

SKETCHES ON THE AFFECTIVITY OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVORHOOD

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ABSTRACT

Before the revelations of #MeToo, rape existed. It still exists. It will exist for the foreseeable future. But what of those who have experienced sexual violence and come out the other side? What of these ‘survivors’—how are their lives altered? In this piece of work, I use vignettes inspired by Kathleen Stewart’s (2007) method in *Ordinary Affects* to explicate on how it *feels* to be a survivor. Drawing primarily on the postphenomenological framework of Sara Ahmed (2014), I combine both longer academic screeds with shorter, creatively written yet autobiographic scraps to capture the various states of affectivity central to survivorhood, such as shame, anger, abjection, and anxiety. Flashbacks run as a theme throughout, both in the very text itself but also in their importance to the experiencing and re-experiencing of trauma, in their nature as catalysts for recollection and feeling. I also explain, using Berlant (2001), my understanding of trauma as a ‘slow death.’ These sketches, then, reveal the messy, entangled nature of the emotions of survivors, whilst leaving room for a conversation to develop within the fields of affect theory and trauma studies.

KEYWORDS

survivorhood, abjection, rage, anxiety, shame, stigma



This paper is not a paper. It is instead a set of writings constituted as a series of vignettes—an approach very much inspired by Kathleen Stewart (2007) in her *Ordinary Affects*—relating to the affectivity of sexual violence survivorhood, or, more casually, how it *feels* to be a survivor. These vignettes are non-linear, because trauma weaves its way through time, punching and jabbing like a boxer, to the rhythm of its own feet. Some of these writings are creative, while some are more traditionally academic, to demonstrate the ways in which such violence escapes the confines of our tongue. There are many other issues that I could have attempted to attend to alongside these impressions, but I have focused only on emotions—fleeting, fluid, foaming, fermenting, fixating—because they deserve the space to themselves, to occupy our minds and bodies in solitude. Emotions are, quite simply, important. It is time we listened to them. It is time we listened to survivors, too.

I must, however, attend to the main theoretical basis of this work before beginning in earnest, and highlight my debt to the writings of Sara Ahmed, particularly in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014). Ahmed's postphenomenological theory is the driving force for many of the more academic considerations here: quite simply, her work has been a way through which I have thought about my trauma (although I am, of course, also indebted to the work of other authors, as shall be seen). As such, it is necessary to give a quick debrief on the central components of her work to make sense of what follows. Key to Ahmed's (2014) work is her writing on 'affective economies.' While the term may make it sound like it is the affects themselves that circulate, Ahmed (2014) is at pains to show that, in these economies, emotions do not circulate but their *objects* do (11). These emotions are not *caused* by the objects themselves but are instead *shaped* by their contact with them, showing that emotions therefore do not exist within the subject or object themselves, but as *a relation between them*. Instead, emotions are indebted to an economic functioning which means that their objects accrue 'value' the more they move around (Ahmed 2014, 44–46). These affective responses themselves are therefore *not* random or free. They are, in fact, deeply wedded to a series of associations to objects-as-signs, and the systemic nature of this is what allows certain affects to become 'stuck' to certain objects through intentional repetition,¹ making it *appear* that this particular object elicits a 'natural' response (Ahmed 2014; 2010). Affect, therefore, is not the free moving, utterly capacious thing that a lot of affect theory designates it as. It is instead deeply tied to objects (which include concepts, thoughts, and ideas just as much as physical things) in a way that is dictated by the affective economies—the social environment—which we inhabit just as much, if not more, than our own

personal associations and ideologies. Objects therefore become associated with affects because of their movements throughout the social world. This allows us to not only have our own personal orientations (“relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’” (Ahmed 2014, 8)), but also to be informed of the ‘correct’ collective response by the affective communities we inhabit (Ahmed 2010). Certain objects, then, become attributed as “feeling-cause[s]” (Ahmed 2010, 28).

Before continuing, one other note: I advise readers to be aware of the upsetting nature of many of these vignettes. I deal, explicitly and graphically at times, with sexual violence (of course), but also flashbacks, death, suicide, sex, and self-harm. While these were unavoidable to me, you the reader may make a choice as to whether or not you engage. But if or when you do, you are bearing witness to atrocities. I was not prepared to experience such things, but you can be. That is the gift I grant to you.

* * *

A Miracle

I was fucking. The sex is good: for a time, I am able to forget my body's particularities, its memories, its borders. I give in to pure sensualism as orgasmic bliss rolls through me.

And then I roll over and I'm on my front and I'm back in my body and it's a body that's been breached and the awareness of my cunt is my only perception and I roll, roll, roll backwards in time to another place, another face, being ravaged, torn to pieces, tears silently rolling down my cheeks as I want to scream but I can't, I can't, I can't I can't I—

“— need to stop.” It was only for a second, but paradise turned into Room 101 and there was no going back. He exits me immediately and asks if I'm okay. I lie and say I am because how can you vocalise to a lover that for a moment you were frightened that your “no” might mean fuck all to them, too?

Suppress the gags, the convulsions, the tears: they are for a past that is no longer present.

Lie in his arms and remember it is a miracle you can fuck at all.

Crisis Back in Time

Crisis is boring. Crisis doesn't actually exist. Like Lauren Berlant (2001),² I draw on the idea of *episodes* over *events* that occur in spatiotemporal environments where time occurs differently for those consigned to the slow death of trauma.

Berlant (2001) describes slow death as “the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence” (95). It “occupies the temporalities of the endemic” (97) and “is neither a state of exception nor the opposite, mere banality, but a domain where an upsetting scene of living is revealed to be interwoven with ordinary life after all” (102). Is this not the position of the survivor? Their deterioration was forced upon them, perhaps again and again, at the moment that someone made that decision for them. And while perhaps the first is an event, the others quickly become episodes, a part of insufferable life that becomes ordinary, a constituent feature of living towards a death that might be welcome respite or might be a tragedy, or both. The first, however, is the creation of a spatiotemporal environment bound up with a number of unbearable affects that must, on the other hand, simply be borne.

This environment has a curious relationship to the past. As noted above, Berlant (2001) uses the word ‘endemic’ to describe its relationship to time. Endemic, I should note, has a number of related meanings, but here I believe Berlant draws on the epidemiological to describe a situation or set of situations that persist within a population, “generally having settled to a relatively constant rate of occurrence” (dictionary.com, 2021). It is constantly happening to us. Even if it happened only once, it continues to reoccur. Why? One word: *flashbacks*.

In a reductive and spectacularising view, flashbacks constitute crisis. But when they are so persistent, they become part of everyday life. There is not a single day that goes by where I do not remember, to some degree, the face of my abuser. It is common for me to fully descend into the past, a screaming wreck collapsed on the floor, fetally positioned and rocking away to remembered rhythms. They are so normal for me that they are typically forgettable, simply another one having happened. As Berlant (2001) writes, they are situated “within a zone of temporality marked by ongoingness, getting by, and living on, where structural ine-

qualities are dispersed and the pacing of experience is uneven and often mediated by way of phenomena that are not prone to capture by a consciousness organized by archives of memorable impact” (99–100). I simply do not need to remember because they are a part of life. Why file them away?

But how does this come to pass? Simply, the past leaks into the present (and the future, too). To draw on Berlant (2001) again, this “*crisis ordinariness*” (101, my emphasis)—a phrase I find particularly useful to describe the predicament of the survivor—is situated within “the historical present as a back-formation from practices that create a perceptible scene, *an atmosphere that can be returned to*” (100, my emphasis). As Gregory Seigworth (1999, n.p.) notes, “the past isn’t something that you can cast off and leave behind. Instead, the past continues to persist right alongside the present.” The past is right there with you, seeping in, sliding about. It is inescapable as it forms us and parts of the environment, the habitat, the spacetime we live in.

It should be impossible to travel through time. Yet, still, we do. This is trauma as slow death, as crisis ordinariness, as the perseverance of ordinary life through the ugliness of affects, memories, and experiences that one would rather not have but simply puts up with, gets on with, forgets and remembers and forgets again because you have to park it. You must, lest it take over. And when it does? That is what constitutes the episode, what others label as crisis but is just the thing that happens again and again that, actually, one is simply rather fed up with. A conglomeration of affects descend—all the ones I describe here—into a pile of shit that we must wallow in for a while before we crawl, again, back through it. Perhaps we don’t smell so fresh, but that’s what happens when you have been made to slowly die instead of thrive, like neoliberal capitalist ideology promises us before, during, and after enacting the violences upon us that makes such thriving impossible. Yes, trauma is slow death, and crisis? Crisis is boring.

Morning Routine

I am so very tired of it all.

The sleepless nights. The nightmares. The waking up to the sounds of myself screaming out. The fear first thing in the morning. The awkward urination, to limit sensation. The difficulty washing myself. The grimacing as my towel dries me off. The gagging on my toothbrush, and not because I'm brushing my tongue. The dark circles. The picked-at cuticles. The discomfort with nudity. The trials and tribulations of dressing. The painting on a mask. The erring before leaving the house. The nausea as soon as my foot crosses the threshold.

Yes, I am tired. When can I rest?

Fear and Anxiety

I thought I saw him again. Number one: my first rapist. All my worst fears, embodied. I see his face everywhere, of course. Any man with a passing resemblance: a certain shaped nose, perhaps, or the geometry of a jawline.

On the subject of fear, Ahmed (2014) states that it

does not reside positively in any particular object or sign. It is this lack of residence that allows fear to slide across signs and between bodies. This sliding becomes stuck only temporarily, in the very attachment of a sign to a body, an attachment that is taken on by the body, encircling it with a fear that becomes its own (64).

It is this that allows my ‘quasi-psychosis’ (as a psychiatrist called it) to slip and slide across any number of people, as the “fear works by establishing others as fearsome insofar as they *threaten to take the self in*” (Ahmed 2014, 64, emphasis in original). Yes, that is what frightens me: that again his forked tongue might work its magic, reeling me in only to be gobbled up and spat out all over again.

Ahmed goes on to state that fear is based in futurity: it is the anticipation of pain *in the future*. But she does also consider fear’s relationship to the past, and this is where my focus falls. It is through past associations—whether my (the subject’s) own, or those picked up through affective economies—that allows fear to become messily attached to an array of objects, including those only tangentially related to the feared one itself.

When fear does this, it becomes a way of life. When fear becomes a way of life, it transforms into anxiety, whereby “[a]nxiety becomes *an approach to objects* rather than, as with fear, *being produced by an object’s approach*... One thinks of more and more ‘things’ to be anxious about; the detachment from a given object allows anxiety to accumulate through gathering more and more objects, until it overwhelms other possible affective relations to the world” (Ahmed 2014, 66, emphasis in original). Through ‘hypervigilance’, the subject amasses more and more signifiers that become associated with the trauma. When these are encountered, they act as triggers for a fearful response that pulls the subject away from the trigger and into themselves. It is this anxious relation to the world which can be said to structure the traumatic experience, so that the individual understands the world as full of potential threats that must be constantly warded against. Trauma, then, alters the very way that an individual navigates and exists within the world.

Vigilant

My eyes are everywhere, scanning for signs of danger. They flit about so much that my vision has motion blur. I take in every detail of the space. I note all the ways out. I'll have 50 exit strategies planned before you can even start to say 'paranoia.'

And the sound—oh, the sound! I can hear every single one in the universe so close that they feel as though they're hammering away in my head. But I can't try to block them out, because then how will I hear if someone's coming? How will I know his approach?

If I am not vigilant, who else will be? If I do not stand as my protector, who will? If I do not remember, who might?

Underwater

It can come from anywhere, but it is usually the media that does it: triggering content when you least expect is like a punch to the gut. All of a sudden, I feel like I am underwater. My vision, however, is homed in ahead of me, unable to stop fixating on the cause of my current trouble. I struggle to breathe, chest heaving up and down. I am brimming over with tears. I need to leave. I must leave. I do leave.

Upstairs, in the bathroom now, hunched over the toilet bowl, trying not to retch. I shudder from the effort of it. The tears are now barreling down my face. My mind swims, a mixture of what I have just witnessed, and what I have suffered before.

Remarkably, I keep it together—just enough, at least. This is not always the case. Sometimes I descend, full pelt, into the memories of those things I'd rather forget, living them out like they were happening all over again, because they were, they *are*. But not tonight. I go back downstairs.

The Abject

'I' want none of that element... 'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it. But since [it] is not an 'other' for 'me', who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself* (Kristeva 1982, 2, emphasis in original).

Julia Kristeva³ might be talking about soured milk, but the retching that she describes sounds eerily familiar. When I return to those quiet moments of distress and desperation in what the psychological sciences call a 'flashback,' I am beset by an inability to control my gag reflex. I always know when it is about to begin: my throat spasms, I cough and splutter, and before I know it, I am on the floor, dry heaving and screaming, rejecting that which forces itself upon me again.

"The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*" (Kristeva 1982, 1, emphasis in original). If this is the case, then surely the paradigmatic case of abjection is not spoiled foods, nor bodily fluids, nor corpses, nor ritual impurity—all of which Kristeva makes a case for—but rape itself. Although she does mention the rapist as an abject figure she does not linger on this point. But the act is clearly that which "disturbs identity, system, order", that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 1982, 4).

With respect to our identity as embodied, autonomous individuals, our skin serves as the edged border of this body and we "feel these edges as belonging to the outer flanks of [our] personal self, as providing the covering for the core of this self" (Casey 2012, 247). So, when this edge is breached without our consent, the act immediately takes on the characteristics of the abject encounter.

Rape "is a sexually specific act that destroys... the intersubjective, embodied agency and therefore personhood" of the victim (Cahill 2001, 13). As such, it

should be perceived as an assault on the whole body-self of the victim [which] can mean the destruction of the person one has become up to that point... [i]t cannot be assumed that there is one aspect of that person's being that is untouched by the experience of rape. There is no pristine, untouched corner to which to retreat" (Cahill 2001, 130-133).

As such, it is not hyperbole to claim the victim's sense of self meets its end when they are raped, utterly destroyed through the wicked will of another.

An end to self. For that is what the abject threatens, is it not? It is "a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me" (Kristeva 1982, 2). And annihilated I am. The self has been broken apart entirely by the act of rape. And while "I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit" (Kristeva, 1982: 3), the new self is not one that I recognise as me. The new self is, itself, abject: a creation entirely of my own unmaking underneath the careless hands of a violator. As Bülent Diken and Carsten Laustsen (2005) note, "[t]he rape victim often perceives herself as an abject, as a 'dirty,' morally inferior person. The penetration inflicts on her body and her self a mark, a stigma, which cannot be effaced" (113).

It is this dual abjection—the abjection of rape and the abjection of self—that is reaffirmed in the flashback. Retching, screaming, clawing at the skin, slapping away at phantomic hands, convulsing along to the rhythm of the remembered rape: both primary acts of abjection are restated in their repetition, one that is carried out *without* the will of the subject, as a *negation* of the subject's sense of self. That which is reiterated by this repetition is precisely that which the subject wishes to avoid the most, lest this time the eradication becomes permanent.

Abjection of the subject does not exist solely in one's own eyes, however. Our perceptions of self are deeply intertwined with the social. As Margrit Shildrick (2002) demonstrates, that which is deemed abject or monstrous is that which exposes the vulnerability of an enclosed, individualised and autonomous self: "[f]or all that the monster may be cast as a figure vulnerable in its own right by reason of its own lack of fixed form and definition and its putative status as an outsider, what causes anxiety is that it threatens to expose the vulnerability at the heart of the ideal model of body/self" (54). The monster threatens precisely because of its vulnerability to harm, as it is this vulnerability that demonstrates to the monster's interlocutor that they, too, are vulnerable. The rape victim/survivor, then, becomes a monster within society. Whether seen through the eyes of pity or disgust—a relation that is always ambivalent in the case of the monster (Shildrick 2002)—they are abjected by others just as much as by themselves. The affectivity of abjection, then, becomes a structuring part of the experience of survivorhood.

Broken Bodies, Broken Minds

A man approaches. He asks for a cigarette. I begin getting my things together, ready to give him the components so he can tailor make his own. But then the questions begin, touching as he talks: why the walking stick? Do you hurt? Would you like a massage?

Immediately I am brought back into the consultation room, the look of resigned recognition of the face of a diagnostician as soon as the rapes are revealed. Being told that your body broke because of trauma is something one cannot unhear. While I have since developed conditions that are likely unrelated, there is a constant and literally painful reminder that I can never escape his touches. I am forever marred by him, marked by him. The body/mind split is a cruel joke.

Shame and Stigma

As Peter Hacker (2017) notes, shame does not have to be caused by one's decisions and actions. Instead, it can be elicited "by what is done to one by others and by what they force one to do" (207). As Dan Zahavi (2012) notes, "[o]n many standard readings, shame is an emotion that targets and involves the self in its totality. In shame, the self is affected by a global devaluation: it feels defective, objectionable, condemned" (305). This shame does not exist solely during the moment that causes it: instead, its temporality drags on, so that we "may also feel the episodic emotion when lying sleepless in the small hours of the morning" (Hacker 2017, 209).

As Zahavi (2012) goes on to explain, "Sartre argues that shame, rather than merely being a self-reflective emotion, an emotion involving negative self-evaluation, is an emotion that reveals our relationality, our being-for-others" (306). There is clearly, then, a social element to shame. Although we *can* experience it when on our own, it is still constituted by the feeling of what it would be like to be exposed before others (Zahavi 2012; Hacker 2017). When I feel ashamed, it is because I feel the judgment of others impressing upon my skin (Ahmed 2014), even if those others are purely imaginative: I recognise that this would be their response because of my knowledge of the objects circulating in shame's affective economies (cf. Ahmed 2014). It is through this that shame "induces conformity to social norms" (Hacker 2017, 212).

It is here that we can turn from shame to stigma. Erving Goffman (1968) states that stigma is "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance" (9):

While the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind... He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma (Goffman 1968, 12).

Goffman goes on to distinguish between two forms of stigma: a discredited and discreditable personhood. In the former, the stigma is always evident; in the latter, the stigma is *not* immediately evidenced and is not already known by the stigmatised person's other, but, crucially, it may be discovered. The ways in which the stigmatised person is treated is instructive of how social norms can be violently

imposed: fundamentally, “we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human” (Goffman 1968, 15) and this leads to treatment such as discrimination, the use of slurs, the policing of the individual’s affective responses to this behaviour and, I would add, the risk of physical violence.

In the case of the rape survivor, we are dealing with an instance of discreditable stigma. While the survivor may attempt to conceal this fact, it will become more and more difficult to do so throughout relationships of all kinds—that is, unless the survivor is ‘outed’ by another individual, or unless they choose to actively disclose this information (as can be a tactic of stigma management) (Goffman 1968). Before the eyes of the other, I am revealed in my failure to conform to a social rule: *do not get raped*. Because I have failed in this, it is *my* fault, *my* shame to bear. In their eyes, my rape exists as an ever-present component of my identity and it is this that marks me as a social aberration.

But what links this stigma to the feeling of shame? As Goffman (1968) notes, the affectivity of being stigmatised often involves feelings of “self-hate and self-derogation” (18) and these are listed by Zahavi (2012) as common components of shame. As such, shame and stigma are deeply interwoven phenomena: to have something to be ashamed of is to have breached social norms and therefore be stigmatised; to be stigmatised is to experience shame before others. The burden of being stigmatised leads to its symbiotic shame existing in the episodic manner described by Hacker (2017) above.

Whether on my own or with others, I will periodically feel ashamed of the fact that I have been raped. I feel it flush into my cheeks. I feel it in the pit of my stomach. My mind rings with the sounds of imagined others chastising me for my sin. In both stigma and shame, “the world recedes and the self stands revealed” (Zahavi 2012, 313) and it is in this revelation that “I expose to myself that I am a failure through the gaze of an ideal other” (Ahmed 2014, 106).

Dark and Still

My lover wants to go to sleep now, so he turns off the light. How can I say that I'm not ready yet? How can I say that my mind is filled with madness? I lay down but everything feels too close. I sit up, back towards him, stifling my tears. It doesn't work. I go downstairs, out into the garden, to have a sneaky cigarette. Everything is dark and still, and for the moment all there is is me and my fear.

The cigarette is over all too soon. It didn't help; it never does. I struggle to lock the door and only manage to—my hands shaking—after a few attempts. I climb back up the stairs and crawl back into bed. He asks if I am okay, and I finally say that I am not.

Tendrils

Everything has become desaturated. Tendrils that usually reach out into the world lazily snake themselves away. I lay in bed, coiled up like a hedgehog but not nearly as spiky: bereft of all fight, but not flying or freezing either. Just simple nothingness. There is no point or passion to anything. Languid. Listless. Leaden. Today I do not survive; today I merely exist.

Pain and Depression

Some days I feel close to death.

The diagnoses that psychiatry has imposed upon me are not terminal. But the affects that they attempt to name (and those they cover over) may one day kill me, just as they have many others. Indeed, they almost have done so on numerous occasions in the past. Psychic pain—whether depression, fear, rage, shame, or something else altogether—can be lethal. But we cannot forget that this pain is not actually individualised, not merely existing in the subject's interior. As Ahmed notes, "[i]t is through sensual experiences such as pain that we come to have a sense of our skin as a bodily surface... as something that keeps us apart from others, and as something that 'mediates' the relationship between internal and external" (Ahmed 2014, 24), giving the *illusion* of ourselves as bounded individuals. This is further facilitated by the psychological disciplines grasp on the discourse of emotions, which means that their particular manipulative mapping of the affective economy of signs allows the subject to become overladen with feelings that cannot be recognised as emerging from connections elsewhere.

But this is precisely what we must recognise. While these emotions may be felt as something we possess, they are not cut off from the world around us. When I am experiencing psychic pain, it is not because of some inherent pathology. *Something* or *someone* has caused this. Perhaps the cause is multiple—and it is here that I resonate with Ngai's (2005) conception of 'ugly feelings', as those experientially negative affects that are defined by their ambiguous attachments.⁴ However, this ambiguity does not mean that an orientation is non-existent: instead, it points to being *overwhelmed* by attachments, as the subject reaches towards and shrinks away from multiple objects at once.

As I opened with the lethality of affectivity, let me stick with that emotion most commonly associated with this: depression. When I am depressed, I experience the whole world through a relationship of negation. I turn away from everything, even those attachments that would usually initiate joy and push me out into the world, and it is in this movement that the affect seemingly stabilises on myself: *I* am the problem. But when looking at it this way, what we see is that the problem is actually a hostile world. A world turns hostile when actions within it have been experienced as such, and there is arguably no survivable action that is more hostile than rape. Out of the pain of rape, I fortify the boundaries of my body: "[p]ain involves the violation or transgression of the border between inside and

outside, and it is through this transgression that I feel the border in the first place” (Ahmed 2014, 27). These borders keep being turned inwards and away from the world, shrinking further and further within myself until the world that I hate has become so small as to only encompass me: *I am the loathed object*. As I turn further and further away from myself-as-world, I more quickly and closely approach death. To turn completely away and abandon all connection with the self is the movement when the ideation of suicide often comes actualised as an act of self-harm. The hostility of the world, then, is felt as a hostility towards the self, and it is this enmity that brings me towards the brink of death.

Bound or Unbound?

Neoliberal capitalist ideology tells us that the self is a bounded object, (Blackman 2008) enclosed by the edges of the body but, crucially, is a personality that *inhabits* a body rather than *is* it. We feel the edges of our body through contact with the social world, including with other people, and as discussed above, sensations such as pain teach us these edges.

But can the self ever truly be bound by our will? Are we truly the autonomous subjects like we are promised? Rape proves otherwise. The violent forcing in of the outside to the inside is a reckoning in understanding that free will has always been a disgusting myth to impose. We quickly realise that we are indeed embodied minds precisely at the moment we are entered without consent, that the body *matters*.

No, the self is an embodied creature that finds itself constantly interacting with the world and others, and being interacted with in turn. Sometimes these interactions are violent, sometimes they are kind, but they all evidence the capaciousness of ourselves as selves, as we constantly reach out beyond our 'bounds' to be a being-in-the-world, and as our 'bounds' are constantly interfered with.

The self is not bounded, but sometimes we like to think it is. Sometimes we like to think we have control. But there is very little control in this world. The traumatised subject, the survivor, knows this all too well.

Lines

Lines become the external trace of an interior world, as signs of who we are on the flesh that folds and unfolds before others... If we are asked to reproduce what we inherit, then the lines that gather on the skin become signs of the past as well as orientations toward the future, a way of facing and being faced by others (Ahmed 2006, 18).

Follow the lines on my skin like a treasure map, but you won't find anything golden. Faced forwards or backwards, the orientation is still the same. It does not quite unfold so much as unfurl, the external reckonings of interior battles. They might never have left wounds themselves, but these may as well have been placed by their hands.

Absence

Sometimes, I feel absolutely nothing at all. It can go on for days, weeks even. It is the absolute absence of any discernible emotion or sentiment. Like a vessel awaiting its fill, I wait for anything to make me feel. I await the energy washing over me as I embody some affect or another. But no, it does not arrive.

Perhaps this anticipation of a feeling, this numbness, does constitute a feeling in and of itself. It certainly structures my orientation towards the world. It is in moments like these that I will flail about wildly within my surroundings, searching for anything that might stir something. Perhaps I'll choose cheap booze and casual sex, like I did so often when I was younger. Maybe this time it'll be self-harm as I scratch or burn away at myself hoping that the pain will jolt something into action. Or I will instead languish in it, feeling the relief of not having to deal with all those ugly sensations that can send me into a tailspin. No matter what course of action I choose to take, it permeates the way in which I navigate the world, interacting with objects and others minus the usual interest that comes from more manifest states of emotion.

Perhaps the absence of feeling is the most hideous feeling of them all.

Grief for Oneself

Matthew Ratcliffe (2017), writing on grief, questions whether someone can mourn something other than the death of a person. Is it the same sort of loss? Of course not. There is certainly something phenomenologically different about the experiences of loss after death and the loss of, say, a prized possession, a home, a relationship. Or one's own life.

But that does not mean that we do not grieve. We still maintain the “world-directed intentionality” of grief (Ratcliffe 2017, 155), that object-related ambiguity that makes it such an ugly feeling (cf. Ngai 2005). It remains “a complex emotion the ingredients of which include other emotions” (Ratcliffe 2017, 156), such as depression, anger and hopelessness. It lingers on as “temporally extended”, existing as a process (Ratcliffe 2017, 158)—another sign of ugliness. And “it is clear that profound grief involves a pervasive disturbance of how the world and one's relationship with it are experienced” (Ratcliffe 2017, 164).

I have lost so much because of him. Whatever life I might have been on the path to lead is gone now, never able to return. To be sure, it might not have been a better life, but I still grieve for it every day. In times of acute mourning, the entire world seems full of empty promises; promises for what could have been, if only that had not happened. Perhaps I would have been an award-winning journalist working in the fashion industry, as I once dreamed of being. Perhaps I would have nurtured my language abilities more, and now I would be bilingual at the very least. Perhaps I would never have tried to kill myself, not even once. Perhaps I would have met the love of my life and not fucked it up with how broken I am. Or perhaps it would just have been someone else who raped me instead and set me on this path. Grief of one's own lost lives is full of these ‘perhapses’, not all of them as enchanting as one might expect.

Darkness Creeps Up

Darkness creeps up inside me. It clouds my vision. I am a husk filled with unrepentant hatred.

How dare they take and take from us? How dare they cause the harm that they do?

My breathing is laboured now. My pulse quickens. I cannot stand the agony of this feeling. It is purely unproductive in its entirety. I can get nothing done. I can stand no one's company, not even my own. I pace around, trying to find an outlet for all this hurt, all this rage, all this loathing. But there is no appropriate outlet. There is only the pain of it all.

Cesspit

I am a cesspit of rage.

My body is on fire and I am burn-burn-burning away.

I try to write through the anger. But there are no words. Language was not created to give form to a fury born from trauma. The visceral reality of it cannot be captured. The sickness it causes. The physical anguish. The fleeting, darting, shifting, fighting thoughts. The fists balled up so tight that they start to ache, knuckles white as snow and a heart even colder.

What am I supposed to do with this? What is anyone supposed to do with this?

Rage

Writing on being transgender, Susan Stryker (1994) states that “like the [Frankenstein’s] monster as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist” (238). I have already demonstrated that the rape survivor is monstrously abject, to both themselves and the affective community. What does this say, then, about the survivor’s rage?

Like J. Keeping (2006), I would state that anger is “a profoundly *moral* emotion”, for it “is the intuition not merely of a wrong, but, more specifically, the intuition of a wrong which is at once a violation of expectations. Anger occurs when we conceive a wrong as a wrong that *ought not to have happened*” (479, emphasis added; 478, emphasis in original). However, they go on to state that “[a]nger is tied to a sense of violation, not of our bodies or our rights in the sense that rape is, but a violation of expectations or obligations” (Keeping 2006, 481). But I disagree: a violation of bodies or rights is *precisely* a violation of the expectations that others are obliged to respect one’s body and rights. In this sense, rape is primed to illicit rage from those subjected to it. Rape becomes a feeling-cause (cf. Ahmed 2010).

As Stryker (1994) goes on to say about the phenomenological experience of rage, “[it] colours me as it presses in through the pores of my skin, soaking in until it becomes the blood that courses through my beating heart. It is a rage bred by the necessity of existing in external circumstances that work against my survival” (244). Keeping (2006) continues that “[i]n anger, as with all emotions, our whole world changes: it takes on at once an intensity and an unfriendliness. The wind blows too hard, the sun shines too bright, all is sharpness and straight lines” (pp479–480). This offers the beginnings of an understanding of what it feels like to experience anger towards injustice. In a state of anger, I am in a position of ‘against-ness’ to the world (Ahmed 2014): like depression, the world is experienced as hostile, but unlike depression, this does not result in a corresponding turning away from it. Instead, I stand in a relationship constituted by an aggression *towards* it. “Anger hence moves us by moving us outwards: while it creates an object, it also is not simply directed against an object, but becomes a response to the world, as such” (Ahmed 2014, 176). My response to a hostile world is not to shrink away into myself, constituting myself as the hostile object. My response is to confront it, head on, with a red-hot fury that wants to see the world, *this*

world, a world that causes so much pain and oppression and tragedy, burned to the ground. I am consumed by the affect, and I direct myself to multiple points at once, meeting their threatening presence with one of my own.

It is in its morality and in its ability to remain orientated towards the world that anger can become transformative: “[t]hrough the operation of rage, the stigma itself becomes the source of transformative power” (Stryker 1994, 249). I become powerful in so much as I acknowledge my state as abject and stigmatised, and settle on fighting against a world that makes me so. As Ahmed (2014) notes, “[a]nger is creative; it works to create a language with which to respond to that which one is against” (176). It is through this experience of anger that I pinpoint injustice, a crucial step in expressing that which I am opposed to. Anger may not always be an articulate emotion—it is difficult to speak with a throat and a mouth that only wants to scream—but it is still instructive. Rage will keep you alive. Rage will keep you fighting. Rage will keep you awake when your eyelids start to droop. Rage will keep everyone and everything else away, distractions that they are.

And now it becomes apparent that anger has its downsides. For in anger, my response to a hostile world is to attempt to become equally hostile towards it. In this, although I may be consciously turned towards a large array of objects, the ‘background’ to these orientations is the many things which I must turn away from in order to sustain my furious attachments (see Ahmed (2006) on phenomenological backgrounds). If I am not careful, anger may very well burn all of those bridges to the parts of the world that I usually hold dear.

The line between transformation and destruction is a difficult one to walk.

Endnotes

1. By ‘intentional repetition,’ I refer to intentionality in the phenomenological sense as that which connects subjects to their objects, and therefore moves the subject out into the world. This may or may not be felt as intentional in the sense of common parlance, as something the subject actively seeks to do: thus, there is an ambiguity inherent in the term.

2. This essay from Berlant (2001), while groundbreaking and crucial to my analysis of trauma, is about ‘obesity’ as an ongoing form of slow death. Unfortunately, Berlant failed to engage in the emerging yet prolific field of fat studies, something their analysis would have

deeply benefited from. I do not have the space here to summarise fully why, but fat studies has been at pains to show that 'obesity' is, indeed, a slur and that fatness is not something to be denigrated, particularly due to its ties to other oppressions such as antiblackness.

3. It should be noted here that Kristeva is a psychoanalytic theorist, which is a tradition that I would typically not engage with due to its pathologising force. However, her work on abjection is one of the most famous on the nature of disgust. I choose to draw on the more phenomenological accounting at the very beginning of *Powers of Horror*, as opposed to her later attempts to map her readings of Freud and Lacan onto the subject matter.

4. By 'ambiguous attachments,' I mean orientations either towards or away from multiple objects at once with no single one exerting enough strength to render it predominant. It therefore appears as though the attachments underscoring an 'ugly feeling' are ambiguous in the sense of them being unclear or difficult to ascertain as the cause for the feeling, because they are so numerous and weak.

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