

# Inconvenience, ambivalence, and abolition: A politics of attachment and detachment in geography

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## Abstract

In this commentary, we explore the idea of detachment that we see as central to Anderson's notion of attachment but that nevertheless does not take centre stage in the paper. We situate detachment not as attachment's antithesis, opposite, or negative, but as its structural condition and as irretrievably interwoven with attachment. Through Berlant's recent writing, we foreground the notion of ambivalence as a way to think about the complexity of attachment–detachment and to foreground politics and differences in these processes. Then, we draw on abolitionist writers like Gilmore and Lewis to highlight the complicated intersection of structural and affective attachment and to consider the possible intellectual and political stakes of pursuing a geography of attachment.

## Keywords

Abolition, affect, ambivalence, attachment, inconvenience

In dialogue with relational theorizing in geography, Anderson's (2022) article makes a case for highlighting and theorizing attachment. The paper shows that attachment, or something like it, has long been central to geography, even as it is rarely fully theorized as such. In developing an account of attachment as a particular kind of enduring and optimistic affective relation, the paper takes forward work on affect by pointing toward the difficulties that certain relational approaches – operating in a more neutral language of assemblage, arrangement, or network – have in thinking through how some relations are differentiated from, and become and remain more important than, others. Anderson's account stays with the messiness,

complexity, and overdetermination that marks the best theorizations of affect, and it invites readers to critically and carefully consider the geographies of attachment.

This is a very promising project. After reading the paper, we are left with three problem-questions that are possible because of what Anderson's work opens up, even as responding to them may require going places that the paper does not get to:

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1. While Anderson approaches attachment as a particular kind of relationship between a subject and an object, objects seem to take centre stage in the paper. Keeping in mind theories of relationality in which subjects cannot exactly pre-exist (their) objects (e.g. Sedgwick, 2007), we wonder what would happen if we pay more attention to the *subjects* of attachment, and how different subjects form (or not) different attachments?
2. Just as some relations are more important than others, some attachments have different kinds of holds on us, individually and collectively. Anderson is already attuned to this problem, pointing to quite different examples, from the book that reappears year after year on a syllabus, to global structures of violence like capitalism and white supremacy. How do we navigate these differences (in terms of their relation to conscious and unconscious processes, the role of individual volition, etc.)?
3. If we approach attachments as particular kinds of promissory and obligatory relations, then how should we understand the political stakes of these promises and obligations, both in researching any particular scene of attachment and in pursuing a geography of attachment more broadly?

In this commentary, we grapple with some of these problem-questions through a theorization of detachment and ambivalence. We develop this by placing Anderson's paper alongside Berlant's (2022) *The Inconvenience of Other People*, which resonate well together because of the latter's exploration of detachment in the context of the ambivalence and non-sovereignty of existing in relation to other people. We then turn toward abolitionists like Gilmore and Lewis to further clarify the potential intellectual and political stakes of pursuing a geography of attachment–detachment at a moment when the need to “change everything” has, perhaps, become more broadly recognized.

To begin with these problem-questions, we want to start where Anderson leaves off, with the question and problem of detachment. To us, and, we think, to

Anderson, detachment is central to attachment. He writes: ‘Attachments...involve becoming proximate to a promissory object in the midst of the mass of detachments and disconnections and separations which are the ever-present condition and shadow of attachment’ (Anderson, 2022). Detachment here is a process co-present with attachment, imbricated within it rather than its antithesis or negative. Yet, detachment and its relationship to attachment could be more fully theorized. Indeed, in the conclusion, Anderson notes that ‘more sustained engagement with detachment as relation, condition and event is for elsewhere’. As we explore provisionally here, theorizing detachment alongside attachment helps us to approach some of the problem-questions posed above.

We situate detachment not as attachment's opposite or inverse, not as a simple reversal, undoing, negation, or antithesis, but as something that is attachment's structural condition, something without which attachment cannot proceed at all. Detachment is a non-linear process, one that overlaps with attachment in not wholly conscious or voluntaristic ways. Subjects do not straightforwardly form attachments and then, later, simply detach from them if necessary or desired. Berlant (2022) argues that it's not just that we (only sometimes) seek detachment from the things that harm us: we also find it difficult to live with the forms of relationality that we like too, those good (enough) objects to which we *want*, or we think that we want, to remain attached. This is an acknowledgement of the nonsovereignty of relation and one manifestation of what Berlant refers to as an inconvenience drive: a constant ebb and flow, a negotiated pulling away from and returning to those objects that are important to us, or a forming of unlikely relations not definable by the current contours of normative relationality. These good enough objects aren't always cruelly optimistic either. It's not (only) that we're misrecognizing objects that impede our flourishing as ones that are actually on our side, though sometimes it is that. It's also that optimistic attachments that aren't cruel are also difficult and inconvenient as well. Here detachment is imminent to the attachment as a pulling away from objects we like: as a desire for an impossible independence from or for them,

or perhaps as a floundering for more control over them or over ourselves.

Detachment also allows us to think more clearly about a *politics* of a geography of attachment, through its connection to concepts like ambivalence. As we note elsewhere (Ruez & Cockayne, 2021; Anderson et al., 2022), ambivalence is central to the scene of attachment–detachment, foregrounding the complexity of affective and material relation, its stopping points, its overdetermination, and its non-linearity. Ambivalence as a concept clarifies attachment–detachment by complicating it: these terms are not binaristic, voluntaristic, or unidirectional. Berlant (2022: 8) conceives of ambivalence as a ‘conflicted experience that allows us to face up to the phenomenality of self-disturbance in the space of co-existence and even the desire to let in particular objects, or to protect them once they’ve gotten under the skin’. This conflicted experience unsettles our being, confirming that objects are not entirely knowable to subjects who also can’t entirely know themselves. Berlant notes, ‘during the stretch of attachment-testing, people can only think they know what they want or what they don’t want. They find out later that their desires were proposals’ (2022: 76). Thinking about attachment as a proposal (as well as a promise, trajectory, and obligation) foregrounds the uncertainty of processes of attachment and detachment and the opacity of the good (enough) or better objects that we seek to attach to.

It’s in outlining attachment–detachment as an ambivalent process that we return to Anderson’s conclusion, which foregrounds ‘the difficulty of detachment at a time when inducing detachments feels so necessary, whether that be from white supremacy or fossil fuels, from hyper capitalism or gendered norms’. On this necessity, we agree, and we find important resources for understanding these difficulties in Anderson’s conceptual work, as well as Berlant’s. Yet, the intellectual and political stakes of attachment–detachment become clearer still when considered in relation to contemporary abolitionist projects.

Abolitionist theory and practice raises the problem of the relationship between attachment/detachment as (dis)investment in a structure, and the attachment or hold that a structure might,

nevertheless, have on us, regardless of our personal or affective involvement in it (Gilmore, 2022). At a societal level, many remain attached to carceral systems, as systems fantasized or desired as appropriate forms of punishment, possible sites of rehabilitation, or necessary systems that are supposed to protect ‘us’. Perhaps needless to say, these fantasies variously represent explicitly racist imaginaries of white law and order, as well as more complicated, but still often racist hopes for protection held by many who are living the societal consequences of racial capitalism’s violence and organized abandonment. Popular understandings of prisons as a social good or (at least) a necessary evil mix with deep political and financial commitments to prison expansion as a solution for the overaccumulation of capital held by segments of the political and financial elite across the political spectrum (Gilmore, 2007). Complicated attachments extend to the people and communities whose livelihoods depend on incarceration: prison guards, social scientists, and entire communities whose local economies depend on a prison. Davis (2013: np) warns that even those committed to challenging the carceral state can ‘replicate the structures of retributive punishment in our own emotional responses’. Many thus remain materially, financially, and affectively implicated in the perpetuation of these systems. Given the depth of this form of attachment, the possibility of *detachment* is much more complex than an intellectual and conscious acknowledgement of the violence of carceral systems and the need, therefore, for their removal.

Just as Anderson (2022) offers a concept like ‘forms of attachment’ to name ‘an interlinked set of promissory objects which *together* offer a fantasy of the good life and are made available as a resource for subjects to organise living through’, we can think about the sense in which abolition offers a *form of detachment* across multiple, interlocking spheres, from its critical and creative center in prison abolition work, to border abolition (Walia, 2021), to abolitionist approaches to the family (Lewis, 2022) or universities (Meyerhoff, 2019). Yet, abolition is not only a question of detachment. Indeed, Gilmore (2020: np) influentially argues that ‘abolition is about presence, not absence’. Here, ‘abolition is a fleshly and material

presence of social life lived differently', and not only the absence of prisons (Gilmore, 2022: 261).

Articulated a little differently, in terms of family abolition, Lewis (2022: 81) helpfully asks, 'what would it mean to not need the family?', as a way to point us to emergent possibilities and new forms of relationality that would begin to disentangle us from the current hegemonic mode of reckoning with one another's inconvenience. She points to historical examples to emphasize how our current understanding of, for example, the abolition of slavery, was generated in retrospect: today's understandings of slavery's abolition were not imaginable prior to abolition itself, and at the time, slavery fit into the era's settler colonialist and white supremacist rendering of 'progressive' values: humanism and liberalism. In the same way, while the abolition of current systems of violence may be, at least in some ways, unimaginable, this should not be an impediment in our reckoning with them, and we can attempt to view them in retrospect from the point of view of a future to come, that may, we suspect, be immanent to our present in complex ways (see also Kaba, 2021). Nor should we misunderstand the violence of *today's* white liberalism and humanism. Abolition, then, and hence, we suggest, detachment, is a process of world-building (Winston, 2021), of producing new modes of relationality, perhaps especially those that appear at present to be unthinkable or unimaginable. Changing everything (in Gilmore's words) is then a process that is interested in producing 'radically alternative worlds as a critical method for scholarship and organizing' (Winston, 2021: 817). Abolitionist politics offer, for us, one of the best and most urgent articulations of the problem-questions of attachment–detachment that holds out the promise for – and indeed, requires – a different kind of world.

Anderson's intervention offers an important opportunity to think through the spatial politics of relationality in a novel way, and we are excited to see future empirical work emerge in response to Anderson's invitation to consider the geographies of attachment. Even where it stops short in its account of 'detachment as relation, condition and event', the paper offers a productive provocation, to which we have tried to respond here by exploring

detachment and attachment together, in all their tense, ambivalent relations. In dialogue with Berlant's recent writing on inconvenience and ambivalence and the work of abolitionists like Gilmore and Lewis, we have sought to foreground the *politics* of attachment–detachment in a violent and uneven world. While there are potential divergences between Berlant's emphasis on inconvenience and survival and the abolitionist call to 'change everything', we think that, taken together, they productively mediate the heterotopian and utopian impulses that could be conceptualized as an attachment to the possibility that the world could be collectively remade, however inconveniently. Critical and careful work on the geographies of attachment–detachment could provide resources 'through which we can loosen the world of conventions, spongy norms, and conventional violence – and to provide dimension, texture, and resonance for emergent and ongoing alt-forms of life' (Berlant, 2022: 12). And such work could speak productively with abolitionist projects seeking to develop new modes of being together, being responsible to and for one another's inconvenience, and acknowledging the nonsovereignty of being in relation with each other. This seems like one useful path for a geography of attachment to take, and one that we would be excited to (un)learn alongside.

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