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AFFECTIVE WITHDRAWAL:

GOING NUMB AS SURVIVAL AND RESISTANCE

Zoe Fuad

fuadzoe@gmail.com

We're going numb. In this era of hypervisible violence and tragedy, we seem increasingly unmoved by daily images of death, destruction, and despair. Besides, many of us are weary of the constant expectation to perform empathy and grief, especially when that demand often comes from and serves those with far greater privilege than ourselves. For too long, the labor of caring (as in, "taking care" of others, but also just "caring about" their problems) has disproportionately fallen on women, immigrants, refugees, poor people, queer people, and people of color to provide (Berlant 2015). Disenfranchised subjects have long been expected to display sympathy (Yao 2021), hyperempathy (Leong 2016), gratitude (Nguyen 2023), and a whole range of other emotions (arousal, awe, fear, etc.) in order to be allowed the privileges of "humanization" (Schuller 2018). Against these conditions of viral trauma-porn and demands for emotional labor, going-numb feels like both a means of survival and political refusal.

This stream invites us to sit in the impasse of disaffection—of being unable, or unwilling, to be affected—and to find what sort of politics this makes available. This might entail deliberately curating where and how we spend our emotional energies, so as to center on those who most need it (Malatino 2021; Yao 2021). Or, it might look like turning away from human sociality entirely and toward our non-human kin as sites of restoration, whether in the form of plant relatives (Jacobs & Narvaez, 2022), ecological landscapes (Luciano & Chen 2015), animals and pets (Han 2022), cyber-relations (Hayles 2010), spiritual entities (Pérez 2007), or even inanimate objects (Chen 2012).

Furthermore, it invites scholars to rethink what change-making looks like when we can't rely upon the mobilization of mass empathy. Our traditional models for social movements, which depend on the "transmission of affect" and shared feeling (Brennan 2014)—on its members "moving" and "being moved by" one another

(Ahmed 2015)—seem insufficient to today's affective insularity. In its wake, we need new frameworks for what justice looks like, ideally detached from the ableist privileging of “movement” and “mobility.”

This stream invites work that rethinks what it means to be unfeeling. It hopes to weave together theory from critical race studies (African American, Indigenous, Latine, Asian studies, etc.), disability studies (mad studies, deaf studies, and critical autism studies, etc.), performance studies, and gender, queer and trans studies to examine how demands for emotionality fall across racialized, gendered, and ableist lines. It also prompts thinking with and through the fields of intimate labor (Boris & Parreñas, 2010), posthumanism, theology, critical animal and plant studies, philosophy, political theory, new materialisms, and eco-feminism to imagine alternatives ways of being in-relation. Further possible subtopics include:

- Tarrying between self-care, self-preservation, selfishness, self-soothing and communal care as political
- Making kin (Haraway 2018), multispecies relationality, or other forms of non-normative solidarity
- Emotional consent and boundaries
- The politics of racialized trauma
- Ontological objecthood (Cheng 2021) or fugitive ontologies
- Flat affect (Berlant 2015) and affective opacity
- Rethinking moral goodness, as disassociated from empathy
- Infrapolitics and racial interiority
- Post-activism (Akomolafe, 2020)
- Animism and animacy (Chen 2021)
- Biopolitics of emotion