



The Emergent Political: Affective Social Transformation in Two-Spirit, Queer and Trans People of Colour Media

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*Power can be invisible, it can be fantastic, it can be dull and routine.
It can be obvious, it can reach you by the baton of the police, it
can speak the language of your thoughts and desires.*

Avery Gordon

Attending to the affective dimensions of social phenomena can foster new social justice-oriented perspectives and practices that intentionally harness power affectively, rather than only building static structures of opposition that can serve to limit the breadth and depth of social justice organising. The word ‘attending’, is apt in this consideration, because it is not that affects necessarily need to be ‘discovered’ to be brought into being; power, as it circulates affectively, is always already there. However, just as power works affectively, political potentialities also form and proliferate. Theorising social justice movements affectively means attending to the details of lived experience as they manifest in the complex webs that connect political thought to action. Whether it be pre-conscious embodied reactions, memory or lack thereof, emotional attachment and spiritual practices, these happenings and their qualities are part of an environment of co-constitute relationships from which movements emerge, fall apart or continue to gradually evolve.

Theorising political potential through this paradigm allows for the consideration of organising methods that can adapt and thrive beyond neoliberal outcome-based imperatives and strict notions of ‘successful’, or ‘strong’ movements. If we consider our current era as a ‘state of exception’, a term brought forth by Carl



Schmitt and expanded on by Giorgio Agamben, wherein a state of emergency becomes permanent and is based on the sovereign's ability to transcend the rule of law in the name of the public good as 'part of a wider range in governance in which the rule of law is routinely displaced by the state of exception, or emergency, and people are increasingly subject to extra-judicial state violence' (Bull, 2004), then building community and movements toward deep transformative social change cannot rely on standards of productivity and guaranteed outcomes. Rather, social transformation requires a finer attunement to the parts *between* and *within* each of us; the complexities and contradictions that characterise the relationality so fundamental to growing practices of resistance and survival that are: anti-racist, decolonial, non-patriarchal, queer, and non-able-bodied.

My research focuses on two-spirit, queer and trans people of colour (2-QTPOC) media making as a process of movement building. In doing this work, I find it not only useful, but necessary to theorise affectively in order to affirm the generative quality that 2-QTPOC media can hold. 2-QTPOC media can constitute sites and processes that reckon with the tensions ever-present in political resistance by attending to the tensions between representation and embodiment, ideology and lived experience, direct action and dreams.

Theorising through affect helps to conceptualise social justice movement building as an 'assemblage', because 'in its debt to ontology and its espousal of what cannot be known, seen, or heard, or has yet to be known, seen, or heard, [assemblage] allows for becoming beyond or without being' (Puar, 2007, 216). An affective lens facilitates the emergence of the new – not as a turning away from the past or present, but as a recapitulation of history/knowledge/experience formed *with* these paradoxes, rather than *despite* them. Furthermore, bringing an affective focus into the realm of the social sciences is less about valuing the relevance of one academic discipline over another than it is about a broader paradigm shift beyond disciplinarity. Embracing such an epistemological paradigm also requires a recognition that the attention to intensity and the metaphysical that contemporary theorists categorised in the 'affective turn' references conjures practices and thought that have always been present in the cosmologies, knowledges and rituals of indigenous and people of colour. 'Affect theory', as a field of intellectual enquiry can exist as such, but should also be practiced in a way that resists the reification of a 'new' or separate discipline, and instead be considered as an approach

that can be enacted in different ways. Therefore, I choose to honour the legacy and ongoing work of two-spirit, queer and trans people of colour (2-QTPOC), by writing, as a queer woman of colour, about 2-QTPOC who organise and produce creative work through affective methods.

The 2-QTPOC media makers I highlight all work through both the explicitly political and everyday experiences to create and express assemblages that redefine what is possible for social justice-oriented efforts. By attending to both what haunts and lingers from the past, and to what potential futures emanate on the horizon of our imaginations, these artists and organisers engage in creative processes that also shape political strategy and possibility. Approaching 2-QTPOC media from within an affective paradigm leads to questions that reach for answers beyond what media *should be*, towards what it is that media *do*. Within the process of performance or media making, how do 2-QTPOC artists attend to haunting as it is embedded in ritual and memory? How can 2-QTPOC media reveal and create potentialities of ‘queer futurity’ and a queer political imagination?

Haunting: Survival and Shapeshifting at the Crossroads

In her book, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon describes ‘haunting’ as ‘a paradigmatic way in which life is more complicated than those of us who study it have usually granted’ that is ‘neither pre-modern superstition nor individual psychosis,’ but a “constituent element of modern social life’ (Gordon, 1997, 7). The concept of ghostliness and haunting that Gordon grapples with is about the attachments that linger, whether we are conscious of them or not, that get lost in the shadows of personal trauma, social relations and political moments, and remain almost not there, but often manifest at different affective registers of bodily or psychic experience that are not necessarily linear, rational or intentional. These ghosts overcrowd the gap between structures that are the subtraction of attachment and the longings and the haunting of something we cannot let go of. It is this in between realm that often goes overlooked or ignored in intentional engagements with political organising. Haunting brings up epistemological and ontological questions, such as: What escapes consolidation and containment? What defies consciousness but nevertheless compels?

In the media-based projects, *Mobile Homecoming* by Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Julia Wallace and the *Unknown Artist* series by TextaQueen, these queer of colour artist/activists practice social justice-oriented mediation by drawing from and rearticulating hidden histories, lived experiences and healing rituals that haunt cultures and representations of queer of colour political resistance.

Mobile Homecoming, an intergenerational and ‘experiential’ archiving project that tours queer of colour communities across the United States, is described by Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Julia Wallace, two young, queer women of colour, as a spiritual journey that honours the ‘trans and cis-gendered women, trans men and genderqueer black people [who] grew their own bravery and created community’ (Gumbs and Wallace, 2012). Ann Cvetkovich writes, in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, about the complexity of institutional memory, archives, public feelings, everyday trauma, and ephemera from queer social movement. Cvetkovich invites her readers to explore ‘how trauma can be a foundation for creating counterpublic spheres rather than evacuating them’ (Cvetkovich, 2003,15). By visiting and living with these elders, Gumbs and Wallace collect their stories through interviews, video and visual art, based on an ethic of community accountability that creates a different kind of ‘counterpublic sphere’, where simple gestures of care, like listening to a new friend and taking out the garbage, are radical acts of survival that acknowledge the suffering that comes with living on as a queer person of colour, while upholding the strategies that have developed from experiences with oppression. Therefore, *Mobile Homecoming* is more than an effort to gather data to commemorate histories long gone, but rather it is an enacted commitment to affirming and nurturing the affective dynamics that are always shaping movement building (What happens between the meetings and rallies? What happens after the revolution?) to reinvigorate the invaluable tools and ‘modes of survival’, that these queer black elders embody: ‘social support organizing’, ‘artistic creativity’, ‘spiritual transformation’, and ‘revolutionary interpersonal relationships’ (Gumbs and Wallace, 2012). Looking at *Mobile Homecoming* through an affective lens shows us that movement building is and must be more than just what we can cognitively comprehend, but also that there is always work to do to recognise and call upon the often invisible, yet present legacies of the past that not only persist in coherent political organising structures and narratives, but also in the complex ways *we live through* these movements.

Part of the affective power of mediation is that it can harness the intensities of oppression and violence by reassembling memories and histories into imaginative storytelling that produce representations and narratives, as well as events from which lines of flight generate. TextaQueen, an Australia-based, immigrant, queer artist of colour whose main medium consists of felt-tip markers, seeks to 'boldly re-interpret the tradition of the salon nude, [exploring] politics of sex, gender and identity in tangent with ideas of self-image and inter-personal relationships' (TextaQueen, 2013). TextaQueen's *Unknown Artist* series combines reinterpretations of ancestral mythology and religious symbolism that display the co-constitutive relationships between fact and fiction, personal experience and institutionalised history. In one of TextaQueen's self-portraits, *Call of the Crocotta*, the artist is presented as half human, half crocotta, the mythical dog-wolf of India or Ethiopia, most closely resembling the contemporary hyena that is said to possess abilities to switch genders, imitate human speech and shapeshift. While the portrait is a two-dimensional image, it acts as a still of an ongoing moment that pulsates at a threshold before the codification of potentiality fully takes form, where the metaphysical 'cluster', at a place where 'the imagination fills with movement, upheaval, and contradiction: the crossroads, the railroad track, and the cemetery' (Alexander, 2005, 303). TextaQueen's work draws attention to how the process of assembling one's own myths and origins relies on affective experience, memory and imagination that are thus necessarily overflowing with ghosts among abstract conceptions of space-time, attachment, power, desire and identity as well as material forms such as bodily pain, identification documents, archival footage, and ephemera.

Queer Futurity: Worlding through the Situation

Another way 2-QTPOC media can be appreciated through affective theorising is to view 2-QTPOC media practices as forms of 'worlding' towards a 'queer futurity' (Muñoz, 2009) where queerness is 'not an identity or an anti-identity' but develops as assemblages 'that are unknown or not cogently knowable, that are in the midst of becoming, that do not immediately and visibly signal themselves as insurgent, oppositional, or transcendent' (Puar, 2007, 204). 2-QTPOC media can be thought of as a process of transformation, as 'something distinct from resistance' (Gordon, 1997, 202).

Founded in 2006, *Mangos With Chili: the floating cabaret of queer, trans and two spirit people of color bliss, dreams, sweat, sweets & nightmares*, is a 'North American touring, Bay Area-based arts incubator committed to showcasing high quality performance of life saving importance by queer and trans artists of color [...] including dance, theater, vaudeville, hip-hop, circus arts, music, spoken word and film' (Mangos With Chili, 2013). *Mangos* offers more than entertainment for its audiences, rather it aims to foster a space for 2-QTPOC community to share space and support one another, expanding the possibilities of performance and show spaces. As a scholar who focuses on queer of colour performance, Muñoz upholds the potential of performance as a form of critical and powerful world making:

To 'read' the performative [...] is implicitly to critique the epistemological. Performativity and utopia both call into question what is epistemologically there and signal a highly ephemeral ontological field that can be characterized as a [doing in futurity]. Thus, a manifesto is a call to a doing in and for the future. The utopian impulse to be gleaned from the poem is a call for 'doing' that is a becoming; the becoming of and for 'future generations' (Muñoz, 2009, 26).

Examining performance and the personal narratives of 2-QTPOC artists as an enactment of queer futurity allows for complex political potential to fully thrive as it is, where it is, without necessitating a guaranteed, measurable, contained future. However, the openness of theorising affectively does not necessarily come at the expense of identity, subjectivity and material realities that need attention. Instead, it entails expanding the scope, depth and texture of theory to fully encompass the intricacies and contingencies of social phenomena. In this vein, writer and prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore challenges us to reimagine different ways of movement building that do not get stuck in purely oppositional forms of political mobilisation: '[t]he point here is not that "agency" is an unimportant concept but rather [...] that it is too often used as if it designated an exclusive attribute of oppressed people in their struggle against an opponent called "structure". Such a dichotomy doesn't stand up to how the world actually works. Structures are both the residue of agency and animated by agential capacities' (Gilmore 2008, 39–40).

For example, the theory, poetry and performance of Quo-Li Driskill featured in *Mangos With Chili* interrogates the complexities of ongoing settler colonialism from

a two-spirit approach. Because critical race and queer of colour critique have been called out for basing their theories on static notions of what constitutes ‘the State’, and ‘nation’ that necessitate the disappearance of indigeneity (Smith, 2011), theorising affectively must remain conscious and committed to a decolonised future. Critiques of oppression might consider 2-QTPOC media as an ‘emerging event’, wherein the political is ‘[registered], lingers and forms attachments’ in different ways (Berlant, 2011, 4). For example, Lauren Berlant brings forth the concept of ‘the situation’ as ‘a state of things in which something that will perhaps matter is unfolding amid the usual activity of life. It is a state of animated and animating suspension that forces itself on consciousness, that produces a sense of the emergence of something in the present that may become an event’ (Berlant, 2011, 4–5).

In *Stomp Dance: Two-spirit Gathering. A Giveaway Poem*, Driskill describes the ‘situation’ of two-spirit people where political realities are disrupted and new worlds are able to manifest:

[S]ome say we can’t do these things. But I recall the story of water spider and how she carried that hot coal on her back anyway. [...] This is the work of our two-spirit people. We are part of a story that does not end in the destruction of the Earth. When we dance, manifest destiny shakes [...] We are an emergence of fire and turtle shells. We are the ones the world can no longer shake. (2013)

Therefore, Two-Spirit erotics haunt territorial configurations and imaginings of settler futurity as a queerness we may feel as ‘the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality’, as ‘a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present’ (Muñoz, 2009, 1).

Theorising Movements through the Incommensurable

Affective methods can remain open to potentialities while holding incommensurable parts, resisting an ultimate consolidation of meaning and path towards a guaranteed liberated future as systems of neoliberal capitalism, heteronormativity and colonialism continue to thrive metaphysically and through bodily experience. Because systemic oppression functions through material conditions, but

through power that is simultaneously ephemeral and embodied, movements must shift to enact transformation at these levels. By exploiting the affective registers of connection and attachment, these systems have succeeded in creating a kind of oppression that fosters a reactionary and oppositional politics. The historical and ongoing material, psychic and metaphysical violations have generated a desperation for the consolidation of identity that was stolen or made to feel dispossessed from. Therefore, there is a need to affirm what political resistance and organising is (not what it should be) instead of defining itself on what it is not, which tends to build movements that are invested in a dichotomous negation of something rather than the creation and redefinition of something new. I am not arguing for a simple return to a former (and often idealised) notion of race politics, feminism, or modernist socialist leadership, but to evolve our politics that can equally honour (different than centering) material reality, that queer of colour scholarship for example claims is missing from otherwise whitewashed queer politics/theory, but honours it within an understanding of complexity. This work is also not meant to say such an approach is easy but to instead to recognise that it is difficult work and to figure out why. It is in the contradictions that something novel emerges, whether we want to reckon with it or not, as people continue to be moved by their lived experiences, relations to their environment and others.

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