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**Contradictory Subjects:
Stuart Hall and the
Politics of Mutual
Vulnerability**

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Abstract

Seeking a through-way between critique and the affective theories that look to counteract it, I attempt to sketch in brief what a critical affect or affective critique might look like, observing that the most valuable theories in both domains, critique and affect, prize their medial position, and make a virtue of contradiction. I look at the writings of a core Cultural Studies tradition represented by Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, especially in areas of their work which relate to the “structure of feeling” (Williams & Orrom, 1954). This work offers productive avenues and metaphors for thinking affective critique anew. Evaluating and disagreeing with Hall’s critique of the refusal of systematization holed away in Williams’ well-worn concept, I argue that attendance to the unsystematised is its chief virtue. Finally, I draw this abstracted discussion into the terms of ‘mutual vulnerability’ and debates over ‘safe spaces’ to argue that our time of multiplying crises and routine commodification asks us to remember our interdependency and foster mutually vulnerable modes of relation.

Keywords

critique, post-critique, affect, structure of feeling, vulnerability, populism, safe spaces, subjectivity, dualism

“The conditions and objectifications of the process are themselves equally moments of it, and its only subjects are the individuals, but individuals in mutual relationships, which they equally reproduce and produce anew. The constant process of their own movement, in which they renew themselves even as they renew the world of wealth they create.” – Marx, *Grundrisse*

Critique is out of favour. Some say it's exhausted; others that it lacks generosity; still others that it's out of touch with the times. Over-reliant on an inhibiting outlook of denunciation (Phelan et al, this issue) its moralizing gestures have erred further and further towards the marketized, the pat, the formulaic. "Critique has run out of steam," (Latour, 2004) Bruno Latour announced in 2004. More recently, Hortense Spillers has argued that critique has abandoned its social commitments: where the critical theory of the post-Weimar intellectuals "melded the aims of criticism and theory in working out the protocols of a responsive and responsible view of socio-political order," (Spillers, 2020: 683) she writes:

In our work today, we have not only abandoned the powerful engines of criticism, having reified theory as the imagined pure locus of a writerly practice, but we've abrogated from any desire, it seems to me, for a vantage point onto a larger sociality that shapes our becoming.

These varied accounts emphasise the involuted, excoriating valence of much contemporary critique, pursuing a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Ricoeur, 1974) to the exclusion of belief, forgetting how to trust or becoming lost in critique's hall of mirrors. The "critique of critique" (Felski, 2015), the "critique of the critical" (Billig, 2013) and the "critique which must involve its self-critique," (Fassin & Harcourt, 2019: 3) variously threaten to drill so far along their critical course that they forget the task of emancipation (Rancière, 1991).

The best theorists of the moment of 'post-critique' marry its sense of disillusion and discontent with something generative. Doing so they avoid the critical pitfalls of 'straw man' arguments to pair critique with its bedfellow of embrace. As far back as 1993, the scholar Paul Gilroy pushed for a mode of "redemptive critique" (Gilroy, 1993) for dealing with the heavy legacies of enlightenment doublethink. More recently, at a speech given at All Souls College, Oxford earlier this year, he finished with the clarion that "critique alone is not sufficient." Our ongoing task, he said, rather than reifying Paul Ricoeur's critical method is "to learn the value of a hermeneutics of suspicion when it comes to the universal claims of the humanisms that derive ethnocentrically from the flaws of Latin Christendom" (Gilroy, 2023: n.p.) and, echoing Ricoeur, to pair suspicion with the work of trust. His sense that something *more* is needed is also registered at the broader level of humanities-thinking within the university. In literary

studies, the work of Rita Felski spearheads the post-critique moment. Couched in more pragmatic terms, Felski writes that “critique is not always the best tool for the job” (Felski, 2015: 8) and proffers an ethos of attachment for smoothing these rough edges. A theoretical period that speaks of “post-humanism,” “post-modernism,” “post-post-modernism” and “post-critique” entrenches a sense of belatedness, trafficking in a lexicon of posteriority which deconstructs and negates rather than offering something to hold onto.

Critiques of critique can succumb to other fallacies and conflation. The affective paradigms of generosity and attachment are regularly put forward as antidotes to the problems of critique (Felski, 2015; 2021; Berlant, 2022; Scott, 2017) and can be; yet critique is not just a disembodied, disinterested practice of intellectual or theoretical deconstruction, but a mode and disposition of its own. As Felski writes: “critique is as much a matter of affect and rhetoric as of philosophy or politics”. Treating critique not merely as a model of intellectual reasoning but as its own species of affective engagement presents new possibilities for moving beyond suspicion as critique’s dominant “thought style” (Felski, 2015: 2). It simultaneously prompts the prospect that preoccupies me here: of mining critique for its own possibilities of attachment, akin to the compound coined by Gilroy of ‘redemptive critique’ (1993: 71). Thus, the work of attachment emerges from its discrete realm into the body of critique, where the vital work of disagreement and dissent can be reframed as activities that hold out the promise of repair.

As for affects and their study, the “affective turn” (Clough & Halley, 2007) or “turn to affect” (Leys, 2011) has brought numerous possibilities for renewed engagement alongside problems of its own. In the humanities, a mushrooming of affect’s theoretically omnivorous approach has seen studies of different sorts of feelings authored across discursive disciplines. These are not confined to the more positively-inflected investments in attachment, intimacy, compassion and love such as in Lauren Berlant’s *The Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), *Intimacy* (2020), *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (2004), Felski’s *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020) or Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* (2010). Studies of affect also attend to how our moment produces “ugly feelings,” in Sianne Ngai’s terms (Ngai, 2005). These accounts limn the contours of affects and emotions such as loss, depression and melancholia.

David Eng and Shinhee Han's *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (2019), Anne Anlin Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (2000), Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011), and Wendy Brown's *States of Injury* (1995) offer different – more pessimistic – diagnoses of the emotional experience of late modernity.

Where I hope to build on this terrain is in developing a theory of affective critique which may be of use to us in our moment of interlocking crises. What sorts of affects might we use in this period of ecocidal danger, revanchist ethnonationalism, backsliding democratic structures and norms? Liberal pundits pronounce the corrosion of trust, and left-wing commentators similarly warn of the propagation of fascist belief in a widespread climate of fear. Mapping in brief the outline of a politics of 'mutual vulnerability' in light of those concerns, I hope to suggest a critical affect or disposition which inculcates trust over and above suspicion and overcomes some of the dualisms inherent in critiques of both affect and critique. I term that outlook, mutual vulnerability, an affect because the practice of mutual vulnerability is inherently social in nature; it is a social relation. Where the vulnerable individual is prone to harm, the mutually vulnerable dyad or group can be strong. These ideas will be pursued further in the third section of this essay.

Studies of affect have, at times, come in for critique due to the diffuse style of their approach, which draws from a broad range of theoretical terms and frameworks. Critics of this style cite its frequent opacity, denseness, and lack of clear argumentation (Leys, 2011). While affect-inflected accounts of "public feelings" (Cvetkovich, 2003; Stewart, 2007) cannot be expected to be 'philosophically complete,' analytical clarity is always desirable. In *The Affect Theory Reader*, introduced by Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, for example, its editors characterise affect as "an inventory of shimmers" and write that affect cannot be simply or narrowly defined:

when theories have dared to provide even a tentative account of affect, they have sometimes been viewed as naïvely or romantically wandering too far out into the groundlessness of a world's or a body's myriad inter-implications, letting themselves get lost in an over-abundance of swarming, sliding differences: chasing tiny firefly intensities that flicker faintly in the night, registering those resonances that vibrate, subtle to

seismic, under the flat wash of broad daylight, dramatizing (indeed, for the unconvinced, over-dramatizing) what so often passes beneath mention (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010).

Pre-empting that critique, their own style of address confirms aspects of its validity.

Secondly, studies of affect receive criticism because they decentre the individual so as to centre the social. Affect focuses on the network, the relational interchange of vibes and moods. These studies arguably thereby produce a double detachment, producing a “turn away from conventional rationality [which] risks leaving behind concepts like the human, the subject, and agency, and so put at risk the ability to define the social and affect in ways that enable them to do meaningful work” (Sha, 2017). Critics of affect and the ‘affective turn’ in the 1990s lamented its overstatement of the role of feeling and inattention to the role of thought in theorising the development of political trends and ideologies. Critics of some of the original theorists of affect such as Brian Massumi and Eve Sedgwick pointed to the way their work conceived of affect as prior to the linguistic or discursive (Hemmings, 2005). Attachment to the imagined capability of the individual within the social field, such as in Richard Sha’s account, registers ongoing resistance to a materialist outlook which emphasises the role of structures, underlying conditions and social relations in determining human action. Theories of affect ratchet these considerations up to a more diffused level still, attending not only to social structures and relations but the cultures, moods and emotions they incubate, emotional and psychic realities which also determine human activity. What had long been thought soft or vaporous is made hard, theoretic: all that is airy is finally made solid.

Thirdly, and finally, the use of a lens attuned to affect across discourses and disciplines has led to a lack of methodological conformity and commonality. The widespread use of affect theory (in philosophy, neuroscience, psychology, psychoanalysis, literary studies and cultural studies, etc.) results in discrepancies in methodological and stylistic approaches to the term. In studies of media and political communication, for example, while there is a general consensus that affect is a rich paradigm for thinking about the complex circulation and consolidation of ideologies and (non-)ideological communities (Finlayson, 2022), and that affective cues play a vital role in constituting those ‘communities,’ these accounts are beset by “the need to engage more deeply with

affect and emotion as driving forces in contemporary media and society” (Lünenborg & Maier, 2018).

While it cannot address all these concerns, this paper attempts to provide a defence of the study of affects and the decentring of individual human action conceived in classically Romantic terms; and an account of how the crossroads between affect and critique, or affective critique, for which the politics of mutual vulnerability provides both precondition and an example, is of value to us at this juncture. Attending to the contradictory character of political ideologies and individual subjectivities, I look at the writings of a core Cultural Studies tradition represented by Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, especially in areas of their work which relate to the “structure of feeling” (Williams & Orrom, 1954). These engagements with the structure of feeling, with its blend of hard and soft, offer productive avenues and metaphors for thinking affective critique anew. Before making the case for mutual vulnerability, we must first (1) understand the necessarily contradictory nature of political subjectivities and their complex role in decision-making, (2) develop our sense of the ‘medial’ nature of both critique and affect – a “condition,” as the editors of this special issue note, “of being in the middle” (Peters, 2022: 1), and (3) consider this abstracted state of affairs in the context of the specific political predicament by which we are confronted.

I. Contradictory subjects: Structuring feelings

In 1988, Stuart Hall wrote an analysis of contemporary Thatcherism titled ‘Gramsci and Us,’ which diagnosed the “regressive modernisation” (Hall, 1988) at the heart of that project. True to form, that term – regressive modernisation – articulated one of the fundamental contradictions which cropped up across his account, with its complex negotiation of a specific form of hegemonic construction, a superficial will to progress carried out through an enforcement of antiquated values and beliefs: “We are all perplexed by the *contradictory* nature of Thatcherism. In our intellectual way, we think that the world will collapse as the result of a logical contradiction: this is the illusion of the intellectual – that ideology must be coherent, every bit of it fitting together, like a philosophical investigation,” Hall writes (Hall, 1988: 166). Elsewhere in the piece, amid analyses of the (impoverished) strategy of the Labour left, the relevance of

Gramsci to life under a decade of authoritarian populism, and to the strategic possibilities still open at that conjuncture, Hall returns again and again to what he sees as the contradictory nature of common sense and the contradictory character of human subjectivity:

Since, in fact, the political character of our ideas cannot be guaranteed by our class position or by the ‘mode of production’, it is possible for the Right to construct a politics which does speak to people’s experience, which does insert itself into what Gramsci called the *necessarily fragmentary contradictory nature of common sense* [italics mine], which does resonate with some of their ordinary aspirations, and which, in certain circumstances, can recoup them as subordinate subjects, into a historical project which hegemonises what we used — erroneously — to think of as their necessary class interests. Gramsci is one of the first modern Marxists to recognise that interests are not given but have to be politically and ideologically constructed (Hall, 1988: 167).

He argues that the Left “does not understand the necessarily contradictory nature of human subjects, of social identities” (Hall, 1988: 170). Elsewhere, he takes this impression further still, drilling inwards to account for the Little Englander that resides in all of us:

What is the nature of this ideology which can inscribe such a vast range of different positions and interests in it, and which seems to represent a little bit of everybody — including most of the readers of this essay! For, make no mistake, a tiny bit of all of us is also somewhere inside the Thatcherite project. Of course, we’re all one hundred per cent committed. But every now and then — Saturday mornings, perhaps, just before the demonstration — we go to Sainsbury’s and we’re just a tiny bit of a Thatcherite subject. How do we make sense of an ideology which is not coherent, which speaks now, in one ear, with the voice of free-wheeling, utilitarian, market-man, and in the other ear, with the voice of respectable, bourgeois, patriarchal man? How do these two repertoires operate together? (Hall, 1988: 165-166).

Throughout this account, and particularly in that final paragraph, Hall is at pains to articulate the constructed character of decision-making, common sense and political hegemony, and the corresponding complex complicity which the contradictory character of human subjectivity makes possible. As Spinoza asks, “why do people fight for their exploitation as if it were liberation?” (Spinoza, [1670] 1998). It is a question which seems to have fallen out of fashion. Hall’s analysis enables us to get beyond simple dichotomies, showing how the right’s “success and effectivity do not lie in its capacity to dupe unsuspecting folk but in the way it addresses real problems, real and lived experiences, real contradictions – and yet is able to represent them within a logic of discourse which pulls them systematically into line with policies and class strategies of the right” (Hall, 1988: 44). As Asad Haider writes, “Today we too often fail to follow this insight, and instead lapse into a moral critique based on a metaphysical theory of power” (Haider, 2018: n.p.). Moving beyond metaphysics and a moral critique asks us to turn inwards.

‘Gramsci and Us’ builds on an existing analysis of Hall’s in that essay just mentioned, ‘The Great Moving Right Show,’ where he speaks of “the magical connections and short-circuits which Powellism was able to establish between the themes of race and immigration control and the images of the nation, the British people and the destruction of ‘our culture, our way of life’” (Hall, 1988: 55). Hall’s compelling analysis of these ‘magical connections’ troubles any easy account of human agency in the field of political action. That destabilization, reshaping the contours of the bounded individual, is ripe for analysis via the paradigm of affect, since affect accommodates feelings, moods, and intersubjective realities. Hall’s account of these mutually interactive but contradictory “repertoires” builds towards his then-burgeoning work elsewhere in the field of identity, which can be encapsulated, perhaps, by a phrase he coins at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) a year earlier: “Identity is like a bus” (Hall, 1987). We alight where convenient; our communities are its stops. Hall’s account of identity attends to history and contingency in the construction of ‘who we are,’ demoting assumptions about identity as something unitary or inherent. At times, he verges on characterising identity as an impossibility: “I cannot become identical with myself,” he said in 2007 (Hall, [2007] 2019: 304), implying not only that the notion of identity is philosophically unstable but that the settled, stable self is nothing more than

an illusion. The epigraph to Hall's memoir, lifted from Henry James, runs: "What is a self? Where does it end? Where does it begin?" (Hall, 2017a).

That open, insurgent and theoretically loose account of the self makes Hall's consistent hesitancy over questions of affect, a field of inquiry emergent in this period, surprising. Cultural Studies practitioner and a former student of Hall's, Lawrence Grossberg, has spoken of his attempts to engage Hall with questions of affect and to entice him to think with Deleuze and Guattari into the depths of political subjectivity. These issues require space to be discussed in proper depth, but Hall's resistance to affect is notable, given how open his conception of identity remained. As Sean Phelan writes, Hall's emphasis on the discursive and the "politics of signification" has been followed by "a different vernacular". "We now deal with "a privileging of terms like 'ontology', 'affect', 'embodiment', 'rhizome', the 'non-human object' and so on, sometimes in explicit opposition to the old fixation on language, signification and representation," he writes (Phelan, 2016: 64). But Hall was fiercely wedded to the discursive field, averse to dissolving too far into something that lacked structuration. Interviewed by Grossberg in 1986, he makes a statement about the effects of nuclear weapons on our intimate lives, saying that "love and human relationships in the postmodern period feel very different—more temporary, provisional, contingent," (Hall, [1986] 2020) and yet this never emerges into a mode of analysis squarely directed by attention to feeling. Hall's operations in 'the popular' had limits.

We are given a clue as to Hall's original misgivings about the looseness of affect in his consideration of forbear Raymond Williams' "structure of feeling," with its originary position within affect studies. Williams coins the concept in 1954, writing about it in relation to film and the dramatic tradition, but returns to it again and again over the course of his writing life. While the structure of feeling remains somewhat "enigmatic" (Middleton, 2020) across Williams' different attempts to theorise it, the precept, a touchstone in his work, clearly amounts to what he calls a "complex whole" (Williams & Orrom, 1954) (perhaps comparable to Richard Wright's "complex simplicity" (Wright, 1994) or Marx's "complex unity") (Althusser, 1996: 199). The structure of feeling attempts to tether subjectivity to complex social and material processes. Williams defined the term as being "as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests" and yet operating "in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity" (Williams,

1965: 64). Its stubborn difficulty, as Williams seems to acknowledge in conversation with the editors of the *New Left Review* in 1977, confessing “the need to define the limits of the term” (Williams, 1979: 164), was that it was so encompassing. Its essential ambiguity – one biographer teases it out to show that it has meant at least three distinct things to readers and audiences (Inglis, 1995) – is clearly, however, a central part of its pull.

Hall accordingly connects the structure of feeling with terms that are related though not equivalent, such as the totality or what Williams terms the “whole way of life”. For Hall, the concept of the structure of feeling collapsed back on itself because of the untheorisability of ‘feeling’: he describes it as an overall “lost concept” (Hall, 1983) – a claim history refutes, though perhaps Hall was referring to its theoretical clarity as opposed to its popularity. Privileging structure over feeling, Hall’s structuralist cast of mind is sceptical of an analytical precept which purports to evade theoretical deconstruction, as the ‘feeling’ of Williams’ phrase does, tied to an organic conception of community, time and place. Hall writes:

Those [terms – incorporation, hegemony] are extremely rich concepts for thinking about the nature of cultural change, but they are inadequate by themselves without a way of conceptualising both the cultural and the social formation as a whole, and of conceptualising as well the proper place of the former within the latter. Those are, after all, the questions that Williams wanted to address. It is here that one might expect Williams to return to the notion of the structure of feeling, and at the end of the section on cultural theory there is a rather weak and inadequate defence of the structure of feeling, which I think is a lost concept. Williams’ (1979) defence, reiterated in *Politics and Letters*, is that the term itself is valuable because “structure” suggests the definitive power of culture but “feeling” denies its systematization (Hall, [1983] 2016: 50-1).

In other words, for Hall the denial of systematization, the excess that is beyond structuration, presents a problem. Williams writes that the meaning of the structure of feeling arose via a perception of something else evading the analyst’s grasp:

We examine each element as a precipitate, but in the living experience of the time every element was in solution, an inseparable part of a complex whole . . . when one has measured the work against the separable parts, there yet remains some element for which there is no external counterpart. This element, I believe, is what I have named the structure of feeling of a period, and it is only realizable through experience of the work of art itself, as a whole” (Williams & Orrom, 1954).

Hall critiques this dimension of Williams’ concept. I wish to critique that critique before extending it into the domain of affect: an affective critique.

Despite the historicist impulse to topple human agents as makers of historical change, emphasising their context both broad and narrow within the field of troublesome Marxian questions of ‘determination,’ Hall remains tentative about dissolving the human person too far into affects or moods. The advent of psychoanalysis into cultural studies reframed that question into a more interior idiom, posing the question of how “culture crowns itself” (Hall, [1987] 2018) and signalling a move away from the ‘discursive’ more narrowly construed. Understanding subjectivity as a process of constitution brought cultural studies into closer confrontation with what the subject is. “What we really needed to know were the forms of subjectivity which allowed us to operate in the social,” Hall says at an address given at the ICA in 1987 on the topic of Cultural Studies and psychoanalysis (Hall, [1987] 2018: 895). For Hall it is the process by which that form of subjectivity comes into being that is of interest, whereas for many theorists of affect that question is routed through examples of what they deem the dominant affective experiences.

Taking up the example of Hall’s work, and following its preoccupation with the contradictory, I argue that affect enables us to probe questions of subjectivity further. In ‘Gramsci and Us,’ Hall lays out an account of how the Thatcherite version of neoliberalism – ‘regressive modernisation,’ or authoritarian populism – keys into and constructs the manifold desires of the people who live under it. Under this ideological regime, hitherto unchartered areas and recesses of our ‘personal’ or cultural identities are open to reconstruction, politicisation, and commodification. Hall encourages those on the left to “recognise that the identities which people carry in their heads – their subjectivities, their cultural life, their sexual life, their family life, their ethnic identities,

their health – have become massively *politicised*” (Hall, 1988). The past thirty years have made that case only too fully, as technologized neoliberal logics via platforms of social self-consumption such as Facebook, Twitter (still its name at the time of writing) and Instagram, have eaten further into previously unmapped territories of the self. The contradictions that regressive modernisation sought to exploit are today more acute than ever, under a regime of what the political theorist Anton Jäger terms “hyperpolitics,” a culture in which everything is tinged by a sheen of political fervour, the “melding of privatized self-expression with political enthusiasm,” but uprooted and disenchanted from the forms of large-scale democratic engagement that mass politics made possible (Jäger, 2023: n.p.). The contradictoriness of the human subject has been intensified, the schism between its repertoires augmented. In 2011, three years before his death, Hall described the public assent to neoliberalism as mealy-mouthed: a “disaffected consent.” There is, he wrote, “as yet no majority appetite for the neoliberal project” (Hall, 2011: 723). How that disaffection has grown.

Rather than abjuring contradiction as critique’s imagined pure locus of reason purports to – akin to Haider’s “metaphysical theory” (Haider, 2018) – we might respond to this situation by knowingly absorbing contradiction as a feature of our methodology. Affective critique meets the human animal in its appetite for critical aggression *and* affective embrace. We are contradictory subjects, like our objects of analysis. In the contemporary moment, as Jäger implies, these contradictions are further amplified by the character of online behaviour and the affective cues online platforms deploy. “Political communities form through online engagement but share more in common with commercial fan communities than with civic groups of citizens,” writes Alan Finlayson: “They are ‘affective communities’ of sentiment not interest” (Finlayson, 2022: 68). In the online realm and in the cultures of sentiment which surround its digital self-construction, theories of affect enable us – in the footsteps of cultural studies, which has variously sought to overcome artificial binaries between culture and politics, individual and society, base and superstructure – to surpass unhelpful dualisms. Affect promises to “overcome existing dichotomies between culture and nature, between cognition and emotion, between inside and outside, and between the psychological and the social” (Lünenborg & Maier, 2018: 2).

Where Hall described the “structure of feeling” as a “lost concept” (Hall, 1983), its blend of hard and soft – of systematisation and the refusal thereof – is instead its signal virtue, and its oxymoronic tension survives into contemporary affect theories. Williams saw ‘the structure of feeling’ “as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests” but still finding us “in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity” (McGuigan, 2019: 17). In Hall’s paraphrase of Williams, which he refutes but which I endorse, “the term itself is valuable because “structure” suggests the definitive power of culture but “feeling” denies its systematization” (Hall, [1983] 2016: 50-1). Partial systematization is necessary; absolute systematization is tyrannical, reifying systems over and above the people who create them. Like Williams before them, the late Lauren Berlant deployed this central contrast or oxymoron to account for affect, deposing culture for a more diffused term, ‘sociality,’ and praising affect for its capacity to name “the hard and soft infrastructures of sociality itself” (Berlant, 2022: 26). Kathleen Stewart, an important influence on Berlant, likewise emphasizes the melding between public and private: “Public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they are also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give circuits and flows the form of a life” (Stewart, 2007: 1-2).

In their overview of affect and the theories that comprise it, Gregg & Seigworth relate “Raymond Williams’ ‘structure of feeling’, Frantz Fanon’s ‘third person consciousness’, [and] Walter Benjamin’s ‘non-sensual mimesis’” (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010: 7), all of which are terms which show how the work imagined to belong to the mind is felt in and on the body, thereby bringing what had previously been left outside of language into its fertile terrain. Doing so they elevate what is disparaged as an individual feeling to a more official status, or at least render it open to dispute. The subjective assumes an objective status, reminding us of Adorno’s account of late Beethoven: “Objective is the fractured landscape, subjective the light in which – alone – it glows into life” (Adorno, 2002). As the scholar Kobena Mercer, drawing on Hall, writes: evasive realities can thus be brought into discourse and rendered speakable. A form of non-sensual mimesis, linguistic representation is “less a mirror of reality than a detour through the fissile stuff of which the human subject is made” (Hall, 2017b: 28-9).

Lest this blend of opposites be considered to encompass a neutral valence, x cancelling out y , soft mollifying hard, the emphasis on contradiction underscores the tensile charge these opposites confer. For Roland Barthes, as Gregg & Seigworth relate, ‘The Neutral’ does not imply a cancelling out but instead a struggle and a tension that emphasises process over product, with its radical potentiality in our commodified age (Barthes in Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). Hortense Spillers refers to “a larger sociality that shapes our becoming” (Spillers, 2020) with that same emphasis on the process of struggle and emergence, what Hall intends when he refers to the “unfinalizability” (Bakhtin, 1982) of persons. “The neutral works to “outplay the paradigm” of oppositions and negations by referring to “intense, strong, unprecedented states” that elude easy polarities and contradictions while also guarding against the accidental consolidation of the very meaning that the Neutral (as “ardent, burning activity”) seeks to dissolve,” write Siegworth and Gregg, citing Barthes (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010: 10). That combination of forces bound through the charge that affect confers enables us to make sense of the “necessarily fragmentary contradictory nature of common sense,” as Hall cites Gramsci’s saying.

Again, Fanon’s ‘third person consciousness’ with its “dreadful objectivity” (Wright, 1953) as to the true nature of a society enables us to imagine a mode of interpretation with its roots in the personal but which achieves a kind of objectivity, a public weight. Discussing his relation to the work of Franz Fanon, Paul Gilroy – whose “redemptive critique” is a guiding concept for us here – says that:

In Fanon we have someone who combines the figures of the doctor and the soldier. The taker of life, and the saver of life. You can’t comprehend him without that pairing. I know he would hate it if I tried to elevate it into some kind of Manichaeic couple, I’m not trying to do that. I think that there is a kind of agonistic pairing of the healer and the soldier in Fanon’s revolutionary imagination, and I think that should be the starting point for reading his development and understanding how his thought unfolds over time (Gilroy & Bangstad, 2019: n.p.).

His refusal of the “Manichean couple,” of the superstitious dualism that recurrently peers through, emphasises the ‘agonistic pairing’ of soldier and healer, of critique and embrace.

II. Safe spaces and the politics of mutual vulnerability

In 1995, Toni Morrison characterized the shifting structures of racism and fascism in America in a piece for *The Nation*. She wrote that fascist politics “changes citizens into taxpayers – so individuals become angry at even the notion of the public good.” Destroying shared experiences of sociality, “it changes neighbours into consumers – so the measure of our value as humans is not our humanity or our compassion or our generosity but what we own” (Morrison, [1995] 2019). Echoing that line of argument, Jeremy Gilbert has written that the “key machinic effect” of neoliberal culture

is to enable subjects to experience sociality only as a source of displeasure – as a source of fear, paranoia, insecurity, and competitive aggression (Massumi, 2002) – and to experience market relations as the only valorised and therefore pleasurable mode of relationality. Shopping of various kinds becomes the only source of fun, because it expresses the only permissible mode of relationality and hence the only permissible experience of joyous affect and potential power (Gilbert, 2014: 184).

These tendencies have intensified since Hall’s original diagnosis of the new political settlement, and even in the years since Gilbert and Morrison were writing, making it more important than ever to seek out affects and modes of relation that short-circuit its individualizing work, which reduces the strength of communities to the atom, the unit of one.

‘Mutual vulnerability’ is such an affect. Building between two or more than two, it alchemizes duality to forge a relation. Writing in her 2003 book *Teaching Community* the late bell hooks reflects that: “When we only name the problem, when we state complaint without a constructive focus on resolution, we take away hope. In this way critique becomes merely an expression of cynicism, which sustains disenchantment” (hooks, 2003: xiv). While this may sound suspiciously like some kind of New Age bullshit, hooks cites the Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh, who says that “in a true dialogue, both sides are willing to change. We have to appreciate that truth can be received from outside of – not only within – our own group... we have to believe that by engaging in dialogue with another person, we have the possibility of making a change within ourselves” (hooks, 2003: xv-xvi). That reciprocal pattern of inter-

subjective exchange offers a mode of redemptive critique for the real world, which attempts to tether the sort of affect I have sketched out in abstract above – beyond neutrality, a contradictory pairing – to an earthly setting. Of the late Sinéad O’Connor, the writer Mark O’Connell recently wrote that what was “so moving” about her, “as an artist and a person... has something to do with her extraordinary combination of vulnerability and strength, and the sense that they were one indivisible quality” (O’Connell, 2023: n.p.). Strength in vulnerability is rare, and can only be realised through recognition of our common interdependence.

In what sorts of setting might ‘mutual vulnerability’ be of use to us? Much of the debate over the condition and validity of forms of critique has centred on the university context (a focus which can become a means of navel-gazing for academics!). Yet the discourse over so-called “safe spaces” sharpens our understanding of how critique is employed in real-world contexts, and provides a useful setting for thinking through these issues. Writing in his 2021 introduction to Stuart Hall’s recent *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, Paul Gilroy refers to a talk Hall gave in 1980 to a collection of teachers in Highbury, North London, titled ‘Teaching Race’. In this talk, Hall spoke of the dangers of any environment being so decidedly anti-racist that:

the natural and “commonsense” racism which is part of the ideological air that we all breathe is not allowed to come out and express itself... That experience has to surface in the classroom even if it is pretty horrendous to hear – better to hear it than not to hear it (Hall in Gilroy, 2021: 17).

Gilroy endorses Hall’s view – today likely to be controversial among many on the left – which is imagined as a riposte to certain orthodoxies of contemporary social justice movements and the pieties of Generation Z, customs often imported from elsewhere through online communities. He argues, following Hall, that these beliefs should be aired in order to be contradicted. He writes that Hall’s “practical recommendations to the antiracist educators of the early 1980s read very much against the grain of current discussion, sounding like a reckless refusal of the signature sensitivities of the anxious “snowflake” generation” (Gilroy, 2021: 17). He goes on to argue that “the struggle against racism demands a high degree of discipline from its political advocates who must not only reject the disabling simplifications of Manichaeism and moralism but also learn to create and manage unsafe spaces... [These arguments] do not now,” he

writes, “translate into some misplaced liberal endorsement of an inviolable, yet utterly banal, right to be offensive” (Gilroy, 2021: 17). This attitude has more than a corrective, moralistic function, though it has elements of that disposition. It also responds to the contradictoriness of subjects, requiring a disposition of mutual vulnerability. Gilroy reflects that “people are not simply either fervently racist or fanatically antiracist,” refusing a binary structure of subjectivity, holding us open to mutual interdependency, in terms which echo Hall’s trenchant analysis of our contradictory selves. Elsewhere, Gilroy cites June Jordan to say that “the ultimate connection cannot be the enemy.” As Jordan writes: “The ultimate connection must be the need that we find between us” (in Gilroy, 2014: 52).

My own encounter with the idea of ‘mutual vulnerability’ arose during a period in which I worked as an editorial assistant for the website openDemocracy, between 2017 and 2018. My colleague, the editor Rosemary Bechler, who passed away at the end of 2021, and who was passionately committed to the question of what it means to change one’s mind, used to speak about mutual vulnerability. It arose for her in the context of safe spaces of another kind. She wrote:

I am concerned at the shift in the meaning of the ‘safe space’ that has taken place in my lifetime. During the euphemistically-called ‘Irish troubles’, a ‘safe space’ was the place where brave Catholic and Protestant individuals, and the very brave people who brought them together, would meet to work out a better way forward than violent conflict. In these conflict resolution spaces, whatever the power imbalances between the parties, and regardless of the conflict raging outside, for the duration those present were equal. They were mutually vulnerable, face to face and crossing boundaries to overcome the enemy images and change each other’s minds (Bechler, 2018a: n.p.).

For Rosemary, the politics of mutual vulnerability were something far more than the milquetoast injunction to be good to one another. Like Marx, who in *The Grundrisse* writes that the “only subjects” of capital “are the individuals, but individuals in mutual relationships, which they equally reproduce and produce anew,” (Marx, 1973: 712) she characterises it as a social relation, a protocol, a structure of feeling.

She sought to cultivate such a protocol through work she performed under openDemocracy's aegis. 'Team Syntegrity' was an initiative she helped to run in Barcelona in 2017 which set out to organise conversations and channels of mutual understanding between strangers. It took inspiration from Sir Stafford Beer's cybernetic theory: "society today is wracked by difficulties throughout the world that have been engendered by tunnel visions of a fragmented whole," writes Beer, who argued that we ignore complexity at our peril. "Then the epistemology of cybernetics is needed to discern a different pattern, and humanity cannot afford to ignore its discoveries indefinitely" (Beer, 1994: vii). Following Beer, who with a different approach to our mutual entanglement imagined its structure of connection as an icosahedron, a twenty-sided shape. That structure could only be brought about, not just by openness and dialogue, but by the mutual awareness of the vulnerability we each embody. In Barcelona, participants in the experiment were buoyed to be released however temporarily from their atomised condition: "What I hadn't anticipated," she writes, "is the sheer energy and delight with which so many of these slightly isolated individuals for precisely this reason, leapt into connection, seizing every available opportunity to bond and to exchange, to make friends and to work together. In one fell swoop many of them seem to have noted their deprivations and overcome them" (Bechler, 2017: n.p.).

Later on, writing about the civic conflagration that was ignited by the killing of Sarah Everard by Metropolitan police officer Wayne Couzens, she wrote of how the murder revealed the "basic thuggish motors of what UK society and culture has become" and of the vulnerability that underscores our human experience:

this glimpse of his 'global Britain' only makes the conversations we all need to have about masculinity and the quest for control that comes from power waged over nature, fellow men and women that much more urgent. The feminist movement needs to think about force, violence and war – and the real strength which lies in mutual vulnerability once recognised – vulnerability between human beings, including men and women, and the mutual vulnerability of 'man' and nature (Bechler, 2021: n.p.).

Observing the "real strength" mutual vulnerability could confer once recognised, it is revealed through forms of social organisation, in compounds and bonds rather than

lone entities. This ‘strength’ – with its different inflexion to power, which, she writes here, corrupts, absolutely – could be discovered in a variety of the local political initiatives and modes of dialogue she encountered. Mutual vulnerability is not only a counter-strength but a theory of that strength. Discussing the radical work of the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (literally, the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages, or here the PAH), formerly run by Barcelona’s later mayor Ada Colau, she noted the way their horizontal, democratic activities fostered human agency and constructed ‘the people’ differently from traditional forms of populism. The PAH devised a political initiative in which migrants were not only the recipients of help but givers of it, too, defending one another from border police in a reciprocal structure. Bechler calls this “a process of horizontal empowerment” (Bechler, 2018b).

The PAH developed a left-wing form of populist activity which avoided some of the pitfalls of their right-wing counterparts, a mechanism for counteracting the social structures imparted by regressive modernisation, authoritarian populism, neoliberal atomisation and their like. As she saw it these right-wing movements were characterised by: a lack of openness to those constructed as “other”; a “ready capacity for enemy images”; a victimised sense of a “national us” under threat from external forces; “a belief in having the advantage of force on its side and a lack of interest in diversity in its own ranks” (Bechler, 2018b: n.p.). By contrast, left-wing populist activity had the capacity to establish links across a more lateral plane and thereby to circumvent the defensiveness of these constructions. She praised the PAH’s work: “the mutuality of it, its egalitarian nature, is refreshing: this is not setting out to ‘help migrants’ in the more familiar unidirectional way” (Bechler, 2018b). Drawing parallels with the conflict-resolution protocols used in Northern Irish ‘safe spaces,’ she writes that “whatever the power imbalances between the parties, and regardless of the conflict raging outside, for the duration those present were equal” (Bechler, 2018b).

Mutual vulnerability, an instance of a critical affect and a precondition for redemptive critique, drives home the value of an intersubjective mode of relation in which speakers remain open, situating themselves, to seek that hard-to-come-by but powerful thing – a relation. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault writes, “I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face” (Foucault, 2002: 17), with an ironic note that betrays the high stakes, the revolutionary, anti-bureaucratic potential of being prepared

to write from a position of limited existence – to bare one’s face. As Foucault implies, that act of exposure is no small thing, involving the revelation of a painfully contradictory subjectivity, an identity of many parts, but a “complex whole” nonetheless (Williams & Orrom, 1954) which leaves us free to conduct the “tracery of a pattern so nimble it could escape the termites’ gnawing” (Calvino, 1972: 1) and to strengthen our resolve “in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity” (Williams, 1965: 64).

Many theorists have argued for a more diffused concept of human agency via the paradigm of affect, attending to the thousand miniature cues that construct our decisions. They are right to do so: the lessons of Occupy, of tyrannical tech billionaires, of the deeply unequal nature of our carbon emissions, are that we are fatally, irreversibly interlinked. At the same time, many of the problems which face us now – the climate crisis, the emboldening of fascists, the casual way migrants are both let to drown at sea and ritually punished – will continue to require conscious and concerted action by many people working together in their contradictory but consolidated way. Affective critique recognises us as human animals, embodied, connected and vulnerable, and seeks to mould into those realities something that together our minds can manage – in a word: politics. For “society today is wracked by difficulties throughout the world that have been engendered by tunnel visions of a fragmented whole,” writes Beer (Beer, 1994: vii). We must “discern a different pattern.”

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