

# Life from the fragments: Ambivalence, critique, and minoritarian affect

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## Abstract

In this commentary, we respond to Ruez and Cockayne's 'Feeling Otherwise' and consider what is at stake in debates concerning the moods and modes of critique. There is a tendency in geographical work on affect to privilege affirmation, yet a key question remains as to who benefits from such moods of critique and the kinds of analysis that they afford. We argue that dominant theorisations of affirmation and negativity often elide uncomfortable discussions of power, domination, and violence. We offer a reading of the relations between affirmation and negativity through 'minoritarian affects' – a reading that arises in the midst of living through racial capitalism, coloniality, patriarchy, and heteronormativity and which builds an indeterminate future from the fragments of our lives and bodies.

## Keywords

affect theory, affirmation, ambivalence, critique, queer affect

We welcome the chance to respond to Ruez and Cockayne's (2021) thoughtful article on 'the moods and modes of geographic critique'. We were struck by the way their call is framed as a potential opening rather than an assertive direction as to where critical geographers must now turn. All too often academic debates such as these become framed as a masterful revelation, suggesting that scholarship that has come before has committed a grave and serious error, that a new concept must arise in order to help us see the world anew. Ruez and Cockayne's turn away from turns is welcome; the ambivalence at the heart of their critique *feels* different. But at times we were left wondering: does it skirt around the edges,

perhaps offering too much generosity, too much leniency? There are glimmers, however, where their frustration shines through, such as their mention of 'how the ways of feeling about a discipline are often crafted by a narrow set of mostly white male scholars'. Yet, despite the plentiful citations, we sometimes found ourselves longing for Ruez and Cockayne to be more direct: what are the specific problems for critique that emerge out of certain

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arguments in the geographical literature on affect? Whose writing is too masterful, too bitter, or too generous? And why? We cannot help thinking that we – as critical race, feminist, queer scholars – might need, at times, in certain spaces, to be bolder than this: there is too much at stake. Violent omissions, exclusionary citational practices, whiteness, colonial dominance, masculine logics, business as usual (Johnson, 2019; Oswin, 2020). These debates around the moods of critique are not just dry academic games or a case of one *upmanship* (and it so often is a male game); something more is on the line. We know that Ruez and Cockayne know this, but sometimes this urgency feels somewhat lost.

At its heart, though, Ruez and Cockayne's piece is a rejoinder to a tendency in much human geography scholarship to privilege affirmation. They question the combination of an ontological stance that offers positive affirmation of becoming with a generosity towards objects of understanding and apprehension that purports to generate and multiply new affective dispositions towards those objects. Such approaches are often said to cultivate new capacities for action and to open towards hopeful, joyful utopian becomings (a conflation of affirmation and a preference for positive affect that Ruez and Cockayne do well to warn against). Yet, who is it who can invest in hope? Who can be joyful? Whose capacities to act might be curtailed, repressed, or closed-off from them? These are some of the crucial questions that Ruez and Cockayne raise about the uneven distribution of capacities to act and how the turn towards positive affects of critique brings with it a risk of turning away from suffering and injustice (Harrison, 2015; Philo, 2017). We would have liked them to have delved further into who benefits from such moods of critique and the kinds of analysis that they afford. Conversely, what kinds of affect, experience, understanding, relationalities, and oppressions thus become marginalised and devalued within academic knowledge production, implied to be both paranoid and antediluvian?

We are writing this commentary towards the end of the northern hemisphere summer of 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought the prospect of loss, illness, and mass unemployment for many parts of the world. This looming threat brings into sharp

relief how the academic affirmation of increasing capacities for action is too easily aligned with projects of austerity, governmentality, and affective self-management. Little room is left for valuing and accepting weariness, little scope for dissenting from the imperative to strive – the imperative to try to throw oneself back into the grinder of all-too-often precarious work (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2019). This summer has also witnessed a resurgence of anti-racist protest, rallying around the insistence that Black Lives Matter. Following the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, thousands of protests – not only in the United States, but in over 60 countries worldwide – have been interwoven with: wider political organising; the establishment of autonomous spaces; and calls for defunding the police, decarceration, reparation for harms associated with slavery, the extension of LGBTQIA+ rights – all organised within a broader framework for social, economic, political, housing, health, education, and environmental justice. What has been opened up are indeterminate potentials for change – to how cities and other polities are run and organised, to how labour and housing markets work, to community safety, to social services, to schooling, to the rearrangement of political alliances and imaginations; indeed, to the very *nomos* of the city and beyond. The important point here is that it is not yet known how this will turn out; yet, none of this could have happened without the long arduous work – the work of generations – to specify and spread public recognition of systematic and structural racism. It remains important to be able to research, expose, and draw attention to structural forms of oppression and subjugation even while considering these claims as parts of broader and indeterminate transformative processes (see Kouri-Towe, 2015: 25).

Ruez and Cockayne open up a space for questioning the tendency for affirmation without forgetting the potential problems of simply passing over into negativity. They identify how the tendency towards affirmation is presented by many geographers as an alternative to 'negative' modes of critique that operate by debunking the hidden truths of a text or by revealing hidden structures of power and ideology. Negative critique is often made from what Sedgwick called a 'paranoid-schizoid' position of

suspicion. It constrains the possibilities for social and political change by generating overdetermining explanations of the world in which alternatives to injustice can only be imagined through negation of – or opposition to – the current set of political interests, identities, and relations. If negative critique is overdetermining and the turn to affirmation too often overlooks the uneven organisation of affect and capacities to act, Ruez and Cockayne's attempt to pluralise the moods and modes of critique offers another alternative that draws upon a heterogeneous understanding of difference. It is telling, then, that in their piece Ruez and Cockayne note how some of the most nuanced and thoughtful work on these debates around reparative and paranoid readings, affirmation and affect, come from queer, feminist, and critical race scholars: the difference that difference makes. Yet they highlight how some of the deeply political roots of this work have been overlooked in human geography.

At the heart of their piece, then, is a desire not to forget the political conditions in which these conceptual frameworks emerge. Here, we welcome Ruez and Cockayne's close engagement with Sedgwick's work on reparative reading. Sedgwick's first reflections on paranoid and reparative reading came in the aftermath of the AIDS crisis, in the wake of Butler's paranoid work on gender trouble (Sedgwick, 1996; Sedgwick and Frank, 1995). As Heather Love (2010) argues, Sedgwick should not be read as calling *only* for a reparative reading; rather, her work left space for the political necessity of paranoid readings. What does it mean to use these concepts 25 years later, often reducing reparative reading to a touchy-feely, open, generous approach that positions critique solely as an act of love? What does this sort of critique do, and what does it elide? How often, then, in human geography do concepts get taken up, wrenched from the context in which they were written, and repeated in a way that overlooks complexity and their political underpinnings? How often do concepts become removed from their political context, at times used in a way that is at best politically naïve, at worst as a way to maintain structures of violence and domination? Central to their argument, then, is a critique of how we scholars may pick up particular tools of critique, taking parts of a

concept, but avoiding other parts that might unsettle us, make us uncomfortable, or challenge our position of power and dominance. These omissions are often more than just poor scholarship. Certain critical tools can be selectively picked up in a way that allows business as usual – in a way that allows uneven and violent power relations to remain unchallenged.

In a similar light, as Tim Dean notes, much of the literature on reparative readings appropriates the language of psychoanalysis and uses its terms out of context (Dean and Wiegman, 2013). Even Sedgwick herself perhaps portrays reparation in a more positive register than Klein ever did (see Seitz, 2017, for exactly the kind of close careful reading we so desperately need). Reparation can never be about complete repair: the subject remains split, feelings of love and hate are always simultaneously present – the 'constant *interaction* of love and hate' (Klein, 1937: 57). Reparation is an attempt to repair the hateful damage we have caused to our object of love. Ambivalence, then, is certainly not a middle ground; it is the focal point of Kleinian object relations. Ambivalence is at the heart of the reparative position.

Yet, we were left wanting a more thorough discussion of the role of ambivalence in critique. In particular, Ruez and Cockayne offer a reading of Sedgwick and Deleuze against the grain of how they are usually read in human geography; yet, the implications of these re-readings for their later discussion of ambivalent critique framed through queer affects and minor pluralisms needs further teasing out. How, for example, does Sedgwick's understanding of reparation – in which the shattered object is not necessarily returned to some 'original' state, but still nonetheless presupposes a subject and an apprehended object – sit alongside the ontological tentativeness towards bodies and objects emerging out of a Deleuzian understanding? How does it sit alongside the 'improper objects, undomesticated feelings, and repudiated social desire' that emerge from Georgis's (2013) exploration of queer affect?

Ruez and Cockayne's reading of Georgis's account of queer affect – and of abject, aberrant desire – situates them neither in the 'better story'

of resistance, nor in stories of the undifferentiated suffering of fixed-collectivities, nor in the forms of gratification of liberal heteronormative modernity. Rather, they emerge always amidst what is at stake in the world, tied directly to the political. Concomitantly, and drawing upon Arendt as well as Deleuze and Guattari, they argue that critical and ethical judgement must always arise in-between, always immanent to the relations of plural worlds, and not be a conceptual judgement that evades or attempts to move beyond ‘a reckoning with the catastrophes of racial capitalism, historical and continuing colonialisms, or heteronormativity’. Here, we think there is something about dominant theorising that needs spelling out more explicitly, for it is the dominant forms of affirmative thinking in human geography that Ruez and Cockayne imply risk evading or moving past exactly this kind of reckoning.

In considering how dominant theorising of collective positivity can elide uncomfortable discussions of power, domination, and violence, we could turn to José Esteban Muñoz’s work on affect and minoritarian subjects, and what he terms the illegibility of ‘minoritarian affects’ in the moments when we ‘don’t feel quite right within the protocols of normative affect and comportment’ (2006: 676). The minoritarian subject, the minoritarian activist, the minoritarian critic: we often exist in a perpetual state of disorientation, reorientation, shattering, paranoia, reparation. Our affirmations of aberrant affects are rendered illegible or misrecognised as simply negative. Negativity has been rendered impermissible, retrograde, a dead-end. Yet, negativity is not simply negation, nor an opposition that overdetermines, prescribes, or shuts down potential. Rather, it is also the weariness necessary for self-preservation – for still having a future. It is the *refusal* of structural violence in Black Lives Matter that opens up potentials for an indeterminate future. Even the thinking of negativity gets captured by dominant voices in affirmative theorising. But, this is not our negativity, the queer longing of Muñoz and his feeling ‘that this world is not enough’ (2009: 1), the broken fractured

glimmers of hope found in the words of Eli Clare (2017), the utopia that exists on the horizon, the place where we hope our critique will lead us. The very purpose of why we are here, why we do this, why we put our bodies through this again and again. As queer, feminist, decolonial, and critical race scholars have taught us, negativity can open up other worlds; we build lifeworlds from the fragments.

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