

# Introduction

## Intimacies/Affect

### Cluster Editors

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**Susanne Luhmann** is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of Alberta. She is finishing a book manuscript entitled *Domesticating the Nazi Past: Gender, Generation and the Familial Turn in Contemporary German Cultural Memory*, which studies the public staging of familial legacies of Nazi Perpetration. Other current projects include (with Terri Tomsy) “Memory Economies,” “Prairie Sexualities” (with Marie Lovrod), and “Learning Elsewhere?,” a co-edited collection with Amber Dean and Jennifer Johnson on praxis learning in WGS (WLU Press). Susanne has published widely on queer and feminist pedagogy as well as on the institutional subject formation of WGS.

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*New Media, and Technology, The Fibreculture Journal, and The Palgrave Handbook of the Psychology of Sexuality and Gender* (edited by Christina Richards and Meg John Barker). He is also the author of *Fraught Intimacies: Non/Monogamy in the Public Sphere* (UBC Press, 2015) and the editor of the collection *Hashtag Publics: The Power and Politics of Discursive Networks* (Peter Lang, 2015). Email: [nrambukkana@wlu.ca](mailto:nrambukkana@wlu.ca) Twitter: @n\_rambukkana.

*To intimate* means to make known, to announce, but also to suggest something indirectly, to hint. *Intimate* also suggests familiarity and deep acquaintance, informality and the private, the innermost, the personal, the sexual. *To affect* means to have an influence or effect a change, to touch, to move; it also speaks to, or intersects with, feelings, emotions, tendencies, labour, privilege, and space. What both intimacy and affect share is the work of renegotiating the boundaries of what we have come to distinguish as “the public” and “the private.” Feminist thought and praxis has long played a foundational role in this renegotiation by insisting, often against much resistance, from second wave formulations onwards, that the “personal is political.” Works such as Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) research on emotional labor, Audre Lorde’s (1984) insistence on the “The Uses of Our Anger,” Elizabeth Spelman’s (1989) “Anger and Insubordination,” Alison Jaggar’s (1989) “Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology,” and, more recently, Sara Ahmed’s (2010) *The Promise of Happiness*, to name a few, have made the case for the importance of the epistemologies and politics of intimacy and affect in understanding people’s worlds.

This (re)negotiation between “the public” and “the private” is furthered by Lauren Berlant’s (1997) coinage of “intimate public spheres,” and in her edited collection *Intimacy* (2000), which might be credited with instantiating more fully the interest in critical intimacy studies in current humanities and social science scholarship. In her introduction to the collection, Berlant suggests that “intimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation. Its potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent activity, making the very attachments deemed to buttress ‘a life’ seem in a state of constant if latent vulnerability” (2). Intimacy, to Berlant, refers to the intensities of multiple domains, simultaneously utopian, optimism sustaining versions of intimacy, and prone to the regulatory, normative, ideological aspects of intimacy’s organization of people’s worlds (3).

The range of scholarship on intimacies and affects has, largely in the last few decades, enabled a wide gamut of pursuits, from theoretical exploration to political contention, from the politics of solidarity and affinity, to the fraught realities of encounters between disparate flows in life and culture. The work coming

out of this confluence is frequently provocative, often —though not exclusively—feminist in nature, and has a rebellious tendency to draw its problematics from across or between traditional academic disciplines. In the process, scholars have produced a wide range of new vocabularies. For example, Eva Illouz (2007) coined the term “cold intimacies” in her exploration of the affective life in “emotional capitalism,” defined as “a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing... a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behavior and in which emotional life - especially that of the middle classes - follows the logic of economic relations and exchange” (5). Sonja Mackenzie’s (2013) “structural intimacies” names the meeting of intimate lives and structural patterns that raise questions about intimate justice in her study of HIV/AIDS within Black communities. And Theresa Senft (2011) uses “strange intimacies” to refer to the way that, through various forms of social media, we are increasingly bound in relationships of uncanny “familiarity that arises from exchanging private information with people from whom we are otherwise remote” (7).

Such intellectual projects seek to connect acts and spheres of intimacy and affect to larger relations of power/structural patterns, including neoliberal capitalism, racialization, biopolitics, and social movements. Feminist and social justice work on both intimacies and affect brushes normativities against the grain, challenging the felt contours and linkages of everyday life. Reconsidering the organization and impacts of forms of closeness and mutual impact strikes at the heart of staid cultural forms, representations, and politics.

This thematic cluster sought contributions that considered the (re)productive work of intimacies and affect, that engaged with these two concepts (individually or together) as ways of challenging and renegotiating the boundaries of what has come to count as public and private, personal and political, sexual and non-sexual, local and global.

We asked contributors to consider some of the following questions: What does the theoretical and political turn towards affect and intimacies mean for transformative feminist and social justice thought and politics? What new vocabularies, visions, practices, and questions does this turn towards intimacies/affect give

rise to? How does this critical conjunction ask us to (re) consider what counts as intimate and affective (in)justices? What do these terms make im/possible that other terms do (do not)?

The three papers contained in this cluster represent a range of approaches and problematics that stem from engagements with, and encounters of, intimacies/affect. While all three papers address disparate matter, they are linked both materially and theoretically to what might be seen as one of the underlying processes that characterize critical studies of intimacy and affect: challenging the status quo, privilege, and oppressive normativities. For example, in her theoretical exploration of the linkages between notions of personal sovereignty and the radical potentials of queer sex, Caitlin Gladney-Hatcher challenges homonormativity and its complicity with a conventional, status quo hyper-individualism, noting that in its inherent and messy relationality, queer sex has the potential to pry us from our own obsessive self-regard and give us “a taste of and desire for social transformation.” In a similar challenge to status quo intimacies and “proper” affective attachments, Naomi de Szegheo-Lang reads two case studies—commodified snuggling and objectum sexuality—alongside each other to explore, in her words, how “[t]he claim that normative intimacy can be interrupted and refigured” enables us to question “how *intimacy* might offer a way in to think about possibilities for disrupting individualized domestically normative models of existence. And, further, how ‘improper’ affective connections might productively interrupt...normative domestic models by offering expanded possibilities for intimate relating.” Finally, Natalie Kouri-Towe unpacks the sticky political realm of queer Palestine-solidarity activism. She considers how the felt texture of relationality might be rethought as more than just a means to an end, but also as a line of flight in itself. In considering the affective life of activism, Kouri-Towe highlights the “hidden dimensions of social change, whereby the space in-between grounds new language and new modes of being that open to other transformative possibilities during other moments of intensity, such as times of war.”

Together, these three engagements illuminate the range of problematics, connections, and insights that work on intimacies/affect can reach, as well as suggest how many other pathways to societal reflection and social change might be possible when academics,

activists and other practitioners of the social take up the lenses of intimacies and affect to look at the world anew, to pause—and consider.

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