



## Where crises converge

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## **Where crises converge: the affective register of displacement in Mexico City's post-earthquake gentrification**

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### ***Abstract***

Affect theory suggests that imagining different futures for cities begins by feeling the present differently. This article considers the political potential of the affective register in the context of gentrifying Mexico City, where the 2017 earthquake, as a crisis-event, burst onto the ongoing crisis-ordinary of gentrification-based displacement. I argue that this convergence of crises opened an affective impasse, or a time and space lived in excess of predictability. This affective impasse both interrupted business-as-usual gentrification and channeled historical affects across 32 years from the 1985 earthquake, and in turn generated new political energies. Informed by affect theory and trauma studies, I use qualitative data to invite the reader into the impasse and observe its affective dynamics. The empirical sections describe the entry points to the impasse, the affective activities that subjects engage in there, and the role of historical trauma in reshaping the atmospheres that emerge from this space. The resulting research investigates how affective ways of navigating an impasse offer the potential to reshape ongoing struggles against displacement. This builds on recent work in urban geography that uses psychoanalysis and affect theory to understand gentrification's complexities, contradictions, and ambivalences.

### ***Introduction: A crisis-event in the midst of a crisis-ordinary***

The arrival of an earthquake is abrupt, while its stay is elongated. It barges in on routine, upending normal patterns for weeks. When the September 19, 2017 earthquake shook Mexico City, communication networks became patchy or went dark. The electricity went out in many parts of town. Amid halted metro service and delayed buses, people clogged the streets as they attempted to make their way to loved ones. People walked for hours. Food and drink were exchanged without charge, rides offered, materials given away, bikes left unlocked in public spaces. People left their jobs and swarmed to collapse sites, arriving in business attire, bike

helmets, tennis shoes, carrying whatever tools they could rummage. Regular demands were abandoned. Many people worked at collapse sites through the night and into the next days and weeks. They took turns sleeping or went without rest for extended periods. After a week, the smell of bodies emanating from the forensics units at collapse sites began to permeate entire rescue camps, drifting throughout the areas where volunteers busily maintained a suspended city. Those who couldn't fit at the rescue sites brought food for volunteers, coordinated logistics from afar, or transferred goods between ad-hoc collection centers (*centros de acopio*) and collapse sites. The usually lively restaurants, small businesses, and bars were closed or functioned for relief efforts. For weeks on end, there was little semblance to business-as-usual.

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This was not the first-time life was interrupted by an earthquake in Mexico City. In 1985 a devastating earthquake shook the capital, damaging thousands of buildings, collapsing more than 400 completely, and taking the lives of roughly 10,000 people<sup>1</sup>. That earthquake would mark the city: it catalyzed already existing social movements<sup>2</sup> and spurred democratic reforms that led to the end of decades-long one-party rule in Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Its force frightened a great number of residents, who abandoned central areas for the more stable land in the suburbs and nearby cities. Thus, while the 1985 earthquake sparked democratic social movements it also led to drastic disinvestment in the central city and set up formerly wealthy neighborhoods for a period of decline, laying the groundwork for the gentrification that is visible today.<sup>4</sup>

Mexico City is never free from the threats of natural disaster: its lakebed soil ripples when the four tectonic plates that meet in Mexico settle and buckle. With four tiny earthquakes per day here, the city sinks unevenly at a rate of roughly 30 centimeters annually. Despite this

constant movement large earthquakes are infrequent, and against all odds the one in 2017 came on the same date as 1985's disaster: September 19.

I contend that the 2017 earthquake, as a crisis-event, burst onto an ongoing crisis-ordinary<sup>5</sup> of gentrification in Mexico City, unraveling normalized everyday injustices of housing development in central areas. This intrusion threw the city into what Lauren Berlant terms an *impasse*, or the recognition of a stalemate where business-as-usual cannot continue. An *impasse* is an uncertain moment shaped by affective dynamics and lived in excess of predictability: turbulence in perceived order.<sup>6</sup> It is a “stretch of time that is being sensed and shaped” as it happens.<sup>7</sup>

The *impasse* forged by the 2017 earthquake frames the crisis-ordinary of gentrification in affective terms. I understand affect as that which is immanent to the discursive and corporeal, which may well be excessive and escape articulation, yet which plays very real roles in shaping sensation, interest, attention, attachment, and feeling.<sup>8</sup> The affective encompasses not only the emotional, but the sensory: the chalky feel of the dust, the wet smell of rubble under the rain, the creaking sound of buildings as they shift and fall, the whirr from above of hovering drones or the beat of a cumbia wafting out from speakers in an improvised kitchen. Affective, sensorial cues like these stick out in a crisis-event but they also shape daily life less obviously during ordinary times. I study the affectivity of this *impasse* using the language of *attachments*, *orientations*, and *stickiness* from Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant. This lexicon brings the sensorial register of urban politics to the fore, a register that undergirds political action. In the exceptional time following an earthquake, preparation, improvisation, and habit mold the contents of this register.

The *impasse* of 2017 thus draws attention to the sensorial, but this is not to say that it erases the historical. Rather, I argue that this *impasse* revives collective traumas from 1985,

creating a contact zone between two crisis-events that invites affects originating 32 years earlier into the contemporary moment. These affects animate the emergence of political feelings that break with the assumptions and coping strategies of a pre-earthquake crisis-ordinary. The affective experiences described below, of displacement-by-earthquake and displacement-by- eviction, demonstrate the ways that violent experiences come to inflect one another in temporal and spatial proximity. I view them alongside one another to examine how their coincidence in 2017 Mexico City changes political atmospheres; I observe that they resonate through one another in such a way as to bring into relief the affective registers that generally hum in the background. This resonance presents alternative ways of understanding the crisis-ordinary of gentrification and displacement; it offers ways of detaching from what Berlant calls “cruel attachments:” logics and loyalties that keep people grinding towards unreachable objects against their own best interests.<sup>9</sup>

To present a snapshot of the affective register at this juncture in Mexico City, I draw from ten months of fieldwork, spread over 2017-2020. To study affect, I approach the subject matter from a number of angles including interviews, participant observation, and analysis of cultural objects. I interviewed residents in the Centro and nearby neighborhoods, activists working against displacement, nonprofit representatives, earthquake survivors, and one rescuer. I observed and participated in activist meetings, neighborhood assemblies, public events around the anniversaries of the earthquake, academic panels, social media, and several ongoing WhatsApp group chats. These hours of participant observation, along with literature and film about the earthquake, contextualize the enunciations of speakers in this article. Affect is generally understood to be in excess of language, so speech may seem a strange place to look for it. However, the impossibility of fully communicating feeling is the very driver of much verbal

expression, which renews itself in pursuit of what escapes it,<sup>10</sup> making language a very appropriate place to search for affect. I ask about feelings, sensations, and affects in interviews, coupling analysis of this spoken data with observations of expression and analysis of cultural objects. My goal is to glimpse affect's traces in this exceptional moment to see how it plays a role in gentrification and influences the stylings of urban politics against displacement.

My interest in the affective register of gentrification finds affinity with a small body of literature that uses psychoanalysis and affect theory to tease out gentrification's complexities, contradictions, and ambivalences. In the words of David Seitz, a focus on the psychic and affective registers "supplements rather than supplants" Marxist research on the political economy of gentrification<sup>11</sup> by producing granular accounts of how abstract processes take shape at the level of the unconscious and the transpersonal. Studies on topics such as the relationships between neighborhood residents and gentrifiers,<sup>12</sup> the composition of movements to resist displacement,<sup>13</sup> the psychic structures that underlie urban policy,<sup>14</sup> the precarity felt by residents in novel housing initiatives,<sup>15</sup> the psychic agency of children in a gentrifying neighborhood,<sup>16</sup> and the cruel optimism embedded in discourses of social mix<sup>17</sup> give texture to how gentrification and displacement play out at the level of the subject: how they shape subjects, but also how psychic processes shape gentrification and displacement. Analysis of dynamics in psychic and affective registers – the slippery emotions that quicken the process, the entanglements between people that slow it or complicate it, the irrational basis for policy and its inadvertent outcomes – exposes the excesses and incongruities of gentrification, revealing inconsistencies and the struggle to contain them. In doing so, this emerging body of work offers hope for thinking new ways out, through, and around the violence of gentrification.<sup>18</sup>

In what follows, I begin by discussing what an affective approach to understanding gentrification and earthquakes could offer to those resisting ongoing displacement. I go on to explain how I see the 2017 earthquake converging with gentrification-based evictions to conjure an impasse that both interrupts business-as-usual gentrification and channels historical affects across 32 years, bringing 1985 face to face with 2017. I follow this with three sections that invite the reader into the feelings and sensations that circulate in this impasse. In the first section, I describe the atmosphere of the earthquake's arrival, aftermath, and the resonance between experiences of living through the earthquake and living through an eviction; in the second section, I linger with three cultural items that return residents to the moment of the 2017 earthquake, bringing it back to life in different ways; and in the third section, I inflect these sentiments with the personal, familial, and cultural memory from the historic 1985 earthquake. I demonstrate how the collection of sensations and orientations mark how subjects caught in an impasse make do, reorganize their attachments, and summon adjacent maneuvers that change the grounds for negotiating space in the city. These sections focus on the affects that are called forth by the earthquake and then linger in the aftermath to inflect the atmosphere of gentrification going forward. I conclude with thoughts on how attending to affect makes room for politics in an impasse: in other words, what political possibility may be present in a seeming dead end.

### ***Gentrification in Mexico City as crisis-ordinary***

In Mexico City, gentrification has slowly churned through the central neighborhoods, attracting investment to areas that the 1985 earthquake ravished and which withered in the wake of the debt crises of the 1980s and 1990s. To address this abandonment and attract both tourists and middle-to-upper-class residents, in 2001 the *Programa de Rescate* (Rescue Program) was

established that would facilitate private investment in the *Centro Histórico* (Historic Downtown).<sup>19</sup> It was successful: 2000-2010 is notoriously described as the decade in which Carlos Slim bought the Centro for tourists. During the same period, the government attempted a course correction on development with two initiatives: Bando 2 and Norma 26. These initiatives were to foster the construction of social housing in the central city, but their loopholes were many. They led not to the rebalancing of the low-income housing market, but to a surge in middle class and luxury housing in inner neighborhoods.<sup>20</sup> This brought further speculation to areas that had been damaged and depopulated by the 1985 earthquake, threatening residents who had made homes among the ruins in neighborhoods like Juárez, Centro, and Roma.

In recent years, a creeping style of gentrification has changed the face of these neighborhoods, drawing back the sons and daughters of families that moved away in 1985, Mexicans from other parts of the country, and foreigners from Latin America, the US and Europe. Many are young, educated, artists, queer, hipsters. They come to Mexico City for professional opportunity, for freedom from judgment, community, central locations, and for both elite and bohemian counter-cultural atmospheres. This influx of outsiders has marked the most gentrified neighborhoods in recent years (Condesa, Roma, and Juárez). When the 2017 earthquake hit, housing markets there were becoming saturated, their inflated rents escalating rates in nearby areas including Centro, Guerrero, San Rafael, Santa Maria la Ribera, and Narvarte.

As the scope of gentrification extended beyond the initial bubble in the lead-up to the 2017 earthquake, neighborhood anti-gentrification organizing was also spreading into new neighborhoods and a web of resistance was beginning to appear, centered on a strategy of identifying predatory speculation, amplifying awareness of the cultural facets of gentrification,



and capacitating tenants to organize themselves within their buildings to resist displacement. At this time the uneven landscape of power was apparent. Despite the growing popular mobilization, it seemed there would be little chance of tenants prevailing against real estate interests. Strategic but limited interventions on gentrification's effects looked to be the most promising approach to resisting something so formidable as real estate interests in a global city.

Despite this feeling of closure, it is important to remember that the present moment is *always* something of a situation: an unclear improvisation that could have many outcomes.<sup>21</sup> Reflecting on the time leading up to the earthquake, people describe the hopelessness of realizing they were playing in a rigged game. The earthquake validated this sentiment: as it laid bare the depths of corruption in the permitting offices and construction industry, so too did it expose the hypocrisy of official pathways for protecting housing rights.<sup>22</sup> Crisis-events like a natural disaster force a reminder that the situation is open: in 2017 the earthquake threw the background circumstances of gentrification into relief, highlighting the cruel logics circumscribing anti-gentrification activism. Viewing this situation as an impasse offers a lesson: maintaining hope for progress in an entrenched paradigm is a cruel fantasy, and an exit requires introducing something unfamiliar. I turn to affect theory to understand the dynamics of engaging with the unfamiliar in an impasse and for insight on how to conjure an exit into being.

An impasse bursts with affect; it is both a place and a moment that lacks a clear narrative thread – it is filled with such an *excess* of meanings that signification inverts into chaos. When an impasse settles over a scene, the usually taken-for-granted background comes to life. To examine the background requires a sensorial relation to surroundings and encounters: paying attention to affects, feelings, and sensations is necessary for attuning to that which one is accustomed to overlook. In this way the impasse is an affective contact zone where people are touched by what

they usually hold at a distance. Here it becomes clear that the usual scripts no longer hold off the openness of a situation unfolding otherwise. In this space, attachments to trusted scripts are strained and break. New scripts swirl around the subjects of an impasse, and with newly freed allegiances they may grasp at some of them. This is a creative but indifferent space, where strange bedfellows introduce themselves, and narratives might take a turn.

Berlant calls an impasse a space of dithering because what is required for making changes is activity that seems to make no advance. Dithering begins to shift the field of objects and signifiers, stirring changes and opening a space out of which a path might plow forward. Fitful movement like this leads to new signification. It is here that the quiet work of political reconfiguration happens, where other fantasies develop and where the search for a new stability takes place. Here is where the ground for politics stirs. However, moving forward hinges on *using what is laying around* in this paradox of everything/nothing. In other words, the excess – affect – is the key for making movement. Experimenting with dubious tools to make openings is the artistry of an impasse.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Getting into an impasse: contending with rupturing attachments***

It's 10pm on September 19, 2018, anniversary of the 2017 earthquake in Mexico City. The rain-soaked candles take a moment to re-light at the collapsed building site on Álvaro Obregón 286 in the Roma neighborhood, where 45 people perished under rubble one year prior. I'm speaking with a survivor and two rescuers. The rescuers are talking about the rescue camp with the survivor, who is drinking up their stories. "Do you want to know what the rubble pile smelled like?" One of the rescuers asks me. He hands me a face mask and tells me to see if I can sense two smells. I pull the strap over my head and breathe in deeply. I just smell rubber: the soft

but pungent kind of odor that reminds me of a new car. But I can't smell anything else. The other rescuer takes the mask and holds it to his face. "I can just smell it a little," he says. It's been a whole year, I think. I ask what smell we're looking for. The first rescuer looks at me seriously and says: "Death" He pauses before he goes on, "You know, volunteers would show up, all excited to be the hero, wearing their boots, they've got their tools... They'd climb the ladder and when they got to the top, they'd catch a whiff, turn around and go right back home. It smells like death up there."<sup>24</sup>

In the wake of the emergency, the 2017 earthquake lingered as a presence: the public spaces of the city smelled, looked, and felt different, and worked in new ways. The fuzzy, dusty scent of rubble floated in the city air; narrow streets with old buildings became untrustworthy gauntlets; people slept in medians; interior spaces felt claustrophobic even after inspections cleared their safety. Every crack in the wall came under lay suspicion and expert scrutiny. Any waft of gas aroused concern about leaks. Life took place in new spaces. The rain, which comes heavily in the evenings during this time of year, complicated matters: tarps sprouted in the streets over relief activity. Ponchos proliferated. Near collapse sites, structurally safe buildings gave themselves over to rescue efforts: an orthopedic clinic offered private bathrooms for public use; an ice cream parlor became storage for volunteers' belongings; the carport of a private clinic became a collection center; a nightclub became a sleeping space for rescuers and volunteers, its bathrooms filled with toiletries for people who hadn't gone home for days.<sup>25</sup> But even after the city returned to some semblance of normal, the earthquake had shaken loose the narratives governing urban life under gentrification. The earthquake was a reminder that these narratives were only ever provisional to begin with.

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The event of the earthquake was a mass-entrance to an impasse, splicing Mexico City life into a before and after in a communal way, but individual crisis-events had been personally delivering people to a space of impasse in punctuated moments as gentrification swallowed buildings erratically in its slow creep through Mexico City. For many displaced residents in the Centro Histórico, this happens through violent forced evictions. Forced evictions are traumatic personal disasters – “like a tremor inside your house”, according to a journalist reporting on illegal evictions here – that resound affectively with *the* disaster: the 2017 earthquake. Reverberation between eviction and earthquakes generates a background hum to ongoing processes of gentrification. In the following vignette I weave aggregated accounts of earthquakes and evictions through one another to accentuate their resonance. The wisps of sensation collect between them and coalesce into an affective base for politics of displacement in the wake of the earthquake.

Eviction arrives as an abrupt knock on the door as she’s getting the family ready for the workday. When she answers, 200 riot police are standing outside. She’s being evicted. There was no notice but she has to be out. They ask for Celia but her name is Marta. It doesn’t matter, they say – nobody should be there, everyone must leave. The apartment, the building, everyone out.

When the earthquake strikes, he is in bed. At first it feels like a bus rolling by, shaking the street, but when everything continues moving he realizes this is much bigger. How strange – there was a small one last week, and only two hours ago he watched from the window as

the rest of the street evacuated for the annual drill. It's the anniversary of the 1985 earthquake: the big one that the state couldn't clean up alone, the one that took 10,000 lives, the one that powered the social movements of 1988, the one he was too young to remember, but which he heard about time and again from relatives for the last thirty years. The big one.

The riot police flood inside the apartment, breaking the furniture, throwing the TV on the floor. On top of that they toss the water jug, the piece of meat that was on the table, and the dirty dishes too. Marta sees one of them slide something in his jacket, and her family photos and important papers end up covering the floor.

So this is an earthquake. The apartment is a blender. Things crashing down everywhere. He scrambles out of bed as the alarms begins to warble. They were so late! The house creaks. Trying to pull on his shoes, he is thrown about and gives up, tries to run out barefoot, but the earth is jumping. The door sticks in the frame; this isn't like other earthquakes. It feels like the house might give in.

Terrified amid confusing directions from the police, she moves toward the door, tripping over their clunky boots and her own possessions. Her 15-year-old son, who was getting dressed when the knock came, is still pulling up his jeans as an officer punches him in

the face and drags him out, pulling off his shirt, yelling “don’t move!” Another officer drags a woman by her hair in the hall. The violence is exaggerated, unnecessary. The sound is deafening as they break the toilets, the sinks, every window, making her home entirely uninhabitable. These are minor costs in the grand scheme of things, apparently.

Outside his unstable house the street is a river of people.

He sees the neighbors. The conversations all go this way:

“Are you okay” “Yes” “And the building? Is it okay?”

There is an older woman sitting with a younger woman on the curb,

both sipping on tequila “*por el susto*”: “for the fright.”

Everyone is okay, but everyone is not okay.

To finish their work the police take the door off the hinges and weld a metal grate to keep anyone from entering. This is the scene of an eviction. “*Demasiado, demasiado*”: “Too much, too much.”

They kick everyone out. All their things are thrown out on the street.

Her bed looks so strange sitting on the sidewalk. The building is left abandoned. All that can be done is to gather the items up quickly,

call a moving truck and a relative to try to store things while you figure out what to do.

There is a before and after to the earthquake and he is now in the after. He’d never questioned the stability of his house. It was once a

refuge and a point of pride – a safe investment and a validation of class status. For the first time he feels afraid to go inside.

Everything can be destroyed so much more easily than it seems.

It – and we – are so vulnerable.

The above vignette gathers sensations expressed by survivors and witnesses in interviews and participant observation to show how in an eviction, home is scattered and exposed to the world, while in an earthquake, it is destabilized from within, imploding under the weight of its own physical structure. Rumbling through the testimonies, the voices describe an abrupt, unannounced, and violent intrusion that unravels a home and self. Feelings deriving from varied sources aggregate into something emergent in the space between. In both situations, boundaries are destabilized, boundaries that worked to keep life together and which now have urgent breaches. With these fractures, subjects are released from their familiar crisis-ordinaries and into an unknown – the unscripted space of an impasse.

These breaches expel subjects from the structures built around them – structures that may or may not have served them, but which provided a semblance of predictability. The crisis-event exposes points of weakness in what may have seemed enduring, but the fractures in the boundary do not necessarily come as a surprise: in gentrifying Mexico City, the degree of reliability people ascribe to their homes as steadfast tools for navigating life varies widely. For some, a crisis-event like an eviction or earthquake only confirms certain suspicions: of a weak rental contract, of corruption in the judicial system, or of negligent building maintenance. For them a home's dependability was already in question. For others, precarity from a crisis-event like an eviction or an earthquake comes as a surprise: they may have believed their lease was solid, that they could trust the legal proceedings for evictions, or that their house was sturdy enough to face an

earthquake. The crisis-event only reveals a false sense of certainty. These variations demonstrate the wide diversity of entrances to an impasse, but regardless of how or when one arrives, an impasse makes clear that attachments for assuring the good life – to objects, notions, and people – will not always deliver on their promise.

Thus, the rupture of boundaries that comes with the entrance to an impasse is a rupture of attachments to that which seemed trustworthy. Whether one enters an impasse abruptly or sees it coming, the narratives that scripted life until that point unravel, revealing their trajectories were towards a dead-end. Without the structures that uphold them, these crisis-ordinary stories hold less power. Subjects of an impasse have an opportunity to detach from narratives which never served them, which only held the impasse at bay with false offerings. Accordingly, the impasse finds its subjects surrounded by the wreckage of once compelling stories. What remains is improvisation. In the impasse, it may not look like much is happening, but this temporary holding space is where people reorganize their attachments. For this reason, I draw attention to the impasse as a locus of political activity: it is a place full of both uncertainty and possibility, where new hopeful (but also inherently cruel) attachments are formed and past attachments are mourned. In the following section I examine three cultural artifacts created to linger in the impasse of the earthquake. I discuss the ways that subjects are held in the impasse: how it grabs at them through these artifacts and forces a reckoning with where they align their hopes.

### ***Put it on repeat: Linger in the impasse***

The feeling of vulnerability brought on by the earthquake plays like a soundtrack in the city. It is usually a quiet murmur, but sometimes it rises to a crescendo of anxiety. It can come suddenly, triggered by a car alarm or the passing of a heavy truck shaking the building. “The



state of *shock* that crisis-events provoke can include the hysterical shout and the inexhaustible cry, but also the unavoidable, devastating, incredible silence.”<sup>26</sup> It is curious that one of the feature length documentaries about the 2017 earthquake is called *La Voz del Silencio (The Voice of Silence)*<sup>27</sup> and counterposes order and chaos both visually and in its sound design. Using drone footage taken the day of the earthquake, this film looks back at the crisis-event from above, repeatedly lowering the viewer down into the chaos, then retreating to the air for moments of relief. Splices of news reports mingle with the sound of fluttering papers or a bicycle cassette in what amounts to a dance of sound and imagery to narrate the feeling of the earthquake’s force and the rupture in city life. These sensory scenes bookend interviews with seven speakers, orchestrating movement between order and disorder, a controlled tour of the crisis-event and the human experience during and afterward.

At the same time that *La Voz del Silencio* plays on the border between order and chaos, other media lingers on the crisis-event from squarely one or the other category. Broken and chaotic is the cell phone and security camera footage that proliferates on YouTube. There are endless compilations, and each snippet of video has a different sound level: some are silent because they come from security cameras without audio feed while others brim with the sounds of people shouting, buildings creaking and objects clashing to the ground. With millions of views, it is unclear whether these videos are being watched primarily by the same people who experienced the earthquake or by people from around the world. Are they cathartic to watch? Do they inure people to trauma? Do they help survivors or others process what happened in the crisis-event? Or are they an impulsive, addictive spiral that survivors or others fall into by accident?

Opposite these videos is a quiet song – almost a lullaby – called *Alarma Sísmica* by Mexico City musician Andy Mountains. Mountains’ homage to the earthquake siren is a cathartic soundscape that takes the warbling “wuuuwuuwu”<sup>28</sup> of the alarm and slows it down, quiets it, gives the listener the opportunity to steep in its crevices. When Andy Mountains performs this song live, it evokes a mixture of sadness, relief, and delight in audiences. While the song honors the moment of tragedy, it also prods at the terror people feel towards the strange trill of the alarm, makes it smaller, less startling, more difficult to fear: in the post-earthquake impasse, it defangs the crisis-event, setting the stage for rewriting narratives. The audience laughs in emotional release, singing along by the end. The song cleanses. The commenters on YouTube confirm its therapeutic qualities.<sup>29</sup>

The site of affective activity is the lived, everyday, embodied encounter. The sensorial snaps people back to chaotic moments in an instant, wrapping them suddenly in feelings difficult to describe. The three mediatic returns to the earthquake that I describe above are three different ways to linger in the unfathomable of the impasse – three of an uncountable number. When trauma is understood to be the recurrence of a moment too saturated in affect to fully comprehend in the first instance,<sup>30</sup> it can be said to manifest affectively, and traumatic returns are first affective encounters: they pull a subject out of the regular scripts of life into a moment overwhelmed by stimuli from another space or time. Trauma harms “our systems of perception and representation”<sup>31</sup> meaning that in the aftermath of a crisis-event, work is necessary to secure the excess in narrative. Because a traumatic event is initially non-consciously processed and exceeds the capacity to represent, feel, or comprehend fully,<sup>32</sup> it returns in flashbacks, reminiscences, and other repeated assaults on the subject.<sup>33</sup>

Revisiting is thus an important transitional activity of the impasse. Moving directly from crisis-event to politics without going through the emotion, sensation, and affect of an impasse obstructs alternative possibilities from emerging. Prematurely fastening the excess of affect to objects provokes reactive responses to crisis-events, responses that grasp at ready-made objects without engaging the depths of an impasse's unpredictability. This grasping evades affective encounters, relying instead on sticky "affect objects" that Sara Ahmed describes in *The Promise of Happiness*. Ready-made affect objects suck people into their narrative orbit with scripted reactions, dictating appropriateness, preventing real encounters, and alienating those who do not conform. Resisting the gravitational pull of these objects and experiencing the discomfort of encounter allows for many sensations to make conflicting impressions, impressions that reflect the complexity of a crisis-event.

While the unpredictability of a crisis-event is obvious, uncertainty is also present in the improvisation of the ongoing present moment, and to confront this is destabilizing. It is tempting to shield oneself from life's uncertainty with structuring narratives that offer familiarity and repetition. But to sit in the unease of an impasse is a crucial step in a feminist, minor-theoretical approach to politics: it zeros in on questions of where and how transformation takes place.<sup>34</sup> These cultural artifacts are tools for staying in the discomfort of the impasse to contend with broken attachments. They are powerful not for their documentary qualities but for the way they facilitate this return. Dithering in the excess of affective dynamics makes way for people experiencing phenomena like displacement to connect with others: resonance between two people who find themselves in relation to political objects produces a certain pleasure. "The discovery that 'I stand in relation to a political object, in the same way that you stand in relation to a political object'" is something psychoanalyst Raluca Soreanu refers to as the "pleasure of

analogy.”<sup>35</sup> It is a pleasure that begins in interest and develops trust upon which to mobilize political strategy. Affect matters at this stage; it reorients subjects and composes atmospheres of political action.

There is no avoiding it: the crisis-event returns, and survivors return to it. Alongside film, song, and video about the earthquake, a common manner of going back is by retelling stories. One interviewee related to me that after the 1985 earthquake, he and a neighbor took the bus to school together every day. It wasn't until the spring of 1986 that they were surprised to find themselves talking about something besides the earthquake for a change. It took revisiting the event over and over until it wasn't the only thing on their minds. The stories about 1985 that were told not only to fellow survivors, but to children who had not yet been born – are the stories to which a generation of Mexicans grew up listening. These stories – told over and over – prime reflexes to respond in a moment of chaos. I turn to them in the next section.

### ***The awaited guest: How historical affects shift attachments in the present***

“I've been waiting for the tremor that would mark my life” writes journalist Daniela Rea.<sup>36</sup> For Rea and many in the generation young enough to not remember 1985 personally, the mythical question of earthquakes is innate to Mexico City life. This generation “grew up listening to stories from uncles, aunts, and cousins about that moment in 1985 when the earth shook, and in a matter of seconds, collapsed lives and buildings.”<sup>37</sup>

The affective impasse is a haptic interface between two space-times that have folded onto one another. This impasse absorbs affective stimulation from a distant space-time made intimate. With the fluke arrival of the 2017 earthquake on the very anniversary of the 1985 earthquake, sensations, memories, and attachments from 1985 flooded into the present. Those affects don't

just pass through though; they stick. In hanging around, they scramble the assignment of affects to objects, disrupting contemporary dynamics and generating attachments to elements of 1985.<sup>38</sup> Trauma ruptures the fabric of the present, inviting foreign affects into the contemporary space-time and cracking open the situation to different possibilities.

A year after the earthquake in Mexico City, people spoke of a new intensity in the air: an ambient sense that new things are possible. “I think there’s a consciousness, more than anything with the earthquake, that our generation could change things,” Rafa emphasized to me in an interview.<sup>39</sup> Rafa, a downtown resident-turned-activist in his mid-30’s, began to organize against displacement when his landlord served eviction notices to everyone in the building after the earthquake despite no damages. As he sincerely explains this sentiment to me under fluorescent lights, 90’s Mexican pop music, and the uncaring gaze of a few other Monday evening bar-goers at a hole-in-the-wall downtown cantina, I believe him.

The feeling that this generation could change things is shared. In the words of Rocio, a woman in her 50’s whose Condesa home was severely damaged in the earthquake, young people “were the ones who physically helped the most,” “the spirit of solidarity that the young people found was a... for me, this was a passing of the baton of what happened in 85, which we older folks lived, and the young people took it.” Millennials who participated describe feeling compelled to help.<sup>40</sup> Rocio struggled through the uncertainty of watching her own son, 20 years old at the time, throw himself into the rescue efforts. As he expressed the values she felt proud to have imparted to him – a “sense of social duty” and “human dignity” – she fought back her fears of him putting his own life in danger: “one never knows what a young man compelled by heroism will do.”<sup>41</sup> These kinds of responses show how the earthquake began to unravel the

common narrative that millennials are individualistic, narcissistic, apathetic, and lazy. In the impasse they became figures that inspire other orientations, possibly even hope or trust.

During the earthquake rescue efforts, residents of Mexico City used WhatsApp group chats, Twitter, and Facebook to organize people and streamline information<sup>42</sup> but these new forms of communication, which proved essential for post-earthquake organizing, are also affectively charged. When I spoke with people about the use of social media in 2017, they would often end up telling me about communications in 1985, suggesting a connection between the two. They spoke of community radios and liberated public telephones, but also the local word-of-mouth networks that reinforced site-based bonds. These collective memories of how people organized, especially with community radios, are also rekindled each year when the radio airs news anchor Jacobo Zabudovsky's famous chronicle of the 1985 damages, which he broadcast live over his car phone. With those memories in mind, it is understandable that these platforms would be affectively charged. In relation to WhatsApp in particular, people express feelings of both excitement and frustration. WhatsApp served a primary role in the 2017 rescue efforts, and in recent years this platform has shaped how urban struggles stitch together and how residents see sites of political interaction. Speaking with Rafa again, "I think there are a lot of people involved; there are many individual struggles, what's interesting is the social networks and the..." – he smiles as he says it – "chats on WhatsApp." We both laugh. "There's a *ton* of group chats on WhatsApp," he says, still laughing.<sup>43</sup>

As an affectively charged organizing tool, WhatsApp is a channel for feelings of pride, hope, competence, and self-organization that are attached to memories and imaginaries of 1985 communications. This affective attachment helps compensate for WhatsApp's many imperfections. In the midst of crisis, chats were quickly created to communicate urgent

information between pertinent interlocutors. After the urgency passed, chats remained, and have shown themselves to be both the grease of politics and the bane of an activist's life. Some of them became streamlined exclusive groups for taking collective action, sometimes sidestepping slow bureaucratic channels when public officials join. In productive groups, members attend to affective spikes and valleys, sending tokens of encouragement or chiding wayward messages. But because of WhatsApp's imperfect notification controls and the sheer magnitude of chat members, chats can be exasperating even in their most perfect manifestation. The wear on members ultimately leads many chats to degenerate into sundry conversation, spam, and the exit notifications of fed-up members. People love to hate chats: they are far from the perfect political tool, but they connect people both practically and affectively, taking connections offline and into city spaces.<sup>44</sup> While they orient people towards feelings of solidarity from 1985, they also write new stories of cohesion in present struggles against displacement.

Social media has an ability to create "affect worlds" that cultivate political feelings in digital spaces and mobilize action in novel ways.<sup>45</sup> In chats, resonance builds between people, fostering collective action towards change. A recent occurrence in one WhatsApp anti-displacement group chat demonstrates how: a chat member was at home when a small group of people forcibly entered her building and violently attempted to occupy apartments. Another member wrote to the group chat on her behalf and organized a response. In this, the chat spilled from the digital into the real world, introducing members who had not previously met, preventing the one in crisis from losing her housing, and getting public officials and lawyers involved to prevent corrupt management of the property dispute. The first message of distress about intruders provoked an automatic impulse that spurred members to accompany her in this crisis-event by investigating and taking action. In this instance, relationships that transect age

and class difference spill from WhatsApp into the city and result in an occupation to resist eviction. The infamous chats that proliferated with the 2017 earthquake may not guarantee changes, but they nonetheless function as sites where people build sensitivity toward other objects, people, and events.

These affect worlds are not limited to private digital spaces. While residents on the ground used social media for pragmatic purposes during the earthquake, people around the world shared expressions of encouragement that shaped a larger public sentiment. Images, memes, and hashtags territorialized feelings in portable internet objects: the hashtag #FuerzaMexico mingled with memes of Frida the rescue dog and photos of rescue efforts, including women rescuers, people in professional attire covered in dust, people working through the rain, photos of the older members of TOPOS (the first response groups founded after 1985). Individually and as an affective ecosystem, these affect worlds intervene in negative notions of *Mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) and redefine its essence in terms of care for others and solidarity in crisis, a legacy going back at least 32 years.<sup>46</sup> Thus attachments borne in another moment of Mexican history work as forces for renewing national pride and revalorizing Mexican identity in public discourse, re-orienting Mexicans towards one another.

Time and space folds in Mexico City to bring September 19, 1985 and September 19, 2017 into intimate relationship, inviting the affects of historical trauma into an impasse at the crux of displacement and gentrification. Attachments to 1985 do affective work in the present, disrupting attachments and stirring city atmospheres. The reflex to sacrifice oneself to a larger project is one way to cope with trauma from a significant disaster.<sup>47</sup> As such, collective action in homage to 1985 writes a different script in the impasse of the crisis-event. I return again to the words of Rea: “I’ve been waiting for the tremor that would mark my life.” Rea’s orientation



towards life makes the crisis not the event, but the ordinary. It fulfills one of the qualifications for living in Mexico City and writes her into the urban narrative at the same time that it upends other narratives that had more recently dominated the local imaginary – of economic development, progress, meritocracy and the apathetic selfishness of the contemporary capitalist urban condition, against which anti-gentrification organizing had struggled.

***Conclusion: Affective politics in a dead end***

I argue that the affective dynamics of the impasse provoked by the 2017 earthquake generated new energies in the ongoing urban politics against gentrification in Mexico City. In the crisis-ordinary, cruel attachments trap people in familiar patterns of making-do, but the intrusion of a crisis-event opens a situation to the unexpected, and it does so from the affective register. In Mexico City, the earthquake as crisis-event disturbed the crisis-ordinary of ongoing gentrification and corrupt development practices. I draw attention to the heightened visibility of affect in this impasse so as to sensitize scholars and activists to dynamics that are present in the crisis-ordinary albeit hidden in plain sight. My hope is that cultivating sensitivity to this register of experience and politics will help to bring it to the legible surface of political action.

In the doldrums of the crisis-ordinary, struggle against the rigid scripts may feel hopeless, and in the throes of crisis-events, it is tempting to lean on reflexes and familiar screenplays. But the present is always something of a situation, radically un-foreclosed, and at any time, improvisation and proprioception might expose how a situation could be otherwise. It takes giving oneself over to the impasse to be able to see that possibility, and the empirical sections above explore this process in the context of post-earthquake Mexico City gentrification: where are the entry points to an impasse, what affective activities occur there, and how intimate relation

to another time shapes the affective register of this space. The end result is an exploration of how to navigate an impasse in affective ways to allow for the urban narrative to break from its expected trajectory and take a turn.

Affect theory suggests that imagining different futures for cities begins by feeling the present differently. When appeals for rights through democratic process feel like a dead end in a rigged game, what political possibility lies in the goings-on of affective registers? Perhaps following feelings, sensations, and emotions may already be helping to imagine different forms of contesting gentrification. To make room for those sensations and feelings to emerge requires repeated pausing: to feel, to smell, to listen, to settle in with what arrives across space and time before fashioning responses. This dithering – which allows for sensing the co-presence of many affects, for attachments that are still gelling, for alliances to sit in uncertainty, for hesitation in hanging hopes – makes way for affective shifts to emerge out of a moment not yet scripted with a future. As the stories settle, the feelings in the songs, memes, and other expressions mingle together, possibly even in a WhatsApp chat, and begin to compose new attachments. And yet the quiet can turn eerie: an impasse is a dangerous, unsympathetic space. It affords new opportunities to *everyone* in a political landscape. The chat can go stale or the developer can use the earthquake as an excuse to vacate tenants. Nevertheless, framing the scenario in these terms may shed light on an important pivot-point in making structural political change.

It is easy to believe the Mexico City narrative that Carlos Slim has already bought the Centro, that gentrification is here, that “it’s over” for older residents who can’t afford market rents. But feeling around in the affective crevices of that narrative may open trap doors to other formations of urban space. The earthquake in 2017, as a crisis-event that interrupted the crisis-ordinary of this gentrification story, framed the loss of home in a new light, and brought the

contemporary moment into intimate relation with the 1985 Mexico City earthquake: a space-time in Mexican history that was characterized by resourcefulness, generosity, heroism, solidarity, and hope. In this article I described the entrances to an impasse in Mexico City, the ways people linger in that affective space, and the way that another space-time folded onto the present to shape the affective atmosphere and disturb other attachments. I did so to demonstrate the openings that this impasse brought upon what seemed like a dead-end for residents of this gentrifying global city. By highlighting the affective dynamics in a moment where they already appeared in an exaggerated state, this research attempts to call attention to the affective register and scratch at the openings of an impasse that can be found there. It pushes towards understanding how the terms of negotiating urban space are opened or foreclosed in the affective register and begs the question of what an “affective” urban politics – as intentional interventions on harmful attachments – might look like.

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<sup>1</sup> This figure is disputed, and ranges from 5,000-50,000. 10,000 is a commonly cited number.

<sup>2</sup> For a brilliant explanation of the transition from ‘el pueblo’ to ‘la sociedad civil’ in Mexico after the 1985 earthquake, see A. Leal Martínez, ‘De pueblo a sociedad civil: el discurso político después del sismo de 1985’, *Revista mexicana de sociología* LXXVI (2014), pp. 441–469

<sup>3</sup> M. Anderson, *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2011)

<sup>4</sup> D. E. Davis, ‘Reverberations: Mexico City’s 1985 Earthquake and the Transformation of the Capital’, in eds. F. Miraftab and N. Kudva (New York, Routledge, 2015), p. 203–207.

<sup>5</sup> Pulling again from Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, I counterpose the crisis-ordinary with the crisis-event: the crisis-ordinary is the slow, erosive effect of living under conditions that harm you. It is a condition under which many people survive, but do not flourish.

<sup>6</sup> For more about the related notion of turbulence, see T. Cresswell and C. Martin, ‘On Turbulence: Entanglements of Disorder and Order on a Devon Beach’, *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* CIII (2012), pp. 516–529

<sup>7</sup> L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, Duke University Press Books, 2011), p.199.

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- <sup>8</sup> S. Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010); E. K. Sedgwick, A. Frank and I. E. Alexander, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Duke University Press, 1995); B. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Duke University Press, 2002).
- <sup>9</sup> L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*
- <sup>10</sup> P. Kingsbury and A. J. Secor, 'Introduction: Into the Void' in *A Place More Void* (Nebraska University Press, forthcoming).
- <sup>11</sup> D. K. Seitz, "'Make this adult mess make sense again": the psychic lives of gentrification's children', *Social & Cultural Geography* (2019), pp. 1–18
- <sup>12</sup> M. Butcher and L. Dickens, 'Spatial Dislocation and Affective Displacement: Youth Perspectives on Gentrification in London', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* XL (2016), pp. 800–816
- <sup>13</sup> M. Lancione, 'Revitalising the uncanny: Challenging inertia in the struggle against forced evictions', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* XXXV (2017), pp. 1012–1032
- <sup>14</sup> J. Proudfoot, 'The libidinal economy of revanchism: Illicit drugs, harm reduction, and the problem of enjoyment', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2017, 1–21.
- <sup>15</sup> E. Harris, M. Nowicki and K. Brickell, 'On-edge in the impasse: Inhabiting the housing crisis as structure-of-feeling', *Geoforum* CI (2019), pp. 156–164
- <sup>16</sup> D. K. Seitz, "Adult mess"
- <sup>17</sup> J.-P. Addie and J. C. Fraser, 'After Gentrification: Social Mix, Settler Colonialism, and Cruel Optimism in the Transformation of Neighbourhood Space', *Antipode* (2019)
- <sup>18</sup> N.B. this work builds on the important contributions to urban geography and urban theory made by feminists and postcolonial thinkers. See L. Bondi and D. Rose, 'Constructing gender, constructing the urban: A review of Anglo-American feminist urban geography', *Gender, Place & Culture* X (2003), pp. 229–245; J. Davidson, L. Bondi and M. Smith (eds.), *Emotional geographies* (London New York, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016); L. Kern, 'Rhythms of gentrification: eventfulness and slow violence in a happening neighbourhood', *cultural geographies* (2015), p. 1474474015591489; L. Kern and H. McLean, 'Undecidability and the Urban: Feminist Pathways Through Urban Political Economy', *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* XVI (2017), pp. 405–426; A. Leal Martínez, 'Peligro, proximidad y diferencia: negociar fronteras en el Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México' (2007), p. 12; A. Roy, 'The 21st-Century Metropolis: New Geographies of Theory', *Regional Studies* XLIII (2009), pp. 819–830; K. Brickell, M. Fernández Arrigoitia and A. Vasudevan (eds.), *Geographies of Forced Eviction: Dispossession, Violence, Resistance* (London, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), pp. 1–23; A. Elliott-Cooper, P. Hubbard and L. Lees, 'Moving beyond Marcuse: Gentrification, displacement and the violence of un-homing', *Progress in Human Geography* (2019), pp. 1–18
- <sup>19</sup> F. Carrión, 'El centro histórico como proyecto y objeto de deseo', *EURE* (Santiago) XXXI (2005); I. Díaz Parra and L. A. Salinas Arreortua, 'La producción del consumidor. Valorización simbólica y gentrificación en el centro de la Ciudad de México', *Andamios. Revista de Investigación Social* XIII (2016); L. A. Salinas Arreortua, 'Gentrificación en el Área Central de la Ciudad de México', eds. R. Hidalgo and M. Janoschka (Santiago, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2014), pp. 179–198; A. Leal Martínez
- <sup>20</sup> P. Olivera and V. Delgadillo, 'Políticas empresarialistas en los procesos de gentrificación en la Ciudad de México', *Revista de Geografía Norte Grande* (2014), pp. 111–133
- <sup>21</sup> L. Berlant
- <sup>22</sup> M. Pskowski, 6,000 Complaints ... Then the Quake: the Scandal Behind Mexico City's 225 Dead, *The Guardian* (2017)
- <sup>23</sup> J. Linz and A. Secor, 'Politics for the Impasse', in *A Place More Void* (Nebraska University Press, forthcoming)
- <sup>24</sup> Field notes, September 20, 2018.
- <sup>25</sup> Information in this section comes from an interview with Eduardo, 28 year old rescuer, December, 2018, and participant observation in anniversary events, September, 2018.
- <sup>26</sup> D. Fonseca, ed., *Tiembra* (Mexico City, Almadía, 2018), p.18.
- <sup>27</sup> N.B. This title is also a subtle reference to Elena Poniatowska's famous chronicle of the 1985 earthquake, '*Nada, Nadie: Las voces del temblor*' C. Uruchurtu, *La Voz del Silencio* (Cultura Colectiva, 2018)
- <sup>28</sup> YouTube comment, Andy Mountains, *Alarma Sísmica* (2018) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGr0RbRCMfo>
- <sup>29</sup> Andy Mountains
- <sup>30</sup> C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

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- <sup>31</sup> Quoting Kristeva in E. A. Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (Rutgers University Press, 2005), p.5.
- <sup>32</sup> E. A. Kaplan, *Trauma*.
- <sup>33</sup> C. Caruth, *Experience*, p.91.
- <sup>34</sup> C. Katz, 'Revisiting minor theory', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* XXXV (2017), pp. 596–599; C. Katz, 'Towards minor theory', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* XIV (1996), pp. 487–499
- <sup>35</sup> R. Soreanu, *Working-through Collective Wounds: Trauma, Denial, Recognition in the Brazilian Uprising* (Springer, 2018), p.59
- <sup>36</sup> D. Rea, 'Alguien moverá edificios enteros' (Mexico City, Almadía, 2018), pp. 99–110, p.99.
- <sup>37</sup> Rea, 'Alguien', p.101.
- <sup>38</sup> For more on hauntology, see A. Leal Martínez, "'You Cannot be Here": The Urban Poor and the Specter of the Indian in Neoliberal Mexico City', *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* XXI (2016), pp. 539–559; J. Wylie, 'The spectral geographies of W.G. Sebald', *cultural geographies* XIV (2007), pp. 171–188; E. Cameron, 'cultural geographies essay: Indigenous spectrality and the politics of postcolonial ghost stories', *cultural geographies* XV (2008), pp. 383–393; J. F. Maddern, 'Spectres of migration and the ghosts of Ellis Island', *cultural geographies* XV (2008), pp. 359–381; J. F. Maddern and P. Adey, 'Editorial: spectro-geographies', *cultural geographies* XV (2008), pp. 291–295
- <sup>39</sup> Interview, October, 2018.
- <sup>40</sup> This is evidenced in the project, "Generación 19S" conducted by researchers at UNAM on the participation of young people in rescue and recovery efforts. See <http://www.generacion19s.puec.unam.mx/>.
- <sup>41</sup> Interview, December, 2018.
- <sup>42</sup> See in particular @Verificado19S on Twitter, where verified information was posted and updated to prevent on-the-ground mixups.
- <sup>43</sup> Interview, October, 2018.
- <sup>44</sup> Z. Tufekci, *Social Media's Small, Positive Role in Human Relationships* (2014), p. 4; Z. Tufekci and C. Wilson, 'Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations From Tahrir Square', *Journal of Communication* LXII (2012), p. 363–379.
- <sup>45</sup> Z. Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2015).
- <sup>46</sup> M. Anderson; R. Solnit, *A paradise built in hell: the extraordinary communities that arise in disaster* (New York, N.Y., Viking, 2009)
- <sup>47</sup> Interview with head of Mexican Psychoanalytic Society, December, 2018.