually stopping just short of an actual eruption.

Even if this affective state is experienced as an increase in intensity, it still results from a lack of affective plasticity. Think, for example, of a conflict between two groups that has been fermenting underground for a long time before eventually breaking open. In this case, the disruption is preceded by a constellation in which neither side is willing or able to move. The obduracy characteristic of hatred also points to a lack of affective plasticity. Although the immobility-pole and the disruption-pole come along with different affective qualities, they are, thus, equally instantiated by a loss of affective plasticity. Affective stasis encompasses both: the dull routine in which it feels like nothing is changing at all, and the sudden disruption in which all things seem about to be overthrown.[3]

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As I will now suggest, the polarity at the heart of affective stasis renders it particularly apt for capturing the entanglement of standstill and disruption at work in many crises, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

On Being Stuck: The COVID-19 Pandemic as Affective Stasis

It is remarkable how quickly the COVID-19 pandemic has disappeared from public attention. Like the experience of the pandemic itself, our memory of it appears somehow scattered and blurred. Maybe this blurriness—which might be conceived of as a form of unfeeling or derealization—is part of the affective aftermath of the pandemic crisis itself. The pandemic not only hit many societies as an unprecedented state of emergency, but also put forth a strange new kind of affective exhaustion.[4] Lockdowns, nocturnal curfews, and social contact restrictions were something most citizens in Central and Western Europe had never experienced before. Being forced to stay at home, diminish social interactions, and reduce the scale of their everyday mobility, many people experienced boredom, sluggishness, and existential immobility. While state-imposed pandemic policies changed rapidly, everyday life remained strangely unmoving. A sense of being stuck—as if not only social life, but time itself had come to a halt. The more the pandemic crisis came to establish itself as the "new normal" (Stodulka, 2024), the blurrier its affective contours became. The question "How are you?" for many was not easy to answer. The available emotional vocabulary seemed insufficient to describe this mushy state. One was drooping, but it was not enough to call it depression. One was weary, but not exhausted enough to let this weariness pass as chronic fatigue. No single term seemed apt to capture the core of this affective experience whose main characteristic seemed to be precisely that it felt like no experience at all. It wasn't fear, grief, or any other distinct emotion, but rather something like a general *affective climate*, a latent atmosphere, which only partially became manifest in clearly identifiable ways.

In an article published in *The New York Times* in April 2021, organizational psychologist Adam Grant made a proposition for how to describe this state: "There's a Name for the Blah You're Feeling: It's Called Languishing" (Grant, 2021). Already from the first lines of the article, it becomes clear that the "blah" Grant refers to is not an individual, idiosyncratic experience, but rather an affective condition widely shared:

> At first, I didn't recognize the symptoms that we all had in common. Friends mentioned that they were having trouble concentrating. Colleagues reported that even with vaccines on the horizon, they weren't excited about 2021. A family member was staying up late to watch "National Treasure" again even though she knows the movie by heart. And instead of bouncing out of bed at 6 a.m., I was lying there until 7, playing Words with Friends.
>
> It wasn't burnout—we still had energy. It wasn't depression—we didn't feel hopeless. We just felt somewhat joyless and aimless. It turns out there's a name for that: languishing.
>
> *(Grant, 2021)*

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "languishing" means

> to weaken, wither, or become faint; . . .[t]o live in an oppressive or dispiriting place, situation, or condition. . . . To fail to make progress; to be unsuccessful. . . . To droop

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> in spirits; to pine or brood . . . To waste away with longing for; to yearn (to do something). . . . Of an activity or emotion: to grow slack, lose vigour or intensity.
>
> *(Oxford University Press, n.d.b)*

The semantics of languishing capture important features of what it felt like to live under the conditions of a constantly elongating state of emergency. At the same time, however, Grant's proposal misses an important point: People were not only more tired, but also more *irritable* than usual. Inside homes, there was not only more drooping and brooding, but also more shouting, nagging, and domestic violence (Anderberg et al., 2021). The longer the pandemic lasted, the more one could sense an atmosphere of latent tension and aggression that was felt not only in public protests, but also in the texture of everyday life. Underneath the imposed calm, a mixture of more uncanny affects (→ Haunting) seemed to be accumulating.

Languishing, thus, only captures one side of the picture. It accounts for the low-intensity affects, the feeling of being stuck, but it fails to apprehend its more ill-tempered, high-intensity flipside. Of course, there was exhaustion, but, at the same time, there was also the looming inkling that at any moment things might explode. Sometimes, it felt as if there was nothing but a thin membrane between total ossification and incalculable upheaval. The conceptual framework of affective stasis highlights how both of these states—the feeling of being stuck on the one hand, and the feeling that this putative tranquility is nothing but the calm before a storm, on the other—are, in fact, intricately related to one another. While it is true that the pandemic compelled many to unlearn old habits, it is also true that the new routines that were developed instead very soon became stifling and sour. For many people, domestic space under lockdown turned into a space of confinement. Being confined to the same rooms, following the same routines day after day, bereft of new experiences, and contingent social encounters (see also Alloa, 2020) amounted to the feeling of being stuck both in space and time. With the repeated imposition of similar restrictions, there came not only the sense of exhaustion and powerlessness, but also latent feelings of aggression and frustration. On the political and social level, the virus unleashed new fissions while, at the same time, intensifying those that were already present. Increasingly, news images of overcrowded intensive care units were joined by images of collective protests by antivaxxers and COVID denialists. As social life slowed down, political disintegration accelerated. Conceiving of the pandemic crisis as affective stasis means thinking of immobility and disruption as two sides of the same coin. In highlighting this two-sidedness, the conceptual framework of affective stasis helps us discern central features of affective experience during the pandemic that might otherwise slip under the radar of already nameable emotions and feelings.

Outlook

The notion of affective stasis complements the conceptual repertoire of affect and emotion research in ways that contribute to a better understanding of the delicate interplay between immobility and change in different social and political settings. At the same time, it highlights the importance of relating the affective to the political, thus aligning with critical work in cultural theory, such as Lauren Berlant's account of "cruel optimism" (2011), Mark Fisher's outlook on "capitalist realism" (2009), Ann Cvetkovitch's observations of depression as a "public feeling" (2012), Jan Slaby's account of "structural apathy" (2023)

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in the face of the ecological crisis, or Sianne Ngai's chartings of "ugly feelings" (2005) that pervade the everyday in late capitalist societies.

The value of a concept is measured not so much by the extent to which it is able to provide answers to already existing questions, but rather by the extent to which it is able to create analytical angles from which *new* questions can be asked. From this it follows that deploying the conceptual framework of affective stasis can only be productive if it is combined with detailed analysis of the particular socio-political formation in question. It does not replace empirical research, but, at best, informs and guides it. Further fields of research in which the concept might be beneficially brought to work include, for example, the "politics of stasis" in institutional settings such as prisons, refugee homes, and detention centers; situations of political deadlock; dysfunctional family relations; or negative affective states that emerge within work-related environments (see Finkelman Sánchez, 2024). While the concept remains open to refinement, it may offer a useful perspective for analyzing the less visible, often ambivalent, affective undercurrents of contemporary life.

Notes

1 This comprehensive notion of situatedness partly overlaps with Jan Slaby's proposition to conceptualize affect as "radical situatedness" (Slaby, 2017).
2 For an excellent account of affective life under the conditions of confinement see Guenther (2013).
3 The latter is also the reason why affective stasis ought not be confounded with clinical depression. While it is true that both affective stasis and depression come along with a felt immobility and "vital inhibition" (von Gebsattel, 1954, p. 138), depression is not necessarily related to a sense of impending disruption.
4 For a more comprehensive and nuanced account of the pandemic from the perspective of political phenomenology see Bernhardt & Slaby (2023).

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25

UNFEELING

Henrike Kohpeiß

Despite the latest forecasts from the EU climate service Copernicus on the impacts of global warming, public mood in Europe remains surprisingly subdued. After decades of increasingly dire reports on the effects of global warming, the latest report leaves no doubt that Europe is facing calamitous consequences: in fact, Europe is warming at twice the global average, and is expected to be one of the regions hardest hit (C3S, 2025). Yet Europeans have thus far not seemed to consider themselves to be among the most affected. In light of the data, the alarmed tone of scientists and activists, as well as the growing frequency of extreme weather events, the apparent affective composure of societies experiencing these changes is growing increasingly unsettling. Such subdued responses raise questions about how people relate to these developments, and about these societies' affective conditioning more broadly.

Studying affect in society often involves turning to where it shows up most intensely. We can easily recognize outbursts of anger or despair, the euphoria of liberation, or expressions of grief. These powerful emotions tend to dominate our attention—often overshadowing quieter, less visible expressions of feeling. But those subtler moments, or even the absence of feeling in certain situations, are no less socially significant. Moreover, even when a situation *should* elicit a strong emotional response, prevailing patterns of shared affect can mute or erase that situation from lived experience. This discrepancy is particularly salient in the context of the global ecological crisis, whose severe consequences stand in stark contrast to the absence of a collective emotional response capable of driving large-scale action. By framing this discrepancy as a problem of *unfeeling*, this chapter argues that such a lack of feeling is not arbitrary, but socially produced and politically consequential.

Social power dynamics shape not only *who* gets to express their emotions and *how*, but also *toward what* particular emotions are directed (Whitney, 2018). These social dynamics guide affective attention toward certain events and objects and away from others. For instance, communities might primarily blame their suffering from a flood on inadequate insurance coverage, rather than seeing it as part of a broader crisis that must be addressed politically.

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Targeting the wrong objects with the right feelings is a key feature of unfeeling. At its core, the concept highlights the difficulty of aligning flawed realities with adequate affective responses to them. The concept assumes a meaningful relationship between how reality is perceived from a given social position and the kinds of feelings that arise from that perspective. Unfeeling is not the absence of feeling. Rather the concept highlights how feelings can be valid and legible expressions of what a subject perceives as right or wrong.

But feelings are molded by history, just like any other aspect of social life. They must therefore be understood as products of social and political power structures. Situated at the intersection of societal practices and individual attitudes, unfeeling accounts for the intense presence and puzzling absence of emotional responses to issues that should, by all accounts, provoke concern—natural disasters, food insecurity, racial injustice. The concept of unfeeling draws attention to those sites where feeling is hardly detectable, and offers an analytic of the forces that have rendered it so. More specifically, it illuminates how societies respond emotionally to the crises they face—and why and how those responses are often strikingly weaker than the magnitude of the crises would warrant. Ultimately, unfeeling provides a conceptual toolkit to help answer the question of why, under current conditions, the revolution is taking so long to arrive.

Unfeeling as Capacity

The collective evasion of feelings about realities as grave as the climate crisis merits explanation. Unfeeling refers to the emotional indifference, ignorance, and disregard that impact society to such a degree that they result in a deflection from troubling developments and multiple, often overlapping crises. When, for instance, repeated acts of disregard accumulate across interpersonal communication, media coverage, and political discourse, it becomes increasingly difficult to meaningfully address an issue that has been stripped of emotional and existential urgency. While the climate crisis is by no means the only such case, it is a particularly revealing one for analyzing unfeeling, as it brings together many of its structural markers: a lack of social engagement proportional to its severity; material consequences that, for many in the Global North, still feel abstract or distant; and the obfuscating role of capitalism in shaping how the crisis and its conditions are perceived and felt.

It is widely acknowledged, from a scientific perspective, that current political efforts to combat anthropogenic climate change are insufficient. Yet, a range of affective maneuvers in everyday life makes it possible to disregard this insufficiency, enabling the continuation of business as usual and gradually normalizing a broader social-affective disengagement from the issue. In this context of crisis—where the gap between what is being done and what would be necessary to do is already substantial—unfeeling further weakens the social forces pushing for political change, thereby reducing the likelihood of such change occurring. Analyzing social unfeeling, in its various forms, reveals how unfeeling allows people to remain affectively sheltered from crisis. This approach suggests to shift the focus from a passive hope for transformation toward a critical analysis of the mechanisms that actively suppress deeper engagement. How can societies navigate a crisis they have yet to address adequately together?

Social and political crises are usually *derealized*. Derealization occurs when those not directly affected by the crises experience them as emotionally and socially irrelevant—even

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when these crises occur right nearby. Members of the middle and upper classes, for instance, may remain largely unbothered by the racial violence and poverty that shapes the lives of their neighbors. Seen this way, unfeeling is not the result of an unwillingness to engage with crisis. Rather, it arises from a failure to situate that confrontation within a shared social context that is not limited to personal empathy. When individuals face the ecological crisis alone, the result is often a feeling of overwhelm and a paralyzing moral pressure to act on a problem they feel powerless to change (Sherrell, 2021). The response to an overwhelming sense of threat, marked by fear and paralysis, has been described and diagnosed by psychologists as *climate anxiety* (Thompson, 2021). Expanding this diagnosis to include unfeeling allows us to examine the broader social dynamics that emerge around this felt powerlessness, especially when it intersects with collective indifference. In this way, we can shift our understanding of unfeeling from an inevitable outcome of individual helplessness to a social capacity—a mechanism that enables societies to carry on undisturbed *despite* the crisis.

Unfeeling plays out in the space between social habits and individual attitudes. The collective disregard for the climate crisis is shaped by political culture and discourse, and it is sustained through individuals' ongoing participation in these dynamics. This interplay between a social habit of ignorance and the individual reinforcement of that habit lends unfeeling a certain durability. When mundane exchanges, institutional rhetoric, and daily routines rely on an implicit agreement not to address climate change, individuals often lack the power to meaningfully disrupt these collective dynamics. Attempts to break this silence—such as pointing out the environmental cost of disposable coffee cups or discussing extreme weather events—often fall flat. It is not uncommon for these efforts to be brushed aside as either overly moralistic or futile, framed as problems too entrenched to be addressed. As a result, many of the tools individuals use to break patterns of denial can be neutralized by collective unconcern.

Kari Mari Norgaard (2011) describes this kind of mechanism in her study of a Norwegian town, where climate change was socially ignored despite its visible effects. For individual concerns to gain traction, they need to be supported by what Shiloh Whitney (2023) calls "affective uptake"—the process through which affective interventions are recognized and carried forward in collective interactions, instead of being ignored or overtaken by other concerns. Uptake depends on the concerns being consciously or unconsciously shared by other members of the conversation. This is what makes unfeeling such a powerful barrier: it prevents the affective alignment needed for an issue to resonate.

One example of this struggle for uptake unfolded around Greta Thunberg's explicit challenge to the affective status quo in her statement: "I want you to panic." With these words, she did more than just articulate a call to care about the climate crisis. Her raw performance embodied the emotional rupture such a call demands. In her case, a large part of the climate movement aligned with her affective disposition (Mühlhoff, 2019). Yet political establishments sought to sabotage her intervention by belittling her as a person and downplaying the urgency of her message.

These examples show how unfeeling functions as a capacity to uphold given power structures by suppressing whatever threatens to disrupt them—delegitimizing such disruptions through collective affective dynamics. This function of unfeeling is less a question of intention than of vested interest. Those who live well under current conditions might be more tempted to undermine a determined look into the ecological future, hoping that they

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will continue to escape what is yet to come. What can or cannot be addressed in everyday conversation often aligns implicitly with such interests, making them difficult to challenge once these dynamics of unfeeling have been established.

The climate crisis is not simply being ignored. Rather, it is acknowledged in content but not in its impact on societies. Alenka Zupančič explains the psychological technique of "disavowal" as the ability to accept a fact while refusing to integrate it into one's reality—as if one were to wake up "so as to go on dreaming" (Zupančič, 2024, p. 9). Zupančič argues that this defensive mechanism creates a double reality. Unfeeling, in contrast to the psychoanalytic concepts of denial and disavowal (Delay, 2024, p. 10), is not a full turning away from reality, but an affective reframing of it—an affective juggling of what is perceived to be true, never allowing to really settle. Politicians, fossil capitalists, and others demonstratively *acknowledge* the climate crisis, only to then continue the very modes of extraction that have caused it. Social patterns of dealing with experience reinforce mental infrastructures that allow individuals to live with some distance from the realities of the ecological crisis. This distance enables the avoidance of both current and upcoming losses (Delay, 2024; Freud, 1920, 1957, p. 243), allowing life to proceed relatively untouched by the uncertainties that a deeper engagement with the crisis would provoke. In this way, unfeeling functions as a capacity to continue with business as usual, while avoiding the kinds of adaptation that might threaten profits or comfort.

Production of Emotion Repertoires

What are the specific material conditions under which unfeeling repertoires take shape? Unfeeling is not simply a set of individual cognitive mechanisms detached from the specifics of social life. Rather, it is a set of normalized affective social practices (Tzima & Slaby, 2024)—meaning deeply embedded patterns of perception, feeling, and interpretation that support dominant modes of individual behavior. More specifically, the history of racial capitalism can be read as one such mode of affective conditioning. It has given rise to subject formations and affective arrangements that shape and limit the possibilities for collective action (Ahmed, 2021; Berlant, 2007; Churcher et al., 2023; Slaby et al., 2019).

The organization of social life—through institutions, infrastructures, and labor relations—guides how individuals perceive and respond to crises. These conditions often suggest that crises must be passively endured on an individual level, rather than actively and collectively confronted. In other words, when subjects have come to organize their lives around the belief that their best option is to shield themselves and their immediate circles from the fallouts of political decisions—primarily through private property as a defensive asset (von Redecker, 2020)—it becomes easier to understand why an internationalist class struggle against fossil capitalism might not be the first response that comes to their minds when crisis beckons.

Jan Slaby proposes a taxonomy of three concepts to analyze the production of feeling repertoires under capitalist conditions: *structural apathy* (Slaby, 2023), *habits of affluence* (Slaby, 2024), and *surrogacy emotions* (Slaby, 2025). These concepts help clarify how disregard becomes normalized in affluent Western societies. The first two, in particular, offer a vocabulary for understanding some of the alienating emotional dynamics under globalized consumer capitalism that are especially conducive to the development of unfeeling.

Structural apathy is in effect when everyday interactions are sanitized of existentially or politically troubling topics, and social life is structured around avoidance. This dynamic

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aligns with what Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen (2021) call the imperial mode of living: a way of life—primarily, but not exclusively accessible to the middle- and upper-classes across different parts of the world—deeply embedded in global supply chains marked by violence, exploitation, and extraction that remain largely out of sight. So while the violent and oppressive origins of the commodities that saturate consumer society remain largely invisible, the products themselves come to elevate everyday life through comfort and convenience—that is, they are experienced as a positive affordance.

Automobility provides a telling example of how emotion repertoires and identities are shaped by consumption. The bolstered, insulated sensations of driving an SUV exceed the experience of driving; they shape desires and expectations that extend to other areas of life as well. This is not only a material problem in terms of the resources necessary to sustain such lifestyles, but also an affective one, as these habits cultivate expectations and imaginaries around routine consumer experiences and the infrastructures that make them possible.

Habits of affluence further describe how these consumption patterns become second nature: the immense resource consumption required to sustain these habits is rendered invisible, and the consequences go largely unquestioned (Slaby, 2024). Such habits are tightly bound to property relations, in a system where the means of production are owned by the few and labor power is sold by many. The many, faced with the logic of property as a source of power, often respond by accumulating property of their own. Acquiring land, vehicles, and even weapons becomes part of a defensive emotional repertoire that supports an individual's sense of security. These are habits of affluence that sustain comfort by unfeeling the social and ecological costs upon which that comfort is premised. Because the conflation of property, power, and security is the bedrock of capitalist order, it is difficult for individuals to escape the affective attachment to private property. As Lauren Berlant (2011) argues, people are often tethered to objects that do not really serve them, and this undermines their capacity to notice and resist the high levels of alienation they endure. Even as ecological breakdown becomes more visible, these affective habits persist. Permeated by the ideological promises of a carbon-intense life (Carton & Malm, 2024; Daggett, 2018), habits of affluence do not invite reconsideration, but rather encourage consumers to double down—seeking even more comfort and security through consumption, rather than letting go of a path that, in the face of ecological breakdown, increasingly appears to be a dead end.

Structural apathy and habits of affluence highlight the social, political, and material underpinnings of feelings. They frame societal unfeeling not as a natural state of overwhelm, but as a specific outcome of economic and social conditions. The crises currently confronting Western societies are undoubtedly overwhelming—but what exactly subjects feel overwhelmed by, and how they respond to it, is never a given. Structural apathy refers to a template of feeling powerless under capitalist conditions that is held in place by the distracting comforts of habits of affluence.

Affectability and the Raciality of Feeling

Unfeeling as a contemporary affective condition of the climate crisis is embedded in and reproduced through long-standing histories of violence. The climate crisis cannot be understood as an isolated phenomenon, for it unfolds in conjunction with interconnected ecological, economic, political, and social grievances that intensify and reinforce one another in the

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present. Consequently, the ecological crisis is deeply interwoven with structures of (neo-) colonial exploitation, racial violence, and relentless resource extraction.

To analyze the affective dimensions of these entanglements, Denise Ferreira da Silva (2009) proposes the notion of *affectability*, which describes unidirectional power relations characteristic of colonial modernity that render racialized lives perpetually exposed to violence. In her analysis of police violence against Black residents of Rio de Janeiro's favelas, da Silva shows how these precarious communities are discursively positioned as enemies of the state so as to legitimize state brutality and affectively normalize the use of excessive force. The spatial distinction between the criminalized favela and the supposedly civil city establishes an order of affectability—an order of violence in which entire zones are removed from the map of ethical relevance.

Unfeeling builds on this logic, resting on the exclusion of entire populations and geographies from the realm of affective and moral relevance. Affectability, in this sense, delineates two opposing subject positions: one aligned with the state, endowed with the right to self-defense, and the other reduced to a passive recipient of state power. As such, affectability is both a spatial and temporal condition. Racialized others are prevented from embodying a state of self-determination that is performed by white bourgeois subjects (Kohpeiß, 2023, 2024).

Bringing the concept of affectability into ecological thinking enables a deeper understanding of how environmental degradation is racially distributed and affectively disregarded. To speak of affectability is to tease out the more-than-human dimension of colonial violence and its effects. It is deployed across juridical, historical, and symbolic registers to continually reinforce the order of racial modernity in which land and people are rendered as resources to be controlled, extracted, and subsequently disposed of. Entire regions—often in places removed from the imperial centers—are turned into so-called *sacrifice zones*, rendered neglectable by dominant affective regimes.

These are places so ecologically damaged and socially neglected that they are deemed unfit for human life (Juskus, 2023). Yet, rendering something a sacrifice zone is far from neutral. It effectively imposes a conceptual death sentence on a given place, rendering the lives rooted there disposable. Landfills, islands threatened by rising sea levels, or mining areas confront nearby populations with immense daily challenges simply through their proximity. For the extractivist industries responsible for such long-term damage, the relationship to the land is mediated by a logic of ownership and the presumed immediate availability of natural resources (Bhandar, 2018; von Redecker, 2020). Indigenous and other critical scholarship from different parts of the world has pointed to the colonial historicity of such land relations (Arboleda, 2020; Germanaz et al., 2023; Hooley, 2024; Riofrancos, 2017), linking them to land grabbing and exploitation as crucial aspects of the kinds of primitive accumulation Marx identified as foundational to capitalism (Federici, 2004; Marx, 1990).

The simultaneous exploitation and lethal exhaustion of land and people has been addressed by scholars critical of the humanistic universalism implied in the term *Anthropocene*. Charles Mills (2001), for instance, draws attention to the historical parallels between Black people and trash to show how what today are referred to as sacrifice zones have long been weaponized against unwanted, impoverished, and predominantly Black populations (Opperman, 2024). Documented cases such as the abandonment of Black communities in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 or during the Flint water crisis in 2014 reveal a pattern consistent with "the embarrassing reality that for centuries in the United States,

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blacks themselves have been thought of as disposable, an excrescence in the body politic" (Mills, 2001, p. 74). Mills highlights both explicit and implicit maneuvers that conflate disaster-stricken communities with the disasters themselves, thereby justifying their neglect. When administrators and governments make no effort to preserve human life in the face of catastrophe, a sacrifice zone has been created. This is reinforced discursively by declaring entire areas "uninhabitable" to deflect governmental responsibility. Such reasoning implicitly justifies the premature death, as if those living in these zones were destined to perish regardless.

Colonial genocides often operate through environmental devastation, targeting human and non-human lives alike, when mass starvation or poisoned livestock are used as a strategy to exterminate Indigenous populations (Browne, 2024; Conley & de Waal, 2023; Koch, 2024). Throughout histories of conquest, the entanglement of land and people has been weaponized to make land accessible to colonizers. In such cases, destruction works as a means of property acquisition: the eradication of life lends telluric weight to the colonial fantasy of *terra nullius*, a land imagined as empty and ripe for the creation of a new world under a colonial order (Wynter, 1995, 2003).

The history of genocides and systemic neglect—along with their affective normalization—adds a deeper layer to the seemingly mundane dynamics of unfeeling in the present. Unfeeling is not merely a technique for avoiding discomfort or a newly revealed condition of coexistence; it functions as an affective mechanism that stabilizes an order strongly attuned to capital interests and the comforts they secure for Western societies. Seen through this lens, the climate crisis can no longer appear as a sudden disaster faced by a unified humanity. Rather, it must be recognized as a continuation of the very process of planetary appropriation that has long fueled colonial capitalist expansion (Karera, 2019; Opperman, 2019). Unfeeling is the affective infrastructure that sustains the ongoing "construction of illegible lives" (Tuana, 2019, p. 3). These are surplus populations who have endured the current crisis for centuries, and who have never been fully included in the category of "humanity," now purportedly in need of saving.

The attempts to unfeel the damage now unfolding around the planet requires increasingly sophisticated affective strategies. The racial capitalist order of violence that has long separated sheltered lives from exposed ones is beginning to erode. Scholarly analysis can only respond to these shifts by asking how their effects might be mitigated—and by offering a deeper understanding of the dynamics of unfeeling in order to undo them. From such a situatedness within the negative, it may become clearer that—even if dominant repertoires of societal unfeeling suggest otherwise—"it is neither paranoid nor poignant to struggle, it is simply necessary" (Nersessian, 2020, p. 8).

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PART VI
Perspectives

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26

AFFECT AS METHOD

Against the Numb View of Embodiment

Donovan O. Schaefer

Introduction: The Numb View

After the linguistic turn, the turn to embodiment. Growing frustration over the endless obsession with "discourse" and "social construction" and increased confidence in speaking with and about the material world led to a boom in attention to "bodies" over the course of the past half-century. But the turn to embodiment also opened new questions. What are bodies? What is the relationship between embodiment and subjectivity? How do bodies intersect with discourse? And how does the attention to embodiment increase the precision of what Michel Foucault has called the "analytics of power"—an approach that has often been associated with discourse?

Many basically constructionist approaches have this problem: they have made the physical shift, but they still tend to see bodies as inert repositories—receptacles that receive the sedimentation of habit or discipline—rather than as active, energetic, and complex circuits, as amalgamations of agency and passivity, innovation and inertia. "The body" of the turn to embodiment doesn't want or desire anything except inasmuch as it has been trained—passively—to want or desire. "The body" has no internal tension because it is defined by a single dimension of determination—discipline. "The body" has no contribution to make to sociality because it is frozen at the dead end of a one-way street—from power to bodies. And the body is either presented as the binary opposite of thought or presented as a passive extension of cognition.

The turn to embodiment is incomplete because it has left us with an essentially *numb* view of embodiment. The numb view of embodiment presents bodies as essentially passive because they are essentially feelingless. "The body" becomes an explanatory terminus: you get to do something cool and interesting by just observing how many things are *actually* embodied. But even though it physicalizes, it fails to offer resources for studying the dynamics of power embedded within the profoundly complex *field* of physicality. It opens a door but hesitates to step through, declining the analytic frame that can answer the newly illuminated tier of questions on the other side.

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This chapter argues that moving on from the numb view of embodiment requires a shift from an analytics of embodiment to an analytics of affect. Bringing affects to the surface makes it possible to inspect the modes by which history, culture, and sociality are not only received in the flesh but also remixed, rearranged, defied, distorted, and broken. Affects are the forces that make up embodied life; cognition and affect are related, just as affect and discourse are related. But affects also move beyond, beneath, and beside cognition and discourse. Without the vocabulary of affect—and specifically of the plural forms of affective experience that are the prima material of subjectivity—there's no comprehension of the complex dynamics of desire, disdain, hostility, frustration, and tension that define the experience of power. Attending to affect even allows us to refresh our encounter with philosophy by studying it in terms of the way it transacts with the felt dimension of subjectivity.

This chapter proceeds in two parts. First, it zooms in on the turn to embodiment by considering two of its phases: the complementary work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault in the 1970s, and the critique of Clifford Geertz's cultural anthropology by Talal Asad in the early 1980s. It then identifies how the consideration of affect was already latent in this turn to embodiment. In part two, the chapter considers a series of methodological disclosures offered by affect theory, developing the complex join of feeling, power, and language. Finally, it suggests a path forward for affect as method in philosophy, reframing philosophy not just as intellectual elaboration, but as a venue for the development of complex interweavings of concept and feeling.

From Embodiment to Affect

The Numb View of Embodiment

The contemporary interest in embodiment across the humanities and social sciences has many roots, but the contributions of a handful of French thinkers in the 1970s did much to direct the new lines of interest. I will here focus on two: Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, discussing how they serve as prelude to the debate between anthropologists Talal Asad and Clifford Geertz in the 1980s. This is the landscape on which the turn to feeling eventually springs up.

Michel Foucault is often taken to be a consummate thinker of "discourse," but this rests on a narrow focus on his earliest works, which were concerned with "the methods, limits, and themes proper to the history of ideas" (Foucault, 2002, p. 16; see Schaefer, 2024 for discussion). By the mid-1970s, Foucault's concerns had shifted away from the fixation on the politics of classification. His new fascination—the body—appeared at least as early as his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish*. Although Foucault, in this volume, maintained an interest in how frames of knowledge are formed, he shifted to a new focus on what he called the "microphysics of power"—a "set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies" (Foucault, 1977, p. 28).

Foucault became, unexpectedly, interested in what he called the "soul"—not a theological soul, but the dispositions of subjectivity as they were created through the activity of the body (Foucault, 1977, p. 30). *Discipline and Punish* steered attention to the physical, the corporeal, and the material. The prison, for instance, was not just an idea; it was a material apparatus that corralled subjects through the exertion of physical pressures. It was part of

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a lineage of methods of bodily transformation, what Foucault called *disciplines*, or "art[s] of the human body" (Foucault, 1977, p. 138). Shortly thereafter, Foucault deployed a new term of art for the conjunction of discourse, materiality, and bodies—the *dispositif* (see Schaefer, 2024).

On a parallel track, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu developed his own set of reflections on the need to study the "logic of practice" in understanding societies. Bourdieu devised the concept of "habitus" to name patterns of behavior fostered by different sectors of society. These patterns prompt actions undertaken by individuals that flow together to make up social life. Habitus is a matrix of embodied tendencies, a set of "principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). It names, for Bourdieu, a fluid—but durable—ensemble of actions and tendencies shaping our bodily comportment.

This attention to embodiment became the conceptual engine driving a major shift in the humanities and social sciences in the 1980s, emblematized (and arguably instigated) by Talal Asad's criticism of the "cultural anthropology" school typified by Clifford Geertz. Geertz drew on an anthropological tradition that saw all cultural systems as forms of thought. Geertz wrote that his concept of culture was "essentially a semiotic one"—culture as an accumulation of symbols arranged into webs of meaning (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). Religion, for instance, was a swathe of symbols within this web, pitched to "formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other" (Geertz, 1973, p. 90).

In the early 1980s, Asad (1983) drew on a perspective tinged by both Foucault and Bourdieu to push back on the framing of culture as a zone of strictly semiotic activity. Asad noted that Geertz's definition of religion, in particular, as a skein of mental figments was itself a result of developments within Western Christianity in the early modern period in Europe. This shift transformed the pre-modern picture of religion as a dynamic of bodies, practices, power, and thought into a pure stream of symbols and ideas—eventually canonized in the flattening of all religion to "belief" (Tylor, 1871). This is why, in Asad's words, "what appears to anthropologists today to be self-evident, namely that religion is essentially a matter of symbolic meanings linked to ideas of general order . . . is in fact a view that has a specific Christian history" (Asad, 1993, p. 42). Religion came to be about belief, "a set of propositions to which believers gave assent" (Asad, 1993, p. 41). Geertz, he contended, epitomized a strand of common sense that was in fact deeply parochial.

Asad's counterproposal was that meaning is never exclusively cognitive. Instead, what we think of as "religious" meaning is always enmeshed not only with *non*religious discourse, but with power, practice, and labor (Asad, 1993, p. 53). Although it deeply contradicts the conventional wisdom that we are, *au fond*, thinking beings, Asad argued that the current of cognition is actually determined by the condition of *the body* that bears it (Asad, 1993, p. 62). Physicality, rather than theological argument, was the engine of faith.[1] Bourdieu's criticism of Claude Lévi-Strauss—archduke of the linguistic turn—can be applied equally to Geertz: "Beneath its air of radical materialism," he wrote, "this philosophy of nature is a philosophy of mind which amounts to a form of idealism" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 41).

This turn to embodiment has become widespread in contemporary scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies*, one of the early works in the turn to embodiment in philosophy, calls for an attention to both embodied subjectivity

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and psychical corporeality: how "the social inscriptions of the surface of the body generate a psychical interiority—the movement from the outside in" (Grosz, 1994, p. 115). Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* advances the concept of *onto-epistemology* to describe the dynamic interaction between physicality and knowledge-production, proposing that "theorizing must be understood as an embodied practice, rather than a spectator sport of matching linguistic representations to preexisting things" (Barad, 2007, p. 54). Arseli Dokumaci proposes that James Gibson's concept of "affordances" offers vocabulary for "describ[ing] how actions are shaped by . . . emergent correlations between our bodies and the environment" as a way of understanding the embodied innovations of disabled people—and the "habitus of ableism" that constrains those bodily possibilities (Dokumaci, 2023, p. 17).

These works and others all offer valuable insights. But they also treat "embodiment" as a definitive explanatory terminus. The physical body's interactions with the world are an urgently needed supplement to questions about sociality, epistemology, and disability. But this shift toward the body, I argue, is incomplete: it risks missing something descriptively and analytically important if it fails to explore feeling. The vocabulary of feeling/affect/emotion adds a level of detail to research on embodiment that helps elaborate the specifics of how bodies relate to power, societies, and material environments.

Feeling, Embodiment, and the Numb View

What we might call the "numb view" of embodiment sees "the body" as an explanatory endpoint. In the numb view, the most interesting thing we can say is that something is "embodied," *ne plus ultra*. But how does the explanandum "it's embodied" help to chart variety or transformation? How does it map gradients of motivation and urgency—two bodies experiencing the *same* habitus differently, as violently necessary or as empty ceremony? Or anticipate the subtlety of everyday interactions, with their layers of negotiation and impact? How does it diagram experience—not as a private fortress, but as the nexus point by which the social and the bodily mutually constitute one another? To respond to these questions, we need to consider feeling.

Bourdieu, Foucault, and Asad give only scant attention to feeling per se. But many of their commentators *have* drawn out the relevance of their thought for theories of feeling. Foucault, for instance, has been one of the touchstone figures of affect theory. Although writing very little about affect himself, Foucault's concern with pleasure in his late *History of Sexuality* volumes linked the disciplinary techniques he explored in his earlier work with what he called the "intensification of the body" or "techniques for maximizing life" (Foucault, 1990, p. 123). Foucault's interest in making pleasure a central object of interest is, arguably, the corridor that allowed the uptake of his work in both queer theory and affect theory[2] (Foucault, 1990, p. 157). It is precisely by bringing feeling to the surface that a new analytics and a new mode of resistance to established regimes become possible.

Affect theory has also taken an interest in Bourdieu. Sociologist Deborah Gould, for instance, builds her project on the emotional contours of the ACT UP movement around a synthesis of affect theory and Bourdieu's "habitus" through her concept of "emotional habitus." She defines this as a group's ensemble of emotional dispositions—their "embodied, axiomatic inclinations toward certain feelings and ways of emoting" (Gould, 2009, p. 32). Emotional habitus adds the dimension of feeling to Bourdieu's numb view of embodiment.

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More than just a repository of "embodied" tendencies, habitus is activated and enfolded by emotion. Monique Scheer makes a parallel move, casting emotions themselves as forms of habitus, selectively nurtured and enhanced by different cultural locations while still drawing on an embodied foundation (Scheer, 2012, p. 199).

Asad's work, too, has been brought into conversations about affect. Charles Hirschkind, for instance, places Asad alongside affect theorists like William Connolly and Brian Massumi who attend to "the pervasive role of such nonreflexive registers in shaping thought and action" (Hirschkind, 2006, p. 31; Connolly, 1999; Massumi, 2002). Saba Mahmood's essay "Religious Reason and Secular Affect" runs along the same lines, considering how the secular, while presenting itself as the apogee of impassible reason, actually imports its own affective commitments (Mahmood, 2009; see also Johansen, 2020; Schaefer, 2022b). Mahmood's ethnographic study *The Politics of Piety*, although not phrased in terms of affect, follows Foucault in studying the "techniques of the self" as tools for "honing one's rational and emotional capacities so as to approximate the exemplary model of the pious self" by, for instance, using embodied actions to cultivate moods like shyness (Mahmood, 2005, pp. 31, 156). This is not just "embodiment" full stop. It's embodiment *in detail*—the concrete particulars of how bodies are shaped by habit and discipline, phrased in terms of feeling, illuminating complex tangles of power.

Affect theory, however, has its own version of the numb view. The tendency to define "affect" as essentially the "capacity to affect and be affected"—the circulation of material traces between entities in the world that are defined by their relationships rather than a pre-existing essence—can fall into the same trap. Lisa Blackman and Couze Venn write that affect draws analytic focus to "how bodies are always thoroughly entangled processes, and importantly defined by their capacities to affect and be affected" (Blackman & Venn, 2010, p. 9). Kyla Schuller calls this "impressibility discourse"—an analysis of bodies as both "emitting impressions and . . . absorbing impressions" (Schuller, 2018, p. 13). These framings of the question flatten affect theory into a way of attending to the accretions of physical properties in bodies. The bodies that are created are influenced by the world around them—an important pushback on certain versions of essentialism—but are still fundamentally *numb*.

In the wake of the affective turn, *experience*—the phenomenological register repudiated by the linguistic turn—is brought back to the scholar's table. But this time, rather than cloistered in the "private" domain, experience itself is revealed to be conditioned by history, culture, and power. Making affect into method requires recognition that the phenomenological—the experiential domain of embodied life—is itself the circuit that registers flows of power. In other words, experience is always political, in both directions. Power shapes what we experience, and power only works on us to the extent that we experience it. Affects make up the mosaic of this historically contingent domain. It is only by recognizing the body as a *feeling* body that the numb view of embodiment can be superseded and a more textured attention to the working of power opened up.

Affect as Method

The shift from the numb view to the analytics of affect comes along with a number of methodological consequences. Over the remainder of this chapter, I will consider three implications: the assertion of the inextricable relationship between feeling and power; reflections

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on the relationship between feeling and language that call for a rejection of the feeling/language and feeling/thinking binaries; and a reconsideration of the possibilities for applying affect and emotion to the study of philosophy itself.

Feeling Is Power

One of the primary challenges affect theory poses to the humanities—not to mention street-level common sense—is that it locates feelings, rather than words and thoughts, as central to subjectivity. For thinkers of the Enlightenment, to be human was, fundamentally, to be a reasoning, choosing being. So Kant wrote that "morality is based on the conception of the human being as one who is free but who also, just because of that, binds himself through his reason to unconditional laws" (Kant, 1998, p. 33). This conception of humans as, at root, *thinkers* about our situation is at the heart of liberal models of politics—from social contracts to rational choosers.

This is exactly where affect theory raises a challenge. Instead of seeing subjects as formed by the coalescence of thoughts, it views them as tangles of feeling. Rather than bodies directed by sovereign minds reasoning through every situation, it proposes that our actions are dictated by a complex canopy of feeling, enfolding thought, but not governed by it. As Jan Slaby puts it,

> situation-directed motivational pull is not accidental but essential to affective states. . . . [T]here is no distance between the apprehension of the importance of something and one's being motivated to act in accordance with this situational significance—to be emotional *is* to be pulled to act in the relevant ways.
>
> *(Slaby, 2012, p. 152, emphasis in original)*

What bodies think, what they do, where they go—all are byproducts of the pushes and pulls of affect running through us and linking us to the world. This works at the level of societies and of individual bodies: the social is not an abstract idea—arrived at through thought or reason—but a massive weave of imbricated feelings.

This means that many paradigms in the humanities can be seen as versions of the "linguistic fallacy": they assume that the operating system of human action is a stream of words, thoughts, or reasons (Schaefer, 2015). In the affect theory view, rather than a computer processing a stream of symbols, bodies are sensitive to an analog continuum of felt forces—pushes and pulls, not only from the world around us but also those unfurling within us, creating complex agonisms. This is where affect theory directly confronts the linguistic turn, epitomized in the claim that the humanities can only work if we understand everything humans do in terms of "language-like systems" (Smith, 2004, p. 207).

In the field of political theology, for instance, it is taken as given that contemporary political ideas are all fundamentally derived from theological constructs—that is, that they are sublimated *doctrines* that now define the horizon of political power (Gourgouris, 2013, p. xx). In some sectors of antiracist scholarship, racialization is assumed to be an entire conceptual operation: "the language of materiality and its division between life and nonlife, and its alignment with concepts of the human and inhuman, facilitated the divisions between subjects as humans and subjects priced as flesh (or inhuman matter)" (Yusoff, 2018,

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p. 9). Against this, affect theory contends that language, affect, and power (racialized or otherwise) form a single circuit. Commenting on the political success of Donald J. Trump, for instance, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes that white supremacism is about "delivering emotional goods" (Bonilla-Silva, 2019, p. 1780). Language and emotion are not separate; it is a syntactical mistake to say that linguistic procedures (like categorization) are the sole driving force of racialization.

Though trained as a psychologist, Silvan Tomkins, one of the background figures of affect theory, fits into this picture (Frank & Wilson, 2020). Tomkins defines his project as a "quest for primary motives." Everything we do, for Tomkins, is authorized by affect, which is "the bottom line for thought as well as perception and behavior" (Tomkins, 1981, p. 321). An action is precipitated by the force of feeling which defines the underlying architecture of our priorities. We're moved to act (or to withdraw, or to stay still) because something feels good (or important, or noble, or right—Tomkins is a subtle enough thinker to know that pleasure is only one of many motivational channels). Subtract the feeling and we lose the dimension of impetus. More complicated motivations—doing something that we *should* do even if we don't "like" it—are no different. They represent complicated tensions of felt priorities in which one outcome has prevailed over the other. Rather than just being embodied—in numb terms—the language of feeling lets us map out *how* bodies come to do what they do, think what they think, and want what they want.

Making feeling central to the creation of overlapping (and tensed) webs of power is a core move in affect theory. Sara Ahmed's work returns to this frequently. "Emotion," she writes, "is not what comes from the individual body, but is what holds or binds the social body together" (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 9). As Dominik Mattes, Omar Kasmani, Marion Acker, and Edda Heyken write, social belonging possesses an "affective measure . . . that includes its emotional, social, and moral registers" (Mattes, et al., 2019, p. 302). Liberal models of action see emotion as a byproduct of political activity. But for these thinkers of affect, feeling is the indispensable gravitational force that keeps bodies in formation or propels them apart. Both the individual and the social levels are determined by sedimentations of feeling.

Feeling devises not only the interior of a group, but—through the same mechanisms—the exterior. Tamar Blickstein (2019) notes that this attunement to racialized affect is already present in the mid-twentieth-century work of Frantz Fanon. Ahmed is acutely concerned with the way racialization happens, a process that she also understands as affective. So she writes that "what separates us from others also connects us to others" (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 25; see also Ahmed, 2004a). Through the chain of our felt encounters with other bodies, we come to affiliate with some and repudiate others. Sharon Patricia Holland, linking critical race theory and queer theory, goes further, suggesting that the racial dynamic of othering *is itself pleasurable* (Holland, 2012, p. 3). This rubs against the grain of other iterations of queer theory that see pleasure as always liberatory. The erotic is not "a means to undo difference," in this instance but "facilitate[s] its entrenchment"—which helps explain the powerful cementing force of racism (Holland, 2012, p. 59; see also Lorde, 1984; Muñoz, 2009, 2020). Numb views of racism as a set of bloodless intellectual errors are permanently perplexed by racism's capacity not only to hang on, but to rapidly mobilize in new political formations (Schaefer, 2020).

Deborah Gould's "emotional habitus" is an excellent focal point for studying the convergence of theories of affect/emotion, embodiment, and power. Emotional habitus, she

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writes, is not just a set of accumulated quirks; the habitus of the bodies making up a community shapes the political formations that constitute and emanate from those communities (Gould, 2009, p. 10). Patterns of acquiescence and obedience, of celebration and exhilaration, of resistance and outrage—all are products of the way political bodies feel. Feelings are active rather than passive in the construction of subjectivity, and therefore they're the elemental constituents of webs of power. The attention to feeling opens a deeper analytic incisiveness into what makes power tick.

Feeling and Language

With all this emphasis on the importance of the feeling body for understanding subjectivity, where does language fit in? Affect theorists inspired by the work of Gilles Deleuze sometimes lean in to a claim that language is fundamentally exterior to affect.[3] But as Jan Slaby and Rainer Mühlhoff write, this tendency in some "post-1990s affect studies" to aim at "a radical break with discourse- and language-based approaches" ultimately "fulfill[s] rather than counter[s] a key poststructuralist aspiration" (Slaby & Mühlhoff, 2019, p. 34). It reiterates the fundamental specialness of language as a human capacity unhinged from feeling bodies. This is why other affect theorists posit a dynamic relationship between affect and language. Ahmed, for instance, writes explicitly that "language works as a form of power in which emotions align some bodies with others, as well as stick different figures together, by the way they move us" (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 195). For scholars whose primary research materials are texts—documentary archives, ancient writings and inscriptions, literature and philosophy—taking feeling seriously means all these linguistic artifacts are, in fact, embodied. Language, from the perspective of theories of feeling, is a technology for circulating, amplifying, distributing, suppressing, and eliciting affect; it's fully integrated with all our other embodied productions rather than divided from it.

Historian of emotions William Reddy's theory of "emotives"—statements about how we feel—is helpful here. Emotives, for Reddy, have a multidimensional profile, entailing *descriptive*, *transformative*, and *exploratory* aspects. On the descriptive level, an emotive is an announcement about one's state. But on the relational level, Reddy notes, an emotive is almost always designed to change how someone is responding to a particular situation—whether the addressee or the speaker herself (Reddy, 2004, pp. 100–101). A declaration of feeling is potent, so that declaration is almost always underwritten by a transformative design. And an emotive is self-exploratory (and maybe self-altering): the act of announcing is also an act of testing, taking the temperature of our own murky emotional state—or trying to persuade ourselves of an emotional fiction (Reddy, 2004, p. 102).

What this anatomy of emotives tells us is that talking about feeling is powerful. It doesn't just describe; it also transforms the world, the audience, and the speaker themself. It does so not just by informing, but by altering the landscape of embodied feeling. Talking about feeling invokes, provokes, and convokes feeling. It changes the matrix of thought and action by altering its fundamental coordinates. And although Reddy focuses on emotives, it's clear that this goes for statements that are not *quite* explicit "I feel" statements, too—all the ways we induce and produce feeling through language. Word, action, sensation, and feeling are part of a single string figure for Reddy. Pull one end of the cat's cradle and the whole form changes.

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Still, history of emotions approaches tend to focus on feeling as it remains within the register of awareness, relying on an implicitly liberal set of axioms that privilege the sovereign self. By contrast, affect theory, as we've seen, views feelings as *making* the self, operating both above and below the threshold of awareness—with no loss either way. Even *within the realm of language*, this self-constitution is in play. Mel Y. Chen, for instance, adapts affect theory to the concept of "animacy hierarchies" derived from the field of linguistics. In Chen's writing, animacy hierarchies are a set of implicit rules that speakers use to tacitly rank-order different kinds of entities. We talk about an elk and a human in *grammatically* different ways, and these two are different from the mountain on which they both live. This becomes even more fine-grained as we talk about different humans (classed by race, sex, gender presentation) and different animals in different ways (Chen, 2012, p. 5). "Above all," Chen writes, "animacy is political, shaped by what or who counts as human, and what or who does not" (Chen, 2012, p. 30). This is an affective process *inside* the linguistic/cognitive process of racialization. Our grammar both shapes and is shaped by a way of *feeling* about the other entities around us. The political work of an animacy hierarchy is not so much an effect of language as the affective mortar of grammar itself. Language is defined by feeling in ways that we often aren't aware of.

A linguistic artifact under study—a speech or a codex, a poem or a pamphlet—is always the product of a feeling body, and so Anne Fleig calls for sensitive attention to "the bodily dimensions of literature that take shape in interactive dialogue within every single utterance" (Fleig, 2019, p. 184). Understanding the coalescence of feelings that led to that text is vital for understanding authorial intent. But intent is only one of the interesting questions we can ask about a text. It's just as important to ask how a text makes various readers—both the intended audience and all the other incidental audiences along the way—feel. Taking embodied feeling seriously doesn't lead us away from language; it reframes language as a remarkably powerful and precise technology for transforming the sphere of feeling, making it even more urgent that we take it seriously (Schaefer, 2022b).

Affect as Method for Reading Philosophy

Rather than seeing affect as separate from language—or even from rationality itself—this approach doubles down on a commitment to taking affect and cognition as inextricably related. Texts are not just word-machines; they're *also* tissues of feeling. Slaby and Mühlhoff call for "an account of language *as affect* . . ., or focus on the affectivity driving discursive practices," even a reckoning of affect "as part of the vital core of what was long considered its very opposite: thought itself" (Slaby & Mühlhoff, 2019, p. 34). Philosophy, often presenting itself as the purely intellectual expanding horizon of human knowledge, is reframed, through this prism, as a dynamic of ideas and feelings. Hence Birgitte Schepelern Johansen calls our attention to the "emotional invitations" of scenes of knowledge-transmission (Johansen, 2020, p. 200). An expanding body of literature affirms this correspondence (Felski, 2015; Johansen, 2020; Rosfort & Stanghellini, 2012; Schaefer, 2022b; Shusterman, 2012; Svendsen, 2012; Thagard, 2006). As René Rosfort and Giovanni Stanghellini write, "Wonder is the origin of philosophical and scientific knowledge" (Rosfort & Stanghellini, 2012, p. 405). In this view, the work of philosophy is only possible because its conceptual adventures are grounded in an originary emotional substrate.

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Affect as method, then, prompts us to ask how we can read philosophy not just as an architecture of ideas, but as a weather system of moods. How does philosophy make us feel? How do the feeling tones orchestrated by philosophers become the substance of why we pursue philosophy? And how do philosophical ideas become *more believable*—more cogent (Schaefer, 2022b)—because of their effectiveness at drawing feelings out of us? At the most basic level of asking this question, philosophy can be understood as the unfurling of emotions like curiosity or wonder. But there's also an avenue here to explore philosophy as an unfolding of *multiple* moods, multiple affective devices, moving bodies in multiple ways and to different ends.

By way of example, consider the discourse of human uniqueness in twentieth-century continental philosophy. In *The Fundamental Concept of Metaphysics*, Heidegger writes that "the animal is poor in world" while "the world of man is a rich one, greater in range, far more extensive in its penetrability . . . This is why we speak of man as world-forming" (Heidegger, 1983, p. 193). How does this idea feel? What does it feel like to position human beings as above nature, above animality, above biology itself? (Derrida, 2008, p. 144). The affirmation of human exceptionalism, I would suggest, is consistent with a mood of lurid smugness. It thrills us with a sense of ourselves as striding above life. It also, conveniently, forecloses the troubling moral status of our relentlessly violent behavior toward animals. It blesses us, in other words, with a particular kind of myopia, bringing our sense of superiority into the foreground, while blurring guilt and ambiguity. "Nothing," Jacques Derrida cautions us, "risks becoming more poisonous than an autobiography" (Derrida, 2008, p. 47).

In Heidegger's later work *The Principle of Reason*, he writes: "humans, in the concealed grounds of their essential being, first truly are when in their own way they are like the rose—without why" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 38). This illustrates Heidegger's point, in this late work, about the way different beings experience reason. But it is also an *evocation*—"mystical and poetic," as Heidegger himself acknowledges (Heidegger, 1996, p. 35). Splitting philosophy into its affective fibers prompts us to ask about the way philosophy uses a play of concepts and images to evoke moods. Why a rose? Why not a humble dandelion? Or a wriggling, newborn rat? Or a compost heap?—any one of which would have served Heidegger's point just as well? Once again, Heidegger insists on electrifying his audience with incantations about our superiority. It's an uncut transfusion of *dignity*, a way of elevating humans above the rest of the world.

This philosophical mood, I would suggest, is indispensable to Heidegger's success as a philosopher. And arguably, this same mood is also the handmaiden to his susceptibility to Nazism, which similarly demands the glorification of an *us* and the degradation of a *them*. No accident, then, that Heidegger's address after being appointed by the Nazi party to the rectorship of Freiburg University, what he refers to as a *Hohenschule*—a "high school," a school standing above others—finds him rhapsodizing "that unyielding spiritual mission that forces the fate of the German people to bear the stamp of its history" (Heidegger et al., 1985, p. 470). Heidegger goes on to characterize the mission of the university in terms of "battle" (Heidegger et al., 1985, p. 479), and concludes by affirming "we fully understand the splendor and the greatness of this setting only when we carry within ourselves that profound and far-reaching thoughtfulness that gave ancient Greek wisdom the word: . . .'All that is great stands in the storm'" (Heidegger et al., 1985, p. 480). The strains of Wagnerian endless melody boom throughout this passage. Heidegger becomes at once a spiritual

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impresario and a political chump, easily manipulated by powerful political forces far above his ken.

This fragment is one window into the methodological revolution inaugurated by affect theory that makes it possible to analyze philosophy as a constellation of emotional elements, inseparable from the conceptual revolutions that typically define philosophy's contributions.

Conclusion

The linguistic turn rightly spotlights the importance of language, history, and culture in the formation of subjectivity. But it also risks going too far, succumbing to the linguistic fallacy that language makes us what we are—a stealth dualism in which humans are basically "mind stuff." Attention to embodiment helps to correct this mistake, emphasizing that subjectivity is made up of many strata, all with intellectual and material dimensions. This turn to the body carries its own risk, though—that of producing a sense of the body as a black box repository of accumulated influences, with no further explanation possible. This numb view depicts bodies as flattened by power, rather than as sensitive, responsive, and active. Theories of feeling, affect, and emotion help to push this methodological horizon further, opening the door to new vocabularies, new ways of holding the elements of subjectivity—and even philosophy itself—up to the light.

Notes

1 Geertz's later counterattack opens the door to a consideration of power, but not bodies or practices, reflecting his conviction that we are basically creatures of intellect (Micheelsen & Geertz, 2002, pp. 8–9).
2 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, one of the founders of affect theory, talks about *History of Sexuality, Vol. I* as one of the primary books she consulted in writing her seminal volume *Touching Feeling* (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 2).
3 It's worth noting that this is often an accusation lodged by critics rather than one methodically defended by affect theorists themselves (Leys, 2017, p. 313; Plamper, 2015, p. 12; cf. Shaviro, 1993, p. 32; Massumi, 2002, p. 28). See Schaefer (2022a) for a critique of Ruth Leys, the most strident critic of affect theory.

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27

STUDYING (NEO-)EMOTION PRACTICES IN AFFECT AND EMOTION RESEARCH

Marci D. Cottingham

Introduction

Like most fields, emotion and affect research includes factions and diverse theoretical and methodological approaches. Strands of affect and emotion research in psychology and neuroscience, however, appear to be coalescing around shared constructionist viewpoints compatible with developments in sociology, history, and anthropology. Barrett (2017) and Mesquita's (2022) body of work, for example, draws on neuroscience and psychology while emphasizing the role that culture plays in providing the emotion categories in which we classify and understand affective experiences. Sociological and historical approaches (Elias, 1978; Illouz, 2008; Reddy, 2001), which have long recognized the role of culture, also overlap in their shared appreciation of the role that historical eras play in shaping our emotional lives.

An emotion practice approach that aims to situate individual affective experiences in cultural and embodied histories is one approach that can align developments across the disciplines of sociology, history, philosophy, and psychology (Scheer, 2012). Similar to other theoretical developments (Slaby & von Scheve, 2019; von Scheve, 2018), an emotion practice approach is inherently relational and aims to address limitations in emotion management theory by providing a bridge between intentional and unintentional action as well as individual and structural levels.

In this perspective chapter, I briefly survey the link between dramaturgical approaches, emotion management, and emotion practice, to highlight how this particular practice-based approach emerged and how it might differ from other practice/assemblage-based approaches. I then turn to three areas for future research to consider in the study of affect and emotion practices: (1) research on misfeeling and misrecognition, particularly in connection with current trends in dis- and misinformation; (2) renewed consideration of deviance and defiance, particularly in the context of the occupations with high emotional labor demands; and (3) research on the emergence and spread of new emotion terms (neo-emotions) that connect to broader social change.

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Affect and Emotion as Performance, Work, and Practice

In this section, I briefly trace the emergence of an emotion practice approach and its connection to prior sociological work on emotion. Emotions, in a dramaturgical approach, are conceptualized in terms of their display. Emotion display is a part of the broader social performance that actors engage in as they adopt the social scripts that correspond to particular scenarios and situations. Just as actors on the stage work on their gestures, facial expressions, body posture, and vocalizations to display a particular character, individuals modify minute aspects of the body and face to align with social expectations of a competent person as defined by situational and cultural norms.

Developed by Erving Goffman (1959), the dramaturgical tradition emphasizes the effort that goes into these displays. Displays are not natural or inevitable, but social products. In this emphasis on effort, "work" is applied to a host of areas in which individuals must deploy effort to align with expectations. These include "display work," "face work," "identity work," "body work," and, with the development of Hochschild's emotion management theory, "emotion work." All of this "work" highlights the constructed, scripted, and effortful production of everyday social interactions that may at times appear and feel natural.

With her development of emotion management theory, Arlie Hochschild (1979, 1983) argued that a focus on display in dramaturgical approaches underappreciates the reach of social norms beneath the skin, as social actors also work to *feel* in alignment with social expectations or feeling rules (not simply to display appropriate feelings). She drew on interviews with college students, flight attendants, and bill collectors, as well as observations of training and workplace interactions of flight attendants. This led to an expanded dramaturgical vocabulary that included *surface acting*—the effort one engages in order to align emotional expressions/displays with expectations—and *deep acting*—effort to align one's genuine feelings with social expectations. Working to *display* the right emotion for the moment and working to genuinely *feel* the right emotion for the moment were both documented in her study. In light of the increasing significance of the service sector in postindustrial countries, Hochschild developed the term *emotional labor* to refer to working to feel the right feeling for one's paid employment—a foundational concept in the field.

Performance and work, key concepts following the dramaturgical tradition, though, have some important limitations. For one, they suggest intentionality where there might be little conscious choosing to act in one way or another. The strict demarcation between genuine emotions and worked-on emotions can suggest that the former is not constrained by social norms and expectations. But this thinking underappreciates the role that primary socialization plays in the formation of gendered, raced, and classed social beings. Even genuine feelings can be seen as products of the social pressures that shape the types of emotional beings we become. To capture this biography of socialization as well as encompass both the strategic and the non-strategic/unintentional dimensions of affect (Slaby & Mühlhoff, 2019), scholars have turned to notions of social practice, capital, and habitus from the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1990) as a way beyond problematic dichotomies.

In Goffman's (1967) radically moment-centric approach ("Not then, men and their moments. Rather, moments and their men," p. 3), the culmination of a biography of particular moments over time is undertheorized. The concept of habitus, as the accumulated calibration/calibrator of past practices and future expectations, addresses this conceptual limitation

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directly by seeing body, affect, and emotions as situated practices that are enacted over time as a result of past experiences and future projections (Cottingham, 2022). Habitus refers to the internalized dispositions connected to social positions, similar to Slaby and Mühlhoff's (2019) notion of "affective disposition" and the notion of "emotion repertoires" (von Poser et al., 2019), which both try to capture durability across moments of fluidity.

Habitus alludes to both cognitive orientations to the world and visceral affective tendencies, both fundamentally shaped by one's position in social hierarches or "social locations" (Bourdieu, 1990). One's social location—in terms of social class, gender, race, or nationality, for example—influences the dispositions one develops as well as one's habitual enactments of affect and emotion. However, these are dispositions, not inflexible programs. One is predisposed to certain ways of feeling/being, not determined by them. Yet habitus as a construct helps to explain how, over time, certain practices come to be/feel natural while others feel unnatural. This is critical for theorizing affect and emotions as intentional and strategic at times, but also unintentional and seemingly inevitable at other times.

While practice and assemblage-based approaches share certain features—they are relational, try to address the unintentional and embodied aspects of feeling, and provide a dynamic understanding of how affect and emotion emerge in interactions—they have key differences in emphasis. An emotion practice approach differs from assemblage-based approaches in regard to the emphasis on the body and affect, the role of non-human actors, and the relative emphasis on social inequalities. Bourdieu's work was keenly focused on understanding how social class differences endure in both structures and dispositions while also trying to overcome dualisms that pit culture against the body (Swartz, 1997). Assemblage-approaches can risk overcorrecting by emphasizing affect and the body rather than the relationship *between* affect and emotion, body and culture. Alternatively, an emotion practice approach might be seen as overcorrecting in its focus on emotion and limited in that it does not consider non-human actors in the web of connections that assemblage-based approaches address (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019). An integrative approach that combines the strengths of these approaches and "theories and methodologies from cultural studies and the social sciences" is the logical next step (von Scheve, 2018, p. 54).

Practices of Misrecognition and Misfeeling

With notable parallels in other post-structural theories, including new materialism and Actor Network Theory (Fox, 2015; von Scheve, 2018), emotion practice theory centers on the dynamic enactment of social life. Rather than seeing social life as unfolding naturally, statically fixed, or the product of individual intention, it is instead seen as a hybrid—a straddling of both intentional and unintentional strategic action. Much of social life feels natural and inevitable because the habitus has been well tuned to the repeated enactments that one is likely to encounter over the course of primary socialization. Over time, we become habituated to particular actions and feelings—actions and feelings that begin to feel like second nature. Bourdieu's theory gives us both a theory of social life and a theory that tries to explain *why* social life feels natural rather than social. Bourdieu refers to the misunderstanding that social life is natural as *misrecognition*. An understanding of the *misrecognition* of social life as natural is imperative for theorizing affect, emotions, and the body—features of social life that might be among the most misrecognized aspects of our social worlds because they, historically and in popular discourse, tend to be seen as the domain of biology, psychology, and/or neuroscience, as the products of innate biological, neurological functioning.

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Misrecognition and misfeeling are important areas for affect and emotion researchers to develop further. Taking inspiration from Bourdieu, how is it that the social world comes to be misrecognized and misfelt as natural, as operating outside of human influence? Or stated differently, how is it that human actions have come to be seen as separate from nature, rather than interconnected? Berger and Luckmann's (1966) classic treatise on the social construction of knowledge gives us some clues, but even in their work, processes of institutionalization appear somewhat mysterious. In their argument, it is in the act of socializing a new member of a group (usually, the next generation) that knowledge comes to exist apart from direct experience, and as a result, comes to be seen as separate from and standing above/beyond the individual knower. Because much of our knowledge of the world is imparted to us by key socializing agents (primary caregivers, family members, religious leaders, teachers) rather than formed through direct experience, it attains a quality of separateness from human activity that makes it susceptible to being misrecognized as inevitable and asocial. We enter social worlds not of our individual making, but of our social making.

With worlds now constructed through digitally mediated interactions, new questions emerge about how these worlds are potentially distorted, misrecognized, and misfelt. New research suggests that there are now high rates of, and new mechanisms for, spreading disinformation and misinformation online (Bellocchi et al., 2025). Following Bourdieu's notion of misrecognition, we can consider "misfeeling," *not* as socially inappropriate feeling, but rather as a form of feeling connected to the distorted yet potentially taken-for-granted nature of digital life as well as the intentional spread of false information (→ *Unfeeling*). For example, a long line of research on scapegoating, in connection with prejudice and discrimination, is often taken as a cognitive practice rather than emotion practice. Aligned with Sara Ahmed's (2014) insights on how affect and emotions draw boundaries around politically salient groups, viscerally indicating who is in and who is out, misfeeling can be researched as the feelings of anger, fear, or hate that are fundamentally built on intentional disinformation spread about particular groups. Connected with ideology and research on misplaced fear (Altheide, 2002; Glassner, 1999), a fuller consideration of misfeeling might further our understanding of how ideological positions shape action through affect and emotions.

In addition to considering online disinformation, several recent projects on digital interactions and online communities have usefully taken an emotion practice approach (Döveling et al., 2018). In applying a practice approach to online communities, the dynamics of emotions and sense-making can be more fully explored. For example, Medeiros and Makhashvili (2022) study how online emotional communities form and the relational negotiations that journalists and social media users engage in as they formulate the appropriate emotions in response to a far-right terrorist attack. The results of these practices are diverse, but with dominant emotional registers of grief, shock, and calls for solidarity. Medieros and Makhashvili, like others researching emotions online (Cottingham & Rose, 2022; Döveling et al., 2018; Lehto, 2022), showcase the utility of a practice approach and how it can be combined with the growing literature in media and communications research as well as social network analysis.

Practices of Emotional Deviance and Defiance

A second area for developing affect and emotion practice research is in relation to deviance and defiance. Traditional approaches in sociology, as described earlier, focus on explaining

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the regularity of social life and the role that emotions play in upholding both regularity and inequality. Working in the symbolic interactionist tradition, Scheff (2009) and Thoits (1985) provided initial theorizing about the role of emotional deviance in mental illness labeling. Both authors aim to explain the labeling of deviant emotions with mental illness terms, both by others and the self, rather than explain the emergence of emotional deviance per se. Thoits (1985) defines emotional deviance as failed "emotion management attempts" (p. 222) and argues that "When individuals are unable to manage or transform deviant feelings, self-attributions of disturbance should result" (p. 221).

However, we can envision alternative outcomes to deviant feelings or the recognition that one does not feel the socially appropriate feelings for a given situation (→ *Contested Emotions*). Thoits (1985) acknowledges, but does not explore in detail the possibility that individuals might be unwilling to manage emotions or that they might instead deconstruct or critique the very feeling rules or situations in which their emotions are categorized as deviant. Like the cases of involuntary treatment that Scheff's work examines, cases of outright defiance might be (relatively) rare, but their possibility remains. For example, we can see many social movements, including civil rights activism and feminism as partly rooted in emotional defiance. Rather than assume that individuals are motivated to align their feelings with social expectations, what happens when this is questioned? Leaving this possibility open can raise further questions about how and in what contexts emotional deviance might lead to defiance and rebellion, either individually or collectively. Such emotional deviance likely plays a crucial role in collective action aimed at challenging the (emotional) status quo.

The assumption that individuals want to conform to feeling rules is based on the recognition that conformity leads to social benefits while deviance comes with costs. A nurse, for example, who complains to a patient about her anger at a new hospital policy might be jeopardizing her position, failing to center the patient's needs, and risks losing the financial rewards and material security of her job were the patient to complain to her manager. But such emotional deviance might be among the first steps to then discussing one's frustrations with colleagues or hospital managers directly, which could lead to collective action or changes in hospital policy that lead to tangible benefits. In other words, the potential costs of deviance and benefits of conformity are not necessarily straightforward or clear at the moment in which emotional deviance is experienced. Emotional deviance might also be couched in face-saving caveats, such as "not to be political, but . . ." or "not to be negative, but . . . ," through which deviations from the emotional status quo can be felt, expressed, but also softened to avoid harsh judgment from others. Invariably, history is filled with emotional deviants who are willing to risk whatever rewards might have come with conformity.

Emotions have an undeniable role in catalyzing social change. Deborah Gould's (2009) research on the role of grief and anger in fomenting effective social action in the gay rights activism of the group ACT-UP is an excellent case. While she does not frame her study as focused on emotional deviance, her detailed analysis of transformations of grief and shame into anger and pride is not easily explained as simply failed emotion management. Consumed by both grief about the loss of loved ones to AIDS and the general culture of shame around their sexuality, many in the community and their allies were reluctant to take up aggressive tactics that would put the issue of AIDS in the spotlight. But as the legal landscape changed (particularly the Supreme Court's *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision), grieving

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communities became more defiant and ultimately reclaimed pride in their gay identities. This reclaiming of pride allowed them to channel feelings of grief and loss into anger at those with power who were not only allowing the epidemic to rage on, but who blamed the community itself for the loss of life.

The amount of emotion work that those following in Hochschild's path have analyzed and documented suggests that there is a large repository of unaligned feelings that exist below the surface of everyday interactions (as connected to "structures of feeling"; Williams, 1977). Supposedly authentic feelings might emerge in line with social expectations, but those that are deemed inauthentic are what tend to receive our conscious awareness and attention, both as social actors and as researchers. Rather than "manage" problematic emotions, social actors can also resist the norms that frame them as problematic to begin with, as seen in the case of ACT-UP. With ACT-UP, their grief was also twinged with shame because of the self-blame that the gay community held at the time. External events acted as shocks to this self-blame, though, and the feeling of gay pride (and the label itself) were both able to emerge, becoming both feelable and namable. This process does not necessarily unfold consciously in the minds of isolated individuals. Rather, unruly feelings have to be processed, channeled, or changed, or the cultural apparatus that deems them unruly has to be questioned. We might see this unfold in social movements as well as other forms of social action, such as collective organizing in the workplace (McKenzie et al., 2019; Rutten, 2006).

While social movements research has incorporated affect and emotion into an examination of the social processes that lead to social movement formation, continuation, and dissipation (Summers-Effler, 2010), limited research has looked at worker activism, particularly in high emotional labor occupations which now dominate the economies of post-industrial nation-states. In one insightful study of the links between emotions and worker activism, Rutten (2006) examines how labor activists help plantation workers in the Philippines overcome shame's influence on self-esteem, fears of humiliation, and the "embarrassment of breaching the established rules of interacting" (p. 358). Put succinctly, "To challenge authority, one must make a scene, which many people are reluctant to do" (Gamson et al., 1982, p. 111). All forms of collective action against the status quo, then, defy the feeling rules associated with being a good worker, citizen, and person, with significant risks to dignity, "face" (Goffman, 1959), and, in the case of precarious workers, livelihoods. Scholars have highlighted a recent surge in collective action efforts among U.S. workers in particular (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020; Kallas, 2022), which calls for further research on the role of emotional deviance and defiance in the workplace.

A research agenda on worker defiance will need to attend especially to the feelings of anger and moral indignation, with "moral anger" at the core of "social change and justice" (Jasper & Owens, 2014, p. 529). Given that workers in a "people-intensive occupation" (Wharton, 2014, p. 393) experience higher levels of anger than other occupations (Sloan, 2004), further research is needed to account for affective/emotional defiance in occupations with high emotional labor demands. As philosophers and sociologists have noted, the formation, expression, and assessment of one's own and others' emotions, including and especially anger, is embedded within and shaped by social location (Campbell, 1997; Wingfield, 2010). Thus, gender, race, and social class, like sexuality in Gould's study, are likely to be key social categories that will shape the trajectory of particular workplace feelings and sensations that might fizzle out or congeal into named emotions like anger and shame.

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Neo-Emotion Practices

Arguably, the gay rights activists that Gould (2009) identified with and studied transformed their emotional habitus through the creation of a new emotion: *gay pride*. This is not simply feeling good about oneself, but a particular type of pride that is connected to being otherwise seen as a social pariah, with one's most personal and intimate desires having been deemed sinful and shameful by the heteronormative mainstream. To claim this type of pride then is a radical act. Communities also reclaimed terminology like being labeled as "queer" as a positive rather than a negative, and this linguistic and emotional defiance potentially laid the groundwork for later instances of trans pride and trans joy (shuster & Westbrook, 2022). I conceptualize this practice of creating new emotions as "neo-emotions" (Cottingham, 2024), theorized as practices of deviance or defiance against established emotional lexicons. Other examples of neo-emotions can include the litany of new emotions that correspond to climate change, including eco-grief, terrafurie, solastalgia, and doomerism, as well as new emotions linked to digital practices, including doomscrolling, FOMO (fear of missing out), and nomophobia (fear of being without a mobile phone; Bhattacharya et al., 2019).

Neo-emotions are certainly not new phenomena, but they represent creative practices that individuals develop in order to make sense of new situations and experiences. They require certain levels of emotional reflexivity (→ *Emotional Reflexivity*) and are embedded within larger social transitions, such as those connected to climate change, social activism, crises/disasters, and political shifts. While, in theory, anyone could coin a new term to capture a supposedly new emotion, neo-emotions need to have an element of resonance (McDonnell et al., 2017) in order to find a broader audience and uptake. Neo-emotions represent the congealment of cultural resources (part of emotional capital; Cottingham, 2022) that rely on an individual having particular affective and expressive resources. Like other resonant cultural practices, neo-emotions can assist individuals and groups in addressing challenges that emerge within a changing context. While their novelty could be a liability, it can also provide a gate-keeping mechanism that easily differentiates insiders from outsiders and provides status to those "in-the-know" as well as emotion entrepreneurs who spread them (Holthaus, 2022). In focusing on neo-emotions, we gain greater appreciation of the "complexities and subtleties of people's emotional lives" (Campbell, 1997, p. 3).

Like McDonnell et al.'s (2017) discussion of resonant cultural objects, we can view neo-emotions as creative responses to "nonroutine situations" that, in their articulation, might further catalyze social change. While McDonnell et al. distinguish salience from resonance, with the former relating to the construction of social problems and the latter referring to the solving of social problems, arguably this is a somewhat arbitrary distinction. How a problem is constructed is crucial to shaping what solutions will be possible. Thus, I see neo-emotions as naming new emotions, often in ways that merge source with feeling, such that subjective experiences of the world cannot be divorced from the external causes. Neo-emotions often name the sources of new feelings and, in the case of negative emotions, provide a new orientation toward practices that might manage them. For example, in naming eco-grief, activists and researchers are merging the amalgam of sensations associated with loss with changing, and in many cases, destroyed environments and landscapes. In this quite literal sense, internal feelings cannot be isolated from external, environmental conditions. The ability to conceptually hold both internal and external in constant relation to each

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other, rather than default to dualisms of interiority as separate from exteriority, is an enduring theme in practice theory and one that we can see play out in the creation of particular resonant neo-emotions.

The term neo-emotion refers to a range of emergent experiences, that, by providing new language, allows us to capture and communicate change. Neo-emotions, like all developments in language, help to "solve" the ultimate problem of social isolation. In naming a new emotion, sharing that name, and seeing traction in that sharing, a fundamental need for belonging and connection is made possible. This function helps to explain why language evolves and shifts in the first place, as new words and phrases emerge, change, die out, or are reborn depending on the practical needs of diverse communities and groups. Neo-emotions, thus, should have an element of affective resonance, using an expansive definition provided by Fleig and von Scheve:

> affective resonance is conceived of not only as interrelating a number of human and/or nonhuman actors, but bears a significant formative potential. Being affectively entrained and coupled in resonant ways potentially changes and transforms actors' very modes of being and existence. In other words, affectively resonant couplings and relations hardly leave the actors' involved unchanged. They are thus not conceptualized as fixed entities, but as mutually affecting and thus forming and (re-)configuring each other.
>
> *(Fleig & von Scheve, 2020, p. 7)*

Formulated neo-emotions, like all emotions, are not static representations of some sort of objective external change, but rather dynamic constructs that promise to change both the actors and the conditions from which they emerge.

What new emotions gain traction, though, is likely to be shaped partly by the emotional styles amenable to the ideologies of global capital (and its dynamic relationship with social media technologies). Changes in global capitalism and its bidirectional relationship to digitalization and new social media technologies play an important role in explaining the emergence of particular neo-emotions. While habitus is shaped by past practices and one's social location, the dominance of particular emotional styles (part of habitus) is undeniably connected to their alignment with values and beliefs embedded in the dominant cultural modes dictated by capitalism. As Illouz (2008) work shows, the dominance of therapeutic imperatives, self-disclosure, and individualism is a result of psychology's development in relation to the needs of the capitalist economy. The value placed on emotions (and the naming of new emotions) is not fixed but produced through the expansion of productive, utilitarian logics that flow from capitalism's global reach.

As climate emotions are currently some of the most widely studied examples of neo-emotions, focusing on their dynamics can help us understand neo-emotion practices. Two exemplary works that examine the emotion practices of climate activists include Neckel and Hasenfratz's (2021) "Climate emotions and emotional climates" and Holthaus's (2022) "Feelings of (eco-) grief and sorrow." Neckel and Hasenfratz theorize climate emotions as products of both ecological crises and heightened reflexivity. In taking emotions as objects of consideration, activists and members of the public "adopt a meta-perspective" (Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021, p. 255). Like Scheer's (2012) theorizing of emotional practices, the authors see naming, communicating, regulating, and mobilizing all as emotional practices relevant to climate emotions. Taking a practice approach helps the authors to articulate

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emotions as both strategic actions and affectively lurking in the nonconscious, that is, as both intentional and unintentional.

Holthaus's work also takes a practice approach in her examination of eco-grief as a product of emotion entrepreneurs. Building on research in politics and emotions (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), Holthaus identifies processes of objectivation, cultivation, and diffusion that help to explain the emergence and use of climate emotions. Like "norm entrepreneurs" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 901) emotion entrepreneurs are rich in forms of capital identified by Bourdieu (social and cultural) and have "the ability to change the emotional language and feeling rules used by others in the recognition and regulation of their feelings" (Holthaus, 2022, p. 3). Naming new emotions, called objectivation and seemingly connected to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) constructivist approach, is but one important element in explaining the emergence of a neo-emotion like eco-grief. Emotion entrepreneurs with social and cultural capital must also cultivate spaces, rituals, and discourses that make emotions like eco-grief relevant to climate activists' experiences. More than simply cultivate the new emotion, activists also develop new sets of feeling rules and management strategies that can turn eco-grief into eco-action.

A research agenda can build on these insights on climate emotions in order to investigate how neo-emotions emerge, resonate, and what their implications are for social movements and social change. Many questions remain about when, where, why, and how certain neo-emotions gain wider social uptake. While we can theorize the spread of neo-emotions as connected to broader trends in the spread and reach of therapeutic discourse (Illouz, 2008) and increasing levels of emotional reflexivity (Holmes, 2010), neo-emotion terms have the potential to challenge dualisms between exteriority and interiority. For example, while we can see the connection between particular neo-emotions and climate change, we do not know what the implications are for the people and movements that use these terms. Does eco-grief as a term lead to greater integration, improved recruitment efforts, or sustained participation among climate activists? In what contexts might the use of terms like Black joy and trans joy influence the mental health, group solidarity, and/or movement trajectory of Black and trans individuals and activists? How does the merging of source and feeling, as many neo-emotions entail, alter cognitions and orientations to the world? These and other questions can move an emotion practice research agenda forward by focusing on the empirical study of neo-emotions.

Conclusion

A research agenda that frames affect and emotion as forms of practice represents a merging of developments in dramaturgy, emotion management theory, and a social practice approach. Seeing affect and emotion as practices shares many features with other relational and assemblage-centered approaches, with some important differences in emphasis. In taking a practice approach, I outline a research agenda that centers on three areas for future development: (1) empirical and theoretical investigation of the link between mis- and disinformation and misfeeling, taking inspiration from Bourdieu's notion of misrecognition; (2) renewed consideration of emotional deviance and defiance, particularly in the context of high emotional labor workplaces; and (3) greater attention to the emergence and spread of neo-emotions. The latter two areas suggest pockets of creativity and agency that sociological accounts often struggle to theorize, as scripts, rules, and social order are often

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given analytic precedence over improvisation and defiance against feeling rules. Patterns in emotional creativity and defiance are critical as we deepen our understanding of the bidirectional relationship between emotions and social change.

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28

QADMA'

Ecology and the Ends of Affect

Tamar Blickstein

A Concept We Can Feel in Our Bodies

I first heard of the concept called "*qadma'*"—roughly translated as "territory"—over voice message exchanges with a dear friend, Viyen Leiva. My friend is an Indigenous man of the *Qom* nation in the Argentine Chaco, whom I first met during anthropological fieldwork in 2012. Much of the Qom people's ancestral territory—their *qadma'*—is under threat as vast soy fields and cattle ranches overtake the Chaco dry forest at one of the highest deforestation rates in the world. Having returned to the region again for most of 2023, I was now back in Europe grappling over how to summarize my findings for a university lecture.[1] The small crowd there was interested in hearing about Chaco deforestation through the lens of academic frameworks like affect theory, multispecies studies, relationality, decoloniality, and entanglement. But I was growing wary—and weary—of bridging the distance I felt creeping up between these theories and the lived phenomena I sought to describe. Did any of this mean something to the people living in the throes of that upheaval?

Always up for a banter, and keen to be helpful, Viyen was very tolerant and responsive as I left scattered messages about "affect" over the course of a few weeks before my talk. I searched for the words to explain how European universities found it useful to lean on terms like this, to help themselves understand and describe processes that might seem obvious to some other people. I talked about affect as a dynamic of relating—of "affecting and being affected"—and how it was not limited to relations between humans. I told him how scientists are trained to keep things separate: how ecologists use relational notions like "biodiversity" and "biome"—the biotic relations that comprise a vast habitat like Chaco—without capturing the affective or emotional aspects of those relations. I reminded him of another Qom friend who thought my diseased intestine and its microbiome were part of the larger picture of other biotic relations breaking down all around us as the pesticide-ridden soy fields encroached, and the bees and soils died. I asked if he thought the Qom language had a way to express the dynamic and multifold embodied relations—in their emotional and felt dimensions—among beings and entities like humans, other "species," soils, waterways,

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ancestors, microbes, cellphones, spirits, forests, and their rules, sky beings, rocks, sounds, colors, land-claims, words, winds, and even Western academic concepts.

He would reply politely, searching for wise and inspiring and helpful things to say about the "affect" of the ancient *algarroba* trees and their relation to the river and their respective spirit rulers and sacred importance, sometimes lapsing into familiar stories, recollections, or laments. He was trying to connect the dots with me, but I could sense him wondering why I was going on about this everything-word, what it was really offering, why I needed him there for the ride. At one point, after a meandering series of messages, he left a shorter one saying as much with a self-deprecating chuckle: "to be honest, Tamar, I don't have a clue what I was rambling on about there, it probably makes no sense." I laughed too, a tad relieved, ready to drop the conversation. But a few days later, he got back to me with a lot of excitement:

> I've been thinking about it! In Qom we have this concept we call qadma' that is a lot like what you were saying about "affect." It is the territory, but that means it is everything that holds it, all the relations inside it, and how it came to be. It is part of our body; what happens to qadma' happens to our bodies. *It is a concept we feel in our bodies*. Just like qadma' *feels* what happens to us.[2]

For me, our exchange jolted awake an awareness, like a flash of something familiar that one is discovering and recalling all at once. Qadma' compelled me to consider what I am calling in this essay the *ends of affect*. The ends of affect is a play on words, referring to affect's *limits* on the one hand, and to its *purpose and possibilities* on the other—in the face of the intensifying ecological crisis. These limits are especially apparent in sites of struggle over territory in Global South spaces of historic or ongoing colonial occupation—like the Chaco *qadma'*—where, as I will show in the next section, extractivism is routinely propelled by everyday instances of "colonial affect." That is, the emotional, embodied, aesthetic, and multispecies attachments that my interlocutors—settler ex-farmers—feel for the monocrop landscapes, biotechnologies, and racialized plantation legacies of the agribusiness system—a system that has caused them debt spirals, dangerous agrochemical exposure, climate wreckage, and their effective elimination as a small-farming class.

Though drawn from the specifics of my Chaco-based fieldwork, these affective ends can be understood as two competing modes of relating to territory more broadly. While qadma' represents a radically relational embodied and felt ecology grounded in ontologies that favor a reciprocal ethics of care, "colonial affect" stands for the embodied practices, relational attachments, capitalist longings, racialized colonial nostalgias, and plantation desires that keep many people invested in the very systems that cause them harm by driving the climate crisis.

The *ends of affect* also refers to affect's potential use as a methodological tool for social science and humanities research on the climate catastrophe, and in particular, its capacity to help us analyze one of the most complex and centrally defining features of the Anthropocene: its environmental racism (Pulido, 2017). This chapter offers a glimpse of how affect was a useful toolkit in my own ethnographic research among descendants of settler-colonizers and colonized. Because affect as a frame can accommodate the relational worldviews of both groups, it allows us to track how environmental racism unequally targets not just their respective resources, but their different epistemic positionalities and "political

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ontologies" (Blaser, 2025). An affective engagement with qadma' helps us to zoom in and out across scales, to affectively map the shared and unequal stakes of the climate catastrophe in this exemplary space, with all its many entangled actors, geographies, histories, and ontologies—from Global South small farmers dispossessed by the international geopolitics of agribusiness farming, to the locally colonized peoples they themselves have dispossessed.

While the plight of qadma' highlights the deleterious impacts of colonial affect, its force as a concept and as a lived sensate reality opens up a set of affective provocations that, I believe, are fruitful and even urgent to think with, beyond this particular deforestation hotspot. Imagine if the climate crisis were not an "unfelt" abstraction—a collection of worrisome numbers, patterns, graphs, and satellite images—but a pain wired into our nervous system, our organs, guts, veins, joints, and bones. Imagine if we had felt-concepts that bled, embodied feeling-ideas, to aid us in sensing these widening wounds. What if we could harness a capacity for "feeling-thinking-listening" to the climate—to borrow a term from the Tsosil philosopher Manuel Bolom Pale (2020)? What if qadma' were a concept we could all feel in our bodies?

Settler Loss and Colonial Affect in the Argentine Chaco

In the deforestation frontiers of the Argentine Chaco—where I have conducted fieldwork since 2010—many descendants of European immigrant cotton planters feel an immense sense of loss for the vanishing worlds of flora and fauna from their childhoods. Yet by and large, the affective weight of this grief does not lead them to contest the agribusiness system that drives that loss. Before the "soy boom" gradually displaced them from farming over the last 50 years, these communities had built small-scale cotton plantations on Indigenous land and labor throughout the twentieth century—stolen lands offered to European immigrant farmers by the state. Today, the few who have remained as small- or medium-scale farmers are affected by soil degradation, lethal heat waves, flash floods, and dangerous agrochemical intoxications linked to the soy industry. My fieldwork led me to wonder: why does this community appear to acquiesce to the very industry that imperils them?

Many of the ex-small farmers I spoke to have been ousted from farming altogether, selling or renting out their lands to big conglomerates. Some felt betrayed and tricked by the companies that had convinced them to buy genetically modified seeds they ultimately could not afford to plant, leading them into spirals of debt that forced them to leave the industry. Some who have held on to small portions of farmland or gardens, like 79-year-old Marta, have complained that their hens, pumpkins, and flowers have died due to soy and pesticide drift. As Marta put it, in no uncertain terms: "soy kills the soil!" A statement that reflects her embodied awareness, after decades of working the land, of the relational ecosystemic entanglements that distinguish a living soil from a dead one (Lyons, 2020; Myers, 2017; Müller, 2021; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2015). Marta, however, never considered contesting the agribusiness model itself, or building coalitions with localized mestizo and Indigenous led groups like Mocase, which were battling to challenge that system (Lapegna, 2013).

Likewise, Eduardo told me of his enduring sense of injury at having been uprooted with his family from their small farm when he was a teen in the late 1990s, as mechanized genetically modified agriculture replaced the manual cotton plantations in the area. Eduardo never got over the loss. He hated peri-urban life in town and longed for the scent of earth, the open starry sky, the sound of birds, tending the crops and the animals, and the rhythm

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of the countryside. He finally found peace in beekeeping after many odd jobs and contracts as a security guard. The bees were like a homecoming, he said—"a way of returning to the farm life they took from us." I had met Eduardo while researching bee colony collapse, which is on the rise world-wide, but especially in sites near agribusiness and deforestation frontiers in Latin America, where most of the world's stingless bee population lives (Bogo et al., 2025). Eduardo was deeply worried about this loss, and seemed—or so I thought—to be drawing connections between the structural forces that had ousted him from farming, and those that were making bee life unsustainable. Driving toward some of his bee-hives, on the cusp of farmlands near the town, I realized I was mistaken. He talked with a great sense of awe and emotion about the beauty of the scene: a vast monocrop field, stretching infinitely into the horizon, with a tractor moving slowly in the distance. His affective attachment to the agribusiness scene before us stirred him more deeply than the threats of the soy boom or its impacts on the bees. *That* was the lost promise his heart longed for.

My fieldwork revealed a pattern among these and other farming families: all of them seemed deeply invested in the affective infrastructures of the settler-colonial plantation system their grandparents had helped forge. This affective infrastructure is what I am calling "colonial affect." Colonial affect refers here to people's embodied attachments to colonial systems, aesthetics, hierarchies, and modes of production that persist even when these systems may imperil those very people and their most cherished environments and species. It often entails forms of "ecological nostalgia" (Angé & Berliner, 2021) that dovetail with settler-colonial or "imperial nostalgia" (Rosaldo, 1989) for the good old days of prior colonial arrangements. This nostalgia serves to romanticize the racial hierarchies of that lost world as "morally pure" (Rosaldo, 1989) while deflecting that prior system's complicity in the environmental degradations to come. It entails a monocultural way of thinking and feeling—what Vandana Shiva (1993) has called "monocultures of the mind." It is an attachment to the hopes of redemption through biotechnological "progress," and a racialized identification with the successful moguls that run that show. It is a romance with the monocultural landscapes on stolen land that erase Indigenous presence, and a deep-rooted fear of finding oneself ousted from the racialized structures that reproduce colonial privileges and hierarchies. It is also an epistemic dismissal of the ontological lifeworlds—like qadma'—that precede and exceed settler presence.

What is counter-intuitive here is the way colonial affect manifests through multispecies relations of attachment and care, rooted in embodied ecological knowledge. These multispecies attachments in times of drought—for instance, to threatened rose gardens, plantation crops, or domesticated cattle—can sensitize people to the fallouts of deforestation and soy agribusiness. Yet they ultimately serve as vectors of colonial and plantation nostalgia, in ways that can foreclose transformative action—especially if such action demands broad-based alliances with racialized groups and classes. Instead, colonial affect often directs anger and frustration toward those very classes, scapegoating them for the losses mourned.

Colonial Affect at the Heart of the Climate Crisis

In all these ways, colonial affect reveals the *limits of affect* more broadly to prevent or address the climate catastrophe. While it may seem like a footnote to the real structural sources of this devastation, I believe colonial affect is a driving factor in the ongoing crisis of agribusiness-driven deforestation in the Chaco—South America's largest dry-forest—and in

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Argentina at large. Soy covers around a third of Argentina's arable land, and has fueled the country's economy and welfare state over the last decades, creating what some have called a "soy state" (Hetherington, 2020). Most soy farms map onto the lands that were ruled by militarily autonomous Indigenous peoples up through the late nineteenth century, and most of those who farm them are "gringos"—descendants of European settlers. I have found that colonially rooted affective attachments are central to understanding what is otherwise a puzzling phenomenon: the lack of any kind of broad-based resistance among Argentina's small farmers (*pequeños productores*) to an agribusiness system that imperils their bodies and communities, as well as the landscapes and ecosystems they love (Blickstein, 2024a, 2024b). That love—and fear—could have propelled them to form or join scattered fronts of resistance to large-scale genetically modified monocrop agriculture, as farmers' movements have done—with varying levels of success—in countries like India, South Africa, Mexico, and even the United States. Not only was this not the case for my interlocutors, but a contrary phenomenon was apparent: many of my interlocutors voted for the right-wing populist president Javier Milei, whose election in 2023 has led to the breakdown of environmental protections and the acceleration of deforestation and pesticide drift. Given these farmers' attachments to the land and environment, what explains the limit of affect here to generate mobilization against ecological destruction (→ *Affective Mobilization*)?

Some might think to interpret this small farmer acquiescence as a form of ecological "unfeeling" (→ *Unfeeling*). That is, the detachment or apathy of populations faced with climate change, and their failure to fully feel, internalize, and react to the disaster close at hand. Yet "unfeeling" presumes a wealthy North Atlantic society living far away from the Global South consequences of climate disaster, and describes the privileged apathy of those who can afford to behave as though they do not know what they know (→ *Unfeeling*; Slaby, 2023). This conceptual frame works well to interpret the "colonial unknowing" (Vimalassery et al., 2016) of EU countries that import Argentine soy-meal and export chemicals like glyphosate that are banned in local EU agriculture, without thinking very much about the agribusiness system it foments and the illegal logging it directly or indirectly supports.[3]

But my farmer interlocutors are not privileged "unfeeling" city dwellers of the Global North. On the contrary, they could be seen as structural victims of a neo-liberal and neo-imperial agribusiness food system that has been imposed on them by wealthier countries since at least the Cold War, and its so-called Green Revolution. They live on the front lines, in rural towns, and small peri-urban cities along the soy and deforestation frontiers, and are suffused with feelings of loss and fear. Many of them are also suffused with dangerous agrochemical exposure and pesticide drift, causing rising rates of birth defects, cancers, and other health consequences. As we have seen earlier, many farmers and ex-farmers grieve how the soy industry "killed" the soils and species they love, and worry quietly about its effects on their own bodies. They resent the betrayals and the debt they incurred at the hands of genetically modified agriculture, and long for the seeds that were ousted. They dread the ever more manic spells of flooding, drought, and dangerous heatwaves that are affecting their lives and livelihoods, with heat regularly reaching nearly 50 degrees in summer, often leading to blackouts due to faulty infrastructure. They watch as their young abandon the region for work in the big cities, and speak with mournful nostalgia of the old days of manual cotton farming as they pass crumbling cotton textile plants and gins.

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Colonial affect has been central to understanding this phenomenon in my research, bringing into relief both the ecological potentials and the *limits* of multispecies, affective attachments to non-human worlds in the context of climate disaster (Blickstein, 2024b). That is to say, it highlights how embodied sensitivities to environmental shifts can, in theory, sensitize directly affected people to the outfalls and dangers of climate change and its drivers, but also how colonial affective attachments can interfere in or obviate resistance to those drivers.

Colonial affect must be understood in all of its complex, racialized, locally rooted, transnationally situated, and historically grounded specificity. The actors in question are descendants of poor European cotton planters who Argentina recruited around a century ago to settle and populate traditional Indigenous territories on "fiscal" (aka stolen) lands gifted to them by the state, following a genocidal state land-grabbing campaign. The campaign coerced Indigenous people into plantation labor camps like Napalpí by cutting off their access to resources and violently policing their movements to prevent their economic and political-territorial autonomy (Blickstein, 2025; Chico, 2016). The state hoped European farmers would civilize the savage landscapes, as well as its longstanding inhabitants, through back-breaking agricultural labor divided along a racialized hierarchy of evolutionary stages, with white settlers on top, followed by peasant peoples of mixed heritage, and hunter-gatherers like the Qom on bottom (Bossert, 2012). This racialized settler-colonial regime fomented cotton as the capitalist plantation monoculture of the region, beginning waves of agribusiness-driven deforestation that have unfolded into today's dramatic soy boom.

Fast-forwarding to today, not all descendants of these settlers have made it big on soy, and those who remain in rural poor areas or small towns are often those who were structurally eliminated as a farming class by national and transnational policies and food systems, to the benefit of wealthier cities and Global North powers—whose own ecological "unfeeling"—as discussed earlier—is itself symptomatic of neo-imperial structures of capital (but see Hochschild, 2016, for a comparative case in the United States). All of these phenomena are, furthermore, imbricated in our global food systems described by some as the Plantacionocene (Haraway, 2015)—a racialized logic of extractive, monocultural, and deforesting capitalist production that began with the Spanish colonization of the Americas and continued with the transatlantic slave trade, giving way to plantation geographies and ecologies in the present (McKittrick, 2013; Sharpe, 2016; Wynter, 1971).

It is in this framework of racialized colonial affect that we must understand my interlocutors' attachments to the very systems that harm them. Backed into a corner, having lost the promises of progress and capitalist modernity, they are nostalgic for a time when their position in the cotton plantations assured their status and their identity within a racialized hierarchy that placed them—the white petty bourgeoisie—above their mestizo and Indigenous peons and cotton pickers. Their nostalgia for a time when biodiversity and weather patterns and work-life seemed healthier is also a nostalgia for a lost promise of the plantation, and a fetishized affective attachment to the technologies of monocultural production, which operate as a kind of elusive but reassuring "happy object" (Ahmed, 2010). Meanwhile, many of them are also liable to blame the descendants of their own cotton pickers for what they see as a (racialized) lack of work culture, rather than the structural unfolding of a system that, having destroyed Indigenous subsistence lifeways, has finally come to destroy that of small white farmers too.

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Qadma' as Relational Embodied Ecology

Qadma' represents a radically different kind of ecological and affective infrastructure than those that prevail under a regime of colonial affect. Colonial affect, for its part, works to impose and maintain ontological hierarchies of valuation that discredit the thought-worlds of colonized people—to their own peril. Nevertheless, these are not hermetic discourses and lifeways, and while colonial power relations persist, qadma' relationalities do as well—each in some way affecting, and being affected by, the other. Our many voice memo exchanges have led both Viyen Leiva and me to think about that relationship—and to write about it. Realizing the wider importance of qadma' as a concept, both for white or non-Qom people (*doqshe*) like me, and for urbanized Qom youth, Leiva[4] set out to describe and define it in Spanish. He first did so in a text called "Qadma': our territory" (Leiva, 2024a), which he then adapted into part of a talk, "Nobody is different" (Leiva, 2024b), for a local university forum on racism. The two titles, to my mind, evoke the delicate tightrope Leiva treads: qadma' is both a concept of universal standing whose urgency transcends colonial fractures, and a profoundly Qom place-based concept ("our" Qom territory) rooted in ancestral ecological ontologies that colonialism—and its affects—has sought to quash. These factors also make it challenging, and risky, to expose and transmit qadma's to a Western(ized) public, steeped in colonial affect.

Leiva defines qadma' as "the Qom concept that refers to our world, our time, our place, our space, our universe" (Leiva, 2024a). It is both about land, environment, and "territory" in a vast material sense that invokes belonging in terms of rights and reciprocal obligations, and about struggles of territorial resistance to colonial incursions. Like most "home feelings" (→ *Home Feelings*), qadma' is also intimate: the place that "births and houses us, where we grow and live out everyday life." This intimacy is also an identification: "We identify *with* and *as* [qadma']." It is felt, corporeal, relational, visceral, and entangled with the flesh of qadma' through inter-corporeal practices—such as feeding the placenta to the fleshly earth of qadma' at the start of any human life. Such reciprocities are what make this "a concept that we can feel in our bodies" (Leiva, 2024a).

Qadma' is also the felt aesthetic and sensorial experience of kinship with beings who are also ancestors—such as mountains, rivers, and stars (which, in Qom understanding, are vital beings). These relations—which we could choose to call affective social relations—are conveyed sensorially as memory: the cool freshness of the river, the scent of the plants and flowers, the roots beneath the trees (Leiva, 2024a). In evoking ancestors, Leiva is careful to collapse the unilateral pronoun distinctions of Spanish, thus including and interpolating non-Qom people reading him, or listening to his talk. As he puts it, we must "understand that they [mountains, rivers, stars, vegetation, etc.] are your/my elders and grandparents, your/my aunts and uncles, your/my families." Through their sensorial and mnemonic signs, these beings, who are collective ancestors in Leiva's rendering of qadma', "are showing us that they are still alive, and that we who are still in this life must understand that we live *with* them" (Leiva, 2024a). If understanding qadma' means feeling the concept in our own sensate bodies, that felt concept is also a reminder that we are beholden. There are expectations, rules of conduct, a delicate yet powerful economy of gifts and debts. Qadma' has protected Qom people from many colonial incursions, Leiva stresses. Dwelling in qadma' is a responsibility.

Responding to that responsibility is not a choice for the Qom. If qadma' is a concept that is felt in the body, this also includes the felt world of its relational undoings. "What

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happens to qadma' happens to ourselves," Leiva (2024a) writes. Not only through illness in the body, but through a colonization of thinking, feeling, remembering. Leiva takes as an example not just the incursion of deforesting cotton plantations and soy fields, but also the concomitant colonial "invasion" of industrialized nutrient-poor foods into communities and bodies. This marks a rupture of felt knowledge relations with forest foodways, which—and this is the most painful part for Leiva—is also a rupture with the very desire to recover them. When qadma' is colonized by alien, extractive relations, it generates a kind of "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011) toward the colonizer's very poison.

This brings us to the colonial paradox of qadma', and to the environmental racism it reveals in the flesh of a people and a world, dispossessed by plantation landgrabs and their aftermaths. On the one hand, Leiva (2024b) made a point to title his talk "Nobody is Different" as a way of invoking the Qom as a universal subject, embedded in relational webs of parity, similitude, and reciprocity more so than of racialized hierarchy, colonial difference, or distinction. The Qom stand in for all humanity. Likewise, qadma' is presented as a "concept" because it bears traits of a generalizable model or system of relations beyond a single world or ecoregion like the Chaco. On the other hand, the immense losses incurred to the body, and embodied ontological worlds, of people living under a colonial regime *are* different. It is not the same to be a settler cotton planter or soy farmer as it is to be a dispossessed cotton picker wrenched from forest-relations. Damage to the collective, shared body of qadma' affects us all, and yet some bodies, lives, and worlds are more susceptible and expendable than others under a colonial order.

In this way, evoking qadma' as a concept is a political act, with profound heuristic weight. Although he might have easily chosen the commonly used Spanish term "*cosmovisión*" (meaning worldview or cosmology), Leiva specifically opted to present qadma' as a concept. Doing so allows him to stress that qadma', while arising from the specific contingencies of Qom experience and culture, is in fact a knowledge-based description of broader reality that is applicable beyond the purview of his community.

There is a heuristic urgency to this choice, and a set of possibilities it opens to convey—with a kind of expansive rhizomic nuance—the contours of Chaco relations and lifeways that a competing, ecocidal agroindustrial system has proved more than willing to sacrifice.

Conclusion: What Is Affect Good for in the End Times?

I want to end by reflecting on endings, affect, and what qadma' can teach us about the limits and promises of our conceptual toolkits. The unfolding ecological catastrophe has forced a harsh light onto the limits of academic knowledge systems to capture, much less address, the problems generated by anthropogenic activity on this earth. This limit is especially stark in sites of struggle over territory in Global South spaces of historic and ongoing colonial occupation—like the Chaco *qadma'*. In such sites, abstract bio-ecological descriptors of environmental harms, grounded in Western nature/culture, divides can offer useful scientific metrics of credibility for measuring the scale of the crisis. I myself have often relied on such terms to evoke the urgency to particular audiences: Chaco is indeed a "global deforestation hotspot" rife with troubling, often illegal "land-use change" and "resource depletion," where "soil erosion" leads to "desertification," resulting in "biodiversity loss" and "species extinction," rising "carbon footprint" and "greenhouse gas emissions," all of which pose "global sustainability challenges," and so forth (Baumann et al., 2022).

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Framing the crisis this way, of course, falls short of capturing how many people affectively experience the relational, temporal, spatial, embodied, and ontological stakes of what is being destroyed (→ *Colonialism as Affect*). While this disconnect especially impacts colonized peoples and their descendants, who bear the brunt of environmental racism, it also resonates in wealthy Western societies grappling with the impotence of their own ecological "unfeeling" (→ *Unfeeling*). In the academy, a search for more adequate concepts to capture the crisis has led some, like the late Bruno Latour (2017), to engage with notions like Gaia as a way to reframe the Earth as an active, entangled system responsive to both human and non-human actions. But as Métis scholar Zoe Todd (2016) has noted in her critique of the "ontological turn," efforts like these risk falling short when they fail to consider the longstanding conceptual frames developed within many non-Western knowledge traditions, whose insights—often encoded in stories, practices, and oral traditions—have been epistemically dismissed, erased, misunderstood, or extractively used as raw material without citation, in line with longstanding colonial epistemologies. This critique is not just about decolonizing citation practices. As the Potawatomi Western-trained botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) has pointed out, the epistemic dismissal of radically relational and reciprocal Indigenous knowledge-ways is a self-defeating impoverishment of ecological understanding that comes at a time of urgent planetary crisis.

Where, then, does all of this leave "affect" in the ecological end times? And what insights can qadma' bring to bear? Based on my own experience doing fieldwork in the Chaco, and exchanging with my friend Viyen, I have come to see that qadma' opens up the potential of affect as a tool—both through its capacity to offer an inclusive methodological approach to studying the epistemic and ontological stakes of environmental injustice and "colonial affect," and through its capacity to push affect theory toward a more relational and sensate mode of approaching the climate crisis as a "pain felt in the body."

To the first point, qadma' is—as I have shown—a place-based concept bound up in Chaco forest life-ways, reciprocal ecologies, and more-than-human kinship relations, but also in its histories of multiple colonial incursions, racialized labor regimes, plantation violence, genocidal massacres, illegal logging, genetically modified agriculture, pesticide intoxications—as well as the myriad attempts at reversing, resisting, eliding, forgetting, and remembering all these things (Blickstein, 2025; Chico, 2016; Gordillo, 2014). As such, the qadma' concept expresses certain features of affect as a theoretical frame: in particular, its capacity to accommodate a diversity of emotional, sensate, and ontological relations of reciprocity among humans and other-than- or more-than- humans; its embodied attention to the power dynamics that shape these relations as well as their historical, material, and political contingencies; and the cross-scalar scope of its relational movements in space and in time, to name a few. I believe these qualities point to affect's potential to further—rather than dismiss—the kind of epistemically flexible ecological research that authors like Kimmerer call for, while also opening up avenues for mapping the stakes of environmental racism in a more comprehensively comparative way.

To the second point, I believe Viyen's articulation of qadma' as "a concept we feel in our bodies" can guide and challenge affect research to engage more deeply, radically, and relationally with its potential to "feel-think-listen" (Bolom Pale, 2020) to the pain of the earth. In a manner that is highly relevant for the current volume on "key concepts" focused on "affective societies," Viyen repositions the very notion of a concept as an affective force in its own right, by stressing this shared bodily pain. Deleuze-inspired approaches to affective

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concepts leave room for such an experiment (Slaby et al., 2019), but could benefit from paying closer attention to bodily felt-concepts like qadma', grounded in a relational ethics of ecological reciprocity. In this light, the affective force of qadma' as a concept is, I would argue, what makes it a "key concept" par excellence. That is, a concept that *unlocks* various modes of knowing, feeling, researching, becoming with, or describing, a given set of relations. A concept that opens windows onto ontologically flexible modes of imagining ecological relations in particular, making room for both the intimacy of their attachments and the larger scope of structures and laws that organize them. Qadma', as a concept, is "key" not just because it is a generalizable abstracted frame that can be applied to various fields of study, but also because it is an affectively embodied force in its own right, one that is "felt in the body," and that acts in the world as a set of relations. And it is "key" as a multi-scalar tool for helping us think the key crisis of our times.

Notes

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2 Emphasis added to quotes from Viyen Leiva throughout this chapter, and translations from the Spanish are my own.
3 At the time of writing in 2025, the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) is pledging to curb deforestation by prohibiting the importation of products linked to illegal logging occurring after 2021. However, on the ground, illegal logging often escapes scrutiny and reporting to begin with, such that illegally deforested zones may be reported as legal, sometimes with the complicity of local government agencies—as attested by local environmental lawyers, NGOs, and activist organizations, as well as my own interlocutors among these groups.
4 I use my friend's surname Leiva in this text, instead of his first names Viyen or Julio, when quoting him as an author of text or lecture. Note that pagination is not available as these are unpublished and unpaginated works.

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