

RETHINKING AFFECT THROUGH SOCIAL JUSTICE:  
TERESA BRENNAN, ENERGETICS, AND LIVING ATTENTION

by

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Lauren Guilmette, Department of Philosophy, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts & Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

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This work seeks to explore the possibilities of applying affect theory to practices of social justice, specifically, through the affect theories based on energetics described by Teresa Brennan. The first section gives an overview on Brennan's main arguments and how I interpret her through a Spinozistic lens. This project then explores the positive and negative roles that happiness, anger, grief, and humor have had in various social movements and how they have often been mis- or underused in these moments. The final section offers Brennan's theory of "Living Attention" as a means of understanding our own affects and the affects of others and how to use them effectively and healthily

To Alyssa Garoogian, Amber Hilson, and Amy Truong,  
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## WHY AFFECT THEORY? WHY TERESA BRENNAN

*“I have been stunned by the cumulative vision of these books, an unexpected gift of insight offered to those of us still committed to making the world a better place.”*

-Alice A. Jardin, “A Surplus of Living Attention: Celebrating the Life of Teresa Brennan,” *Living Attention: On Teresa Brennan*

Affect theory has experienced renewed interest in the past few years since the height of its popularity in the 90s and early 2000s, but there is one figure who was left out of the original moment whose work I believe should not be brushed aside now. The work of feminist philosopher Teresa Brennan was largely dismissed in her lifetime, and after, for a number of reasons. Brennan’s work in this area was largely written off as being too “New Age-y” because of her explanations of energetic interconnectedness between all beings, humans and nonhumans alike. But this understanding of affects is not “New” at all; Brennan actually pulls this idea from her readings of Spinoza (who was also largely dismissed in his own time for being heretical). I believe reading Brennan through a Spinozistic lens is far more useful than reading her through the psychoanalytic lens that she is usually read through because her readings of Spinoza are more in line with her overall assertion that all beings are connected and more immediately related to feminist thought. Unlike Gilles Deleuze (another prominent affect theorist who uses Spinoza), Brennan reads Spinoza with an emphasis on his idea of Natural Order—that all things are, are necessary; that all Substance follows specific rules in accordance with nature, and his critique of Cartesian Dualism. These ideas are minimized in Deleuze who reads Spinoza through a Nietzschean lens with a focus on the triple denunciation of “consciousness,” “values,” and “sad passions,” and the assertion that the universe is



chaotic and without order (Deleuze 17). Brennan's focus appeals more to the pantheist interpretation of Spinoza. Spinoza believed there were three main affects from which other affects branch, the most important of which for my purposes is *conatus*: translated by Brennan as a striving, specifically a striving that "at its highest would lead to an identity with Nature," (2000, 48). Spinoza specifically notes that nature has a logical *conatus* in that "each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to preserve in its beings," (Spinoza 498). Here, Spinoza is referring to the natural inclination of all beings to act in ways that positively contribute to their own survival, such as a plant growing towards the sun or bees pollinating flowers while in turn being fed by them; as well as the ability for all beings to evolve and adapt as needed to continue to survive in their environment. But these intelligent acts have been demoted to what psychoanalysts call "instinct," or rather, "instinct" has been demoted to "irrational"—done without thought to morality or understanding of larger consequences. I will discuss the biggest problems with this connotation both later in this section and in later chapters.

In order to maintain consistency and clarity throughout this work, I will be using the term 'affect' as Teresa Brennan defines in *The Transmission of Affect*, which is "a physiological shift accompanying a judgement," (2004 5). The term "affect" has most often been used interchangeably with "emotion," however, "affect" is better defined as the physical change in energy that is later interpreted as an emotion. Affect is the initial energetic stimulus that felt through the body as either draining or energizing and then is interpreted through one's mind as an emotion based on its intensity. To elaborate, affects are more than just personal feelings or emotions, though they are related to these, they are material and can travel interpersonally via what Brennan calls "unconscious olfaction"

and “entrainment” (2004 9) or they can simply exist in a space independent of humans. It is the way we interpret these affects that is the ‘feeling.’ Nor, as theorist Silvan Tomkins says, are affects drives in the psychological sense. They are not a biological force that determines motives and limits freedom as Freud suggests, nor are they conquerable aspect the body or mind that one can be free of; they are a bit both. It is both unnecessary and socially irresponsible to try and rid oneself of the influence of affects (and impossible), but they are not so binding and deterministic as to be completely uncontrollable and possessive.

My definition, while derived directly from Brennan, comes from a specifically Spinozistic reading of Brennan rather than a psychoanalytic frame that she is usually read through. This is primarily because I believe that Spinoza is more in tune with feminist sensibilities than the psychoanalysts that have worked on affects. To elaborate, I would like to include part of Spinoza’s introduction to the third part of his *Ethics*:

...there have been some very distinguished men (to whose work and diligence we confess that we owe much), who have written many admirable things about the right way of living and given men advice full of prudence. But no one, to my knowledge, has determined the nature and powers of the Affects, nor what, on the other hand, the Mind can do to moderate them. I know, of course, that the celebrated Descartes, although he too believed that the Mind has absolute-power over its own actions, nevertheless sought to explain human Affects through their first causes, and at the same time to show the way by which the Mind can have absolute dominion over its Affects, (491).

Spinoza’s critique of Descartes is especially important here because it has also the separation of mind and body has been a concept by many feminist scholars. When Descartes splits mind and body into two, he also creates a hierarchy that privileges mind over body. And because the mind has been historically masculinized, and the body feminized, this also feeds into a gendered dualism that privileges masculine (i.e. rational)

subjects. Thus, Spinoza's critique of Descartes is important because Spinoza asserts that though affects and emotions are bodily, they are also rational. When considering emotions themselves have been feminized, giving rise to Freudian terms like hysteria, Spinoza's criticism disrupts this hierarchy in a way that also disrupts the gendered aspect of Descartes claim. Rather, the mind, the body, reason, emotion, men, and women are all "One Substance" (Brennan 2000 47) and exist on the same plain of importance and worth. As Brennan explains "This One Substance is *Deus sive Natura* (God or Nature), an energetic force that is mindful, as well as material, and connects being to being, entity to entity, source to force" (2000 47). Everything is equal not only because Spinoza defines Substance as everything, but because he believes everything exists in accordance with natural law; that everything exists for an equally important reason. The affects are no exception to this, which is why Spinoza also critiques other male scholars as being too dismissive of them. Brennan explains, "Spinoza was developing the view that 'mind' and 'body' ...are the equivalent of twin attributes of One Substance," (2000 47). And while Spinoza acknowledges that the Mind can be used to "moderate" affects to some extent, he does not believe that affects should be suppressed and ignored. Affects, for Spinoza, are not contrary to reason, but invaluable for the ability to reason at one's fullest capability.

Brennan's most important intervention relating to Spinoza's understanding of the affects however, is her notion of "Discernment." As Brennan defines it, discernment is the conscious examination of the affects as one takes them in. It is the ability to interpret the feeling of being drained or energized in a particular situation as an emotion.

Discernment, as an ability, comes out of a specific kind of habitual practice that Brennan calls “Living Attention” that I will explain in greater detail in my final section.

The ability to discern affects in this way is what leads many people to believe that their emotions are their own and that they are self-contained beings, but as Brennan will argue, while discernment allows us to alleviate some of the transmission of affects from others into us, it cannot seal us off completely. Rather, the subject that believes itself to be self-contained can only maintain this fantasy by projecting affects on to others (2004 113). The idea that the self-contained subject is an illusion is what Brennan calls the “foundational fantasy” that she derives from her background in psychoanalysis. The compulsion to project affects rather than discern them properly to maintain this fantasy has been instrumental in various moments of historical oppression, most especially obvious during Western colonization, but is a necessary component in any act of oppression. Brennan explains:

[Projection] is steeped in the ego’s imaginary, in psychophysical territory where, convinced of its own entitlement, it refuses to acknowledge the existence of others. This refusal is the reason it cannot feel the feelings of others. It assumes those others do not feel, (2004 114-5).

Assuming the Other does not feel and thus being unable to empathize with people who are not like “us” has been the foundation for acts of genocide, hate crimes, misogyny, gender-based violence and the subjugation of other humans in to slavery. Thus, being able to discern affects and understand the feelings of others is, as I argue, the most valuable tool that activists and theorists have for igniting social change and achieving justice at more than just the legal level.

It is important to note that what one is interpreting in discernment is an energetic shift. The physiological changes in energy that affects cause is the basis for Brennan's (and indirectly, Spinoza's) idea that we (as in all beings) are connected by affective transmission; what Brennan calls in *Exhausting Modernity*, "interactive energetic economy." She begins her third chapter on energetics with the lines "My thesis in this chapter is that all beings, all entities in and of the natural world, all forces, whether naturally or artificially forged, are connected energetically. I am calling this an interactive energetic economy," (2001 41). The notion of an "interactive energetic economy," by necessity, implies that humans are energetically affected by the all other beings and how much these beings are stimulated or drained is directly correlated to whether or not humans are stimulated or drained when they interact with other beings. All of this leads back into the "foundational fantasy" that I mentioned earlier. And as Brennan also points out, it takes a lot of energy to maintain a fantasy (in this case the overarching fantasies of the self-contained individual and the other that does not feel) so much so that there is not much energy left over to flow freely; rather the energy becomes bound in fixed patterns for the sole purpose of keeping the fantasy going. These fixed patterns of energy are what Brennan calls inertia and what Freud called the death drive (Brennan 2000 61). Fantasy for Brennan is usually and energetically draining force that leads (eventually) to inertia; she writes:

It is precisely the protracted attachment to any fantasy (which must necessitate a bound pathway) that characterizes neurosis. Such attachments make it harder to act upon the world; they are similar in their effects to anxiety, in that they counter 'the movement of life', (2000, 61).

Thus, in Brennan's view, this attachment to the individualist fantasy leads to energetic inertia, which does not necessarily mean a lack of energy, but the amount of energy used to hold up this fantasy means that there is not much energy left over for other acts or even to question the purpose and existence of this fantasy to begin with. This idea also comes out of Spinoza who was suspicious of imagination (or fantasy in Brennan's words) and saw it as an opposing force to *conatus*; "For Spinoza, the imagination is passive and narcissistic...individuals focus inwardly on themselves and their desires rather than their outward striving," (Brennan 2000, 48). The important difference between Brennan and Spinoza here is largely semantic, but worth noting. Brennan's use of the word "fantasy" is more useful, not only because of its contextual ties to psychoanalysis, but also because it implies something that is very unlikely to happen or is impossible, thus fantasy cannot lead to *conatus* and must lead to inertia because fantasies must, by definition, remain unfulfilled. As Brennan explains: "it is precisely the protracted attachment to any fantasy...[that] make it harder to act upon the world; they are similar in their effects to anxiety, in that they counter 'the movement of life,'" (2000, 61). Affects then, are drained from other areas of thought and bound together towards maintaining this fantasy and the freedom of energetic mobility, that is, the ability for energy to move from being to being, is extremely limited.

In other words, affect, as explained by Brennan, is transmitted interpersonally between all beings; it is a "social pressure" that energetically connects beings in a way that physically affects them (Brennan 1997, 258). In *The Transmission of Affect*, Teresa Brennan describes the sociobiological process of entrainment, which is the way that one

is able to take in the affects in the atmosphere and the physiological shift that accompanies this. She writes:

The form of transmission whereby people become alike is a process whereby one person's or one group's nervous and hormonal systems are brought into alignment with another's. Neurologists call the process 'entrainment,' either chemical entrainment or electrical entrainment. Chemical entrainment works mainly by smell; that is to say, unconscious olfaction. For example, pheromones-molecules that can be airborne and that communicate chemical information-signal and produce reactions by unnoticeable odor in many hormonal interactions, including aggression, as well as sex. I suggest smell (in this case unconscious olfaction) is critical in how we 'feel the atmosphere' or how we pick up on or react to another's depression when there is no conversation or visual signal through which that information might be conveyed, (2004 9).

This suggests that humans are constantly taking in affects through smell and have often have no awareness of it. This idea is frightening to those who have been immersed in patriarchal and liberal ideals of the self-contained individual as it would suggest that humans are not actually self-contained and that one's reactions to and perceptions of the world are influenced by others in ways that one is not conscious of. In sociological and psychological terms, this phenomenon appears as "groupthink," most noticeable in mobs and rioters. But affects in groups are not always as negative as this. More positive, although comparatively banal, examples friendship and mentorship. It may seem obvious that such relationships (if they are healthy) are energizing and emotionally rewarding, but how often are particular types of relationships considered as an area of study? In the hierarchy of affective relationships, why do they fall short under romantic love? Even among friendships, why have hierarchies of closeness come to be and why are these things worth studying? How do institutional relationships such as mentorships, or even an average teacher-student relationship in the classroom have an effect on performance? But humans need non-commodified affective relationships and the lack of the ability to form

these affective relationships have been pathologized as sociopathy and psychopathy, two conditions that share antisocial behavior as a major symptom.

Though these changes can manifest in a variety of ways, the two general ways are either that beings are energetically drained or energetically stimulated. But humans have attempted to seal themselves off from this relationship. As Brennan explains through Henry Abramson, “The heart can be plugged up, however—a sort of spiritual arteriosclerosis—and be prevented from receiving not only one’s own affect, but the affects transmitted by others as well” (2004 114). But then this is why discernment—that is, paying attention to our affects is vital. As Brennan says: “the living attention of another is an excellent candidate for the supply of energy which is drawn on in combating inertia,” (1997, 268). Humans, in this age—the Anthropocene (Patel & Moore 2018)—have been encouraged to distance themselves from each other as well as (and more especially) from other, more “natural” beings. The Anthropocene has framed all beings (humans and otherwise) as means to end; they are to be used for (some) human’s monetary or capitalistic gain and neither as ends in themselves nor, especially, as thinking and feeling beings in their own right who deserve compensation in any form for their labor or whose affective suffering is not self-contained. But Brennan’s insistence that we are all connected is the first and most important step towards dismantling these structures.

While Brennan was largely overlooked in her time (and since her death) due to her theological, and often times, mystical influences, and because she died before affect theory reached the apex of popularity, her explanation of humans and other beings as semi-permeable and unconscious ways that beings are affected by one another is



disruptive to the patriarchal paradigm that posits individuals as self-contained and disconnected from one another (and that they should be) can radically change the way that we (living beings) see each other and allow for connections that were previously unthinkable between the marginalized and nonmarginalized and make oppressive systemic practices that rely on affective separation more difficult to perpetuate. In addition, holding affects (traditionally associated with feminine beings) as equally important to reason (associated with masculine beings) in terms of what constitutes a mature and well-developed human would alleviate both problems with mental health and problems of sexism.

In terms of mental health, masculine bodies (often read as men) are, in Western societies, discouraged from showing much emotion. Specifically, they are discouraged from crying or showing too much excitement or disappointment; the only emotion that is considered “acceptable” for these people is anger. But when all affects are forced to be interpreted as anger, this leads to toxic, explosive, and violent expressions of emotions, often in response to events that do not call for this kind of reaction. Feminine bodies (often read as women), are, in a way, “allowed” to express more emotion, but their emotions often getting written off as silly or “hysterical” or simply not taken seriously because they are expected to have an emotional reaction to everything. Neither of these attitudes are healthy for any person, man, woman, or nonbinary. These problems, along with an exploration on how to use emotions ethically will be the main subject of my conclusion, so I will go into more detail about this later, but my main argument here is that affect theory (specifically Brennan’s version of it) allows a basis for making a

feminist argument for current discussions on toxic masculinity, mental health, and the relationship between reason and emotion.

The following section will be discussing how certain emotions have been traditionally considered “positive” socially and personally, but have unintended negative consequences. Specifically, I will be analyzing the way that humor is usually seen as a positive way of subverting norms and bringing people together, it can often have the opposite effect when used improperly. Often jokes can reinforce preexisting prejudices around race, gender, and sexual orientation that only further marginalize these groups and cause more pain than joy. I will also discuss the way that humor was used during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and how it massively backfired against those who truly considered themselves to be “taking on” Donald Trump, but actually served to help him win. On the other side, I offer grief as way to bring people together in a more socially responsible and powerful way. Mainly, I will be using Judith Butler’s *Frames of War* and Elizabeth V. Spelman’s *Fruits of Sorrow* to discuss the various ways that public grieving and attempting to widen the scope of whose lives and what we see as “grievable” can have a more positive and meaningful impact on our relationships to one another than humor does. I will also briefly respond Hannah Gadsby’s stand-up special *Nanette* to explore the ways that humor prevents us from properly processing our grief and keeps us “stuck” in certain parts of history and/or our personal narratives, as well as the detrimental effects of being unable to process our grief on our societal, social, and mental health.

In the third section of this work, I discuss how the idea of “happiness” has been used as an oppressive and controlling force that has been used insidiously against women

and queer folks as means of silencing them. As Sara Ahmed points out in her book, *The Promise of Happiness*, the phrase “I just want you to be happy” is utilized as a way of imposing social norms surrounding love, marriage, careers, etc., especially against women and minorities. I will discuss how this homogenous notion of what makes people happy and what it takes to be happy has caused more unhappiness than happiness and the ways that expressing unhappiness have been used as a means of disruption in a positive way. To demonstrate this latter point, I will look at specific social movements in which women, people of color, and the queer community has used anger to bring about social change. I will use Audre Lorde’s essay “The Uses of Anger,” to explore how people of color, women, and especially women of color have used anger to achieve steps towards political and social justice even though the stereotype that women of color (namely black women) are angry by nature has been used as means of violence and silencing against them.

My final section will deal with the ambiguities of emotion and how to find the line between healthy expression and being consumed by emotions through the process of “living attention.” It is important to place humor, happiness, grief, and anger and their fraught positions in sociopolitical history. While my earlier chapters explain how the ways that humor and happiness have been used negatively, I still believe they can have important uses in both personal and political change. Humor and happiness have been rhetorically useful in various social movements as much as they have been pitfalls. Just the same, anger and grief have power that has often undermined by their initial discomfort and the way they used against marginalized people. Anger and grief, when left without a deep understanding of the how to use them properly can easily take over

and have shown to be both physically and mentally harmful over sustained prolonged periods of time. This is where Brennan's definition of discernment (which is different from judgment) is especially useful in determining the right emotion at the right time and the right intensity.

## WHEN THE LAUGHTER STOPS: HUMOR AND GRIEF IN POLITICAL ACTIVISM

*“I will not say: do not weep; for not all tears are an evil.”*

*-J.R.R. Tolkien, Return of the King*

Humor is one of the most widely used coping mechanisms across the world when it comes to confronting trauma; it is also considered one of the healthiest coping mechanisms especially in comparison to other popular methods like drug and alcohol abuse, self-harm, and self-isolation. And while humor historically, has offered a subversive outlet for challenging moral seriousness and political authority, relying on humor as a response to traumatic or negative feelings raises problems especially in our current political climate; first, because while it is cathartic to laugh through tension, it does not solve the problem that led to that tension; and second, because it leads to the suppression of outrage and grief that would be productive in solving the problem (or at least properly understanding it). These work in tandem to create a fantasy that the world will turn out all right because everyone is still laughing, trauma or suffering appear to be far away or nonexistent—a fantasy that “produces a complex physical alternative world which papers over the original” (Brennan 1993 195). These tendencies to cope using humor could only be considered ‘healthy’ if we understand health in terms of superficial appearances and agreeableness. I argue that this reliance on humor as a coping mechanism is what caused the failure of the American public to take Donald Trump as a serious threat and it is what ultimately allowed him to be elected, but it is evident that many still do not understand or do not want to understand how serious this danger is to

the people of the United States and, quite possibly, the rest of the world. In this paper, I will be using Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* and Hannah Gadsby's "comedy" special *Nanette* to analyze the role of laughter in society as well as alternative responses. Specifically, I will argue that laughter is not always the best response for dealing with negative emotions or cultural/political trauma following Ahmed's suspicions about the transparent promise of happiness in popular cultural representations. In place of laughter, I argue for grieving: private, social, and public in order to deal with personal and sociopolitical trauma using Elizabeth Spelman's monograph *Fruits of Sorrow* and Teresa Brennan's book *Transmission of Affect* to discuss what grieving is, the purpose it serves individually and socially, who and what is deemed grievable, what prevents proper grieving, and finally, the psychosocial results of a failure to process grief. I find it imperative to ask these questions at this historical juncture because, while humor has historically been a powerful tool of resistance, our understanding of the critical powers of humor must be further nuanced as Trump has risen up through the power of mockery and spectacle.

This is not to say that there is no place for satire or subversive humor, but to question where its power comes from: how this humor is directed and whether the audience is aware that what they are receiving is satire. I turn to the 2016 presidential election (as one must when discussing jokes) as example when humor failed to be a healthy coping mechanism. To say Donald Trump was serious threat to the American public in June 2015 after he announced his running, would have been laughed off. Much of the media surrounding him at the time (even from conservative news outlets) were using him for easy ratings, jokes from *The Daily Show*, *The Nightly Show*, and *The*

*Tonight Show* were constant and repetitive. But the problem comes from what the hosts of these were joking about which was mostly Trump's appearance, not his bigotry. Numerous jokes about small hands, bad hair, and orange skin were the main focus of these, but there is nothing satiric about making fun of someone's appearance; this kind of humor does not do any real work against him. Ridiculing his beliefs—making homophobia, transphobia, islamophobia, misogyny, racism, and antisemitism seem outdated, morally and ethically wrong, or at least pointing out that these ideas are an extremist minority through humor— may have been far more effective (though not as effective as ignoring him entirely) because there would have been some acknowledgment that there is a real problem. But the opportunity for this was lost in a series of cheap shots at his appearance and because we were laughing we did not notice.

It also not probable that we would have taken the threat seriously, even if it had been made through humor because satire relies on the audience recognizing it as satire. Too often many take the images they see on social media as reality without bothering to research and fact check what fantasies they are potentially spreading. Politifact.com released a list of memes that had likely originally come from satirical news sources but had spread to other outlets and had to be proven either misleading or completely false.

One from the list:

Readers sent us a meme based on an event that occurred on Michelle Obama's March 2014 trip to China. The meme shows the First Lady energetically waving two red flags. A superimposed caption reads, 'Michelle Obama waves red communist flags on her taxpayer-funded visit to China. Anyone remember her ever waving an American flag?' But the image simply showed a bit of audience participation during a folk-dancing exhibition; the flags were not Chinese national flags, and the dancers waved flags of a variety of colors, not just red but also purple, yellow and green. We also found ample evidence that Michelle Obama appears to enjoy displays of red-white-and-blue patriotism, (Jacobson 1).

And this was only one on a list of eighteen other completely false items that got spread around in the form of memes, because people cared more about spreading these “humorous” images rather than question whether or not they were true.

It is in this way that laughter becomes a form of fantasy making. It constructs an atmosphere of lighthearted optimism; everything will be all right because we can laugh away our problems. It is an attractive fantasy- after all everyone loves to laugh- but all fantasies hide some far more sinister truth underneath and if we get too lost in the fantasy we become unable to see the real threat that lurks just outside of it. As Teresa Brennan points out in *Exhausting Modernity*: “it is precisely the protracted attachment to any fantasy... that characterizes neurosis. Such attachments make it harder to act upon the world; they are similar in their effects to anxiety, in that they counter the ‘movement of life,’” (2001 61). Meaning that our attachment to this fantasy does not allow us to address the problems in reality that it covers over and thus allows these issues to continue unabated. The fact that Brennan connects this attachment to neurosis also would indicate that our compulsion to laugh over these issues indicates a kind of sickness. We as individuals and as a society are making ourselves ill by ignoring the problematic reality and cleaving to a delusion that everything will work out without any real effort to make it so. But the laughter fantasy is powerful; it is seductive through its ability to literally elicit physical pleasure and there is no precedent for getting beyond it. Sara Ahmed points out in *The Promise of Happiness*: “If we are happy, then we are well; or we have done well” (Ahmed 199) and it is the “done well” that makes dismantling the paradigm of laughter as the best means of coping with fear so difficult. Laughter tells us that we are happy and so we have done well without actually having done anything at all. We turn ourselves



into inert, docile subjects while convincing ourselves that we have positively acted in some way.

It is important to note now that Trump himself engaged in mocking the Obamas, the disabled, and women and felt no shame for any of it; instead, he appears to be rewarded for these jokes since he did get elected. Thus, Trump can continue saying these things; mocking Muslims, people of color, and countless other marginalized groups with no backlash that changed his behavior. Even when we joke at his expense, it does nothing because he has too much power and too little shame to care. Back in 2011 when Donald Trump was only an irritating wealthy businessman who contributed in the demand for Obama's birth certificate, the White House Correspondent's dinner made a joke in regards to Trump's xenophobia and racism; it would have been, theoretically, be the ideal place and time to publicly ridicule him, Obama was in a position of power and surrounded by the press, but ultimately this joke did nothing to impede Trump. He was not shamed; he did not reflect on the ridiculousness of his xenophobia and seemed only to become more ardent in his opposition of new (specifically Mexican and Muslim) immigrants during election campaign i.e. the "Build a Wall" rhetoric. Indeed all attention that Trump receives, both negative and positive, is what appears to fuel him.

What this means is that we have to look at what is underneath the laughter; every joke is driven by an emotion. The problem is that we would rather see the joke than the true fear or anger underneath it and so those emotions go unprocessed. Once one comes to rely on a single coping mechanism for dealing with negative feelings, one will fail to fully process them. This is especially true of laughter because there are no great arguments for better ways to cope; laughter becomes the best, and perhaps only, means of

coping because it feels good and appears not to do any harm. But laughter starts to harm the person laughing when they are eventually forced to deal with the reality of their suffering and have no healthy means of doing so because laughter only gives us a temporary sense of relief.

I would like to take an excerpt from Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* to explain precisely what I mean here. Gadsby has a fraught relationship with humor herself as a comedian and as someone who has been laughed at. Here she discusses the way laughter can relieve tension in a way that artificially "solves" problems:

Laughter's the best medicine, they say. I don't. There is truth to it, though. Laughter is very good for the human. It really is. 'Cause when you laugh, you release tension. And when you hold tension in your human body, it's not healthy. It's not healthy psychologically or physically. That's why it's good to laugh. It's even better to laugh with other people. When you laugh, in a room full of people, when you share a laugh, you will release more tension because laughter is infectious. ... Laughter doesn't help... Tension. I do that, that's my job. I make you all feel tense, and then I make you laugh, and you're like, 'Thanks for that. I was feeling a bit tense.' I made you tense. This is an abusive relationship... I've been learning the art of tension diffusion since I was a child. Back then it wasn't a job, wasn't even a hobby, it was a survival tactic. I didn't have to invent the tension. I was the tension. And... I'm tired of tension. Tension is making me sick (*Nanette* 2018).

In this moment, Gadsby shows the dualistic nature of jokes in that can be a means of survival in the short term, but in the long term this ability to quickly diffuse tension has made it difficult to deal with the underlying cause of that tension. The cause (in this case Gadsby herself) is quickly rendered "harmless" and nonthreatening by turning it into a joke. But turning people into jokes normalizes the act of turning people who are like her into punchlines rather than whole people with real concerns for their own safety and a need for acceptance.

Many have argued that laughter is what brings people together, as Gadsby points out in the above quote, but it can often have an adverse effect. In a series of tweets summarizing his Ph.D. dissertation, Dr. Jason P. Steed describes the social function of joking as being fundamentally divisive:

6. we use humor to bring people into - or keep them out of - our social groups. This is what humor \*does.\* What it's for.
7. Consequently, how we use humor is tied up with ethics - who do we embrace, who do we shun, and how/why?
8. And the assimilating/alienating function of humor works not only on people but also on \*ideas.\* This is important.
9. This is why, e.g., racist "jokes" are bad. Not just because they serve to alienate certain people, but also because...
10. ...they serve to assimilate the idea of racism (the idea of alienating people based on their race). And so we come to Trump.
11. A racist joke sends a message to the in-group that racism is acceptable. (If you don't find it acceptable, you're in the out-group.)
12. The racist joke teller might say "just joking" - but this is a \*defense\* to the out-group. He doesn't have to say this to the in-group.
13. This is why we're never "just joking." To the in-group, no defense of the joke is needed; the idea conveyed is accepted/acceptable, (Steed 1).

Jokes here serve to set the norm for what is okay to perpetuate and excludes those who disagree with what has been said i.e. the people who do not laugh.

To prevent this perpetuation, we have to start being comfortable with being uncomfortable. We need to pay serious attention to the things that cause discomfort in us instead of trying to laugh it off by whatever means necessary. In her chapter on “Feminist Killjoys,” Sara Ahmed describes a situation from her younger years in which she is having dinner with her family and someone says something problematic and she—as a “feminist killjoy”—must point out why it is problematic. She then asks herself and the reader what work this is doing and answers by saying that feminists “disturb the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places” (Ahmed 66-7). This disruption of

fantasy can happen not only verbally criticizing what has been said, but also by silence; specifically, not laughing in response to a problematic joke. The not laughing creates a discomfort in the person who made the joke and the others who laughed at it. It causes them to momentarily pause and ruminate on why they believe what they have said is funny. This is the moment I am most interested in: the moment when one stops laughing long enough to recognize the harm that jokes can cause and the harm that automatic unquestioned laughter (in response to any joke, problematic or otherwise) can perpetuate. If we see laughter as the end of conversation, as it often is in these situations, we allow the ideas that caused the laughter to continue unabated and keep spreading.

As comedian Hannah Gadsby says in her stand-up special *Nanette*, humor can keep us stuck in certain parts of stories, unable to move forward. Gadsby states that she must quit comedy in order to move on from the traumatic events that she had morphed into jokes, events that she cannot heal from until she stops making jokes out of them.

Gadsby, professional joke-teller, says of her own work

Do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It's not humility. It's humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission... to speak. And I simply will not do that anymore. Not to myself or anybody who identifies with me, (*Nanette* 2018).

Humor, in Gadsby's case as well as many others who put themselves down to put others at ease, has turned against her. While those around her felt more comfortable, she felt more marginalized because what the people laughing at these jokes had in common were seeing *her* as a punchline. Jokes had only served to further her trauma as Gadsby goes on to say: "Punch lines need trauma because punch lines... need tension, and tension feeds trauma" (*Nanette* 2018). Gadsby's points here are refreshing in light of comedians like

Sarah Silverman and Jeffrey telling us why we should not be offended by the things they say because their jokes are “just jokes” while simultaneously saying that offensive jokes help “push the envelope” and what qualifies as “offensive” changes over time. In doing so, they do not seem to realize that they are contradicting themselves when they say that jokes apparently have the ability to change the world, but still are still “just jokes” when people do not find them funny.

So, what should we do instead? My goal here is not to tell anyone to never laugh, but if one is as skeptical of humor as a coping mechanism as I am, it is only fair to offer an alternative.

In this case, I offer grief. Specifically public and social grieving.

Most people do not like public displays of grieving; it is messy, loud, and requires a lot of energy, but ultimately does more to cause change and bring people together than laughter does. We must grieve openly, freely, and clearly. Judith Butler explains in *Frames of War*, “Open grieving is bound up with outrage, and outrage in the face of injustice or indeed of unbearable loss has enormous political potential,” (Butler 39). In grieving, we also create a division, but the division can be expanded by one’s own ability to empathize. That is, we have a “we” of people who we see as being grievable and there will always be “others” because it is impossible to grieve for everyone individually, but I believe that the frame for whom we can grieve can expand farther through serious attention rather than humor. The thing about making fun Trump’s policies is that it is never satiric; every plan he has for Muslims, immigrant, people of color, and LGBT community is far from exaggerated. So even when we ridicule these policies, there are still real people in danger, the jokes do nothing to abate the serious threat that these

people will likely be facing in the very near future. Instead of trying to squeeze humor out of these traumas, we need to really grieve for them; we need real, pained outrage if we want to prevent more harm.

In addition, because grief is bound up in outrage it also has a level of subversiveness that cannot be misinterpreted. When we react with outrage we are acting in a way that lets others know that we care about injustice. In this case, it becomes our social responsibility to grieve as a means of holding each other up when they experience trauma and their outrage will hold us up when we experience trauma. Open grief is especially subversive because who we can grieve for is framed by the media and the government. Butler explains: “Whether we are speaking about open grief or outrage, we are talking about affective responses that are highly regulated by regimes of power and sometimes subject to explicit censorship,” (Butler 39). Thus, when we grieve for those outside of this framework we are committing a politically radical act of empathy.

I believe humor is most beneficial after we have fully processed and expressed our grief. After that, there will be room for cathartic laughter after all the work has been done. The cathartic nature of laughter would be of much better use after grieving as because the release will come after a much larger buildup of negative affects when there is no longer a need to hold on to them. Our sense of laughter being sign that we have “done well” would be true in that sense and possibly allow a richer and fuller release than trying to bypass the grieving entirely by laughing compulsively.

I turn now to Elizabeth V. Spelman’s *Fruits of Sorrow* and Teresa Brennan’s *The Transmission of Affect* to further define what grieving is, the purpose it serves individually and socially, who and what is deemed grievable, what prevents proper

grieving, and finally, the psychosocial results of a failure to process grief. My definition of grief comes directly from Spelman's *Fruits of Sorrow*, which derives and develops from Plato:

[Grief is not only] intensely felt anguish over the death of loved ones, or, at its outer edges, suffering suffused with the sense of irreparable loss," but more generally "a sense of unhappiness," (Spelman 17).

This definition allows for the broadest discussion of the different aspects and more complex nuances of grief and the grieving process; it also helps one to understand how the suffering of one person becomes grievable by another. For instance, following Brennan's theory of entrainment, "whereby people become alike is a process whereby one person's or one group's nervous and hormonal systems are brought into alignment with another's" (Brennan 2004 9), it becomes clear that the social nature of a human is quite literally hard wired into the body; because of this ability to feel empathy for another's suffering, one can infer that grieving is absolutely necessary to the survival of an individual and of the human race, or in a more intimate sense, a functional family unit.

Referring back to *Nannette*, Hannah Gadsby explains that she used humor as means of coping with the traumatic experiences of violence and bigotry that she had personally experienced over the course of her life, but joking about these experiences kept her stuck in one part of each story, so that she could not move on from that point.

She says:

I think part of my problem is comedy has suspended me in a perpetual state of adolescence. The way I've been telling that story is through jokes. And stories... unlike jokes, need three parts. A beginning, a middle, and an end. Jokes... only need two parts. A beginning and a middle. And what I had done, with that comedy show about coming out, was I froze an incredibly formative experience at

its trauma point and I sealed it off into jokes. And that story became a routine, and through repetition, that joke version fused with my actual memory of what happened. But unfortunately that joke version was not nearly sophisticated enough to help me undo the damage done to me in reality (*Nanette* 2018).

Here, Gadsby's trauma has been unprocessed for decades, she claims that her inability to fully get to the "end" of her stories kept her trapped in them, so much so that she became unable to move forward and grow as a person. If we use Spelman's definition of grief here, we can argue that Gadsby's use of humor left her unable to properly grieve for these painful experiences. She could not truthfully connect and process her own trauma on a personal level and thus, could never heal from it. She goes on to say that in order to fully heal and grow from her past trauma she must stop joking about things that hurt her so deeply and that she believes she must quit comedy all together. Gadsby is pointing to the ways that comedy and humor have been used to silence the pain of others that comes from a resistance to tension that I alluded to earlier. It is true that open and public grieving may create tension, but this tension may also be necessary for healing the trauma.

Tension alerts us to the fact that something is wrong, when we are uncomfortable we understand that there is something out of order around us. Laughter eases this tension too quickly. Long-term, tension is not good for the body or the brain, but laughter is not a long-term solution. Laughter only momentarily relieves tension, but the tension always returns because the issue that caused it has not actually been dealt with. Properly processing tension and understanding that it comes out of someone's suffering and that their suffering matters is the only way to deal with larger issues that cause widespread suffering more permanently. This is most evident when, during the AIDS crisis, public



vigils and the Names Project were able to bring attention to suffering of human beings behind the heavily stigmatized disease (Butler 39). Here, activists were able to expand the framework of who is grievable by openly grieving for their fallen friends and loved ones. They were able to use the affective powers of grief (usually thought to be draining) in a way that energized people to further action, which I will elaborate more on in a moment. Butler believes that humans grieve because “grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of the living being as living, exposed to non-life from the start” (Butler 15). In other words, once one recognizes something as grievable, that person understands that this something is alive, but will not be alive forever; this also means that one cannot know that something is alive until one recognizes that it can be unalive.

Now that I have established what grief is and that it serves a purpose, I must now delve into what that purpose is: Butler provides an argument for how grief has caused upheavals in social structures and has challenged problems of oppression and apathy that arise in corrupt hierarchical systems. In *Frames of War*, Butler states this idea clearly when she writes “Open grieving is bound up with outrage, and outrage in the face of injustice or indeed of unbearable loss has enormous political potential” (Butler 39). This public outcry of grievous outrage has been more prevalent and widespread than ever before with the use of social media to spread the news of deadly injustices committed by law enforcement in the deaths unarmed black adults and children like Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and countless others. The outrage over these deaths has started the Black Lives Matter movement which has led to discussions of racial injustice and disparity by powerful politicians like Barak Obama, Hilary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders who support this movement, as well as Donald Trump, Ben Carson,

and Chris Christie who are against it. With time, the message of Black Lives Matter will spread even wider and hopefully influence people to vote in favor of those who want to fix these issues.

But grief is also bound up with love. Brennan tells us “If I receive another’s love I receive their living attention; and this attention, logically, is a biological force in itself,” (2004 34). “Living attention” is an idea that I will explore in much greater detail in a later section, but for now I will say that it is partially a conscious and ritualistic act of empathy. When we grieve, we recognize the loss of something, but we first have to love something to feel that we have lost something when it is gone. And to love something, of course, we must give our living attention to it. This how we build communities and expand safe spaces for each other and it is what allows us to grieve with each other when one of us passes, but it also expands who the “us” is. If we see empathy as a conscious practice, it compels us then to give our attention to the beings around us. Living attention then moves us toward love and love will eventually lead us to grief—and I mean that in a positive way.

So, how does one get grief right? In his *Republic*, Plato discusses grief is one of the “tantalizing spectacles of humans sabotaging themselves,” (Spelman 16); Plato believed that prolonged and obvious grieving was addicting and led to stagnation; Spelman writes of Plato’s ideas that “grieving makes our condition worse, because it distracts us from attending thoughtfully to the situation we find so grievous,” (Spelman 20). Judith Butler conversely, believes that grief is productive and helpful to society; she argues that restrained grief is not the proper way to grieve; if anything, she seems to believe that there should be fewer limits on when and who we grieve. Butler argues that

our grief for certain people is often forcibly framed by society; we grieve for those whom we deem have the right to live, but these frames limit who we believe as having that right, despite the fact that we are all alive and live precarious lives (though some lives are more precarious than others, and it is these lives that are often considered to not be grievable; this is called the distribution of precarity). The biggest problem with these frames is the matter of deciding who has the right to live; who are these people to say why some people deserve to be grieved and why some do not? By excluding the grievability of certain people, we ignore suffering and injustices that those people face and will continue to face without the social outrage that would arise from grieving them. Butler promotes what she calls “egalitarian” frames of suffering, she says:

This would imply positive obligations to provide those basic supports that seek to minimize precariousness in egalitarian ways: food, shelter, work, medical care, education, rights of mobility and expression, protection against injury and oppression, (Butler 21-22).

Both Butler and Plato are considering the social implications of the power of grief, but while Plato is concerned with its danger, Butler is more concerned with its potential.

As far Butler’s theory of framing and the political potential of grief goes, in November of 2015 Paris and Beirut were both victims of terrorist attacks, but the U.S. News media barely mentioned Beirut despite the fact 43 people had died and most of the public support was aimed at Paris. While Paris did suffer more losses, it should not have taken away from the losses that Beirut face; after all, a human life is a human life and it should not matter where a life was taken when deciding whether or not it is grievable. It was because Paris is more like “us” whereas Beirut was an “us” but a “them.” Paris is

mostly a white, Christian, heavily western city like the United States wants to be. Beirut, however, is a Middle Eastern city with a large Muslim population which are demographics that the United States prefers to ignore or flat out hate and thus Beirut is deemed less grievable than Paris. This is not to say that Paris should have been grieved in the way it was, but that Beirut should have received the support, donations, and volunteering that Paris had. In this situation, the political potential of grief was only used properly to help one group and not the other.

Now the question is: what happens if grief cannot be properly processed? For this, we must remember why both Butler and Plato believed grief was important to a society. Because Plato believed that the purpose of proper grief is to unify a community, the failure to grieve collectively would result in the breakdown of that community. Considering that humans are social beings, the breakdown of a community could potentially lead to the end of the entire human race; though this is a rather extreme possibility, it is not really unlikely. Without a sense of community, there is a disintegration of trust and empathy and love, which means each person would have to rely entirely on themselves survive. Given the many different specialized skills each person has, however, it would not be an easy feat to survive, much less to thrive, as a species. According to Plato, if an individual does not grieve, then it is possible that that person will not be considered part of the society and shunned. Conversely, if one feels grief too much, they will not be contributing to society and be shamed for it.

On the individual level, the inability to process grief can lead to stalling in one of the stages of the grieving process as I mentioned earlier. The five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, despair, and acceptance; however, the stages people often get stuck in are

emotional ones: denial, anger, and despair. Grief is an extremely powerful experience and can be beneficial if properly processed, but incredibly dangerous –politically and personally- if it cannot be processed. David Crimp mentions his own personal experience with unprocessed grief in “Mourning and Militancy” when he explains,

In 1977, while I was visiting my family in Idaho, My father died unexpectedly. He and I had had a strained and increasingly distant relationship, and I was unable to feel or express my grief over his death. After the funeral I returned to New York for the opening of an exhibition I'd organized and resumed my usual life. But within a few weeks a symptom erupted which to this day leaves a scar near my nose: my left tear duct became badly infected, and the resulting abscess grew to a golf-ball sized swelling that closed my left eye and completely disfigured my face. When the abscess finally burst, the foul-smelling pus oozed down my cheek like poison tears. I have never since doubted the force of the unconscious. Nor can I doubt that mourning is a psychic process that must be honored, (Crimp 4-5).

Crimp’s psychosomatic response to his own unprocessed grief exemplifies how toxic the suppression of these feelings are, in this case literally. It can lead to a inert society and negatively affect the individual’s mental health and possibly the individual’s physical health as their energy becomes bound and fixed in these feelings. Crimp goes on to discuss the ways that the queer community had been discouraged from grieving for their friends and lovers as they passed away during the height of the AIDS crisis in the US. This is exemplary of how public displays of grief are especially important.

Public grief has held a precarious position in activism for decade which has forced a false division between the two. Crimp references statements made by author and activist Larry Kramer who called the candlelight vigils “ghoulish” and criticized them for being “indulgent, sentimental, [and] defeatist,” (Crimp 5). But Crimp goes on to explain that what Kramer is referring to in his criticism is not real mourning, but it is in fact

melancholia in Freudian terms. Freud defines melancholia as an “an exclusive devotion to mourning” that involves a “turning away from every active effort that is not connected with the thoughts of the dead...which leaves nothing over for other purposes or interests,” (Crimp 6). This definition of melancholia is similar to Brennan’s definition of inertia which is energy bound up in the maintenance of one idea that does not allow for free-flowing energy elsewhere. But grief is not a precursor to inertia necessarily, it would become inertia if the one fails to properly process it.

Crimp, on the other hand, explains that the failure to properly mourn those who have passed leads to failure to identify with and have empathy for those living with AIDS and a failure to recognize the possibility of one’s own death. Public displays of grief as a form of activism, like the infamous die-ins that later influenced the Black Lives Matter movement, have proven themselves to be effective in gaining resources for research funding, healthcare, and education for those with HIV/AIDS and those who are vulnerable to it. Public grieving interrupts the narrative of the quiet, helpless victim, the moral deviant, the invisible dead as well as the idea that the crisis is over. Displaying one’s grief in public brings attention not only to the “issue” but also to the real people whose lives have been lost and what it means to still be living and fighting against AIDS.

During the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and early 90s, many victims of the illness that were left unclaimed by their blood-relations because of the stigma that illness carried as being related to homosexuality. As Douglas Crimp explains in “Mourning and Militancy,” one of the biggest slogans that appeared during the 1980s in relation to the AIDS epidemic was “Silence=Death” (3). The push to publicly express suffering and trauma was heavily catalyzed by AIDS activist groups such as ACT UP as means of

calling attention to the pain of people (mainly gay men) who had largely be invisible except as a punchline or eldritch monster. Their pain was largely unrecognizable to people outside of the community. This refusal to acknowledge the lives that were lost not only led to public ignorance about AIDS, it also led to the refusal to fund scientific research to develop medications and understand how the disease was spread which led to many more people contracting it and often dying from it. It was only when the queer community came to together and held public funerals and displayed their grief for their friends and found families to the rest of the world. They were saying that these lives, and their lives, were grievable. That were, in fact, lives.

If we reframe our attention to suffering and open up the scope of who we see as grievable, as both Butler and Brennan implore us, we broaden our communities in a way that allows to be empathetic to problems and suffering that we do not directly experience ourselves. I will explain in further on how to put these ideas into practice in my final section, but before I get to that, I would like to cover two other affects whose political power have largely been misunderstood.

## THE DOCILITY OF HAPPINESS AND THE PROMISE OF ANGER

*“BECAUSE we are unwilling to let our real and valid anger be diffused and/or turned against us via the internalization of sexism as witnessed in girl/girl jealousy and self-defeating girlytype behaviors.”*

-Kathleen Hanna/ Bikini Kill, “Riot Grrrl Manifesto”<sup>1</sup>

“How are you?” An innocuous question on the surface, it is often the first thing said when greeting someone after “Hello.” It seems to show genuine investment in other people’s happiness, but is it genuine? What happens when someone answers in the negative? It disrupts the script of the expected conversation. When someone says anything other than “fine” or “great” it elicits confusion, fear, and sometimes anger in the person who asked because it is not what they expected or wanted to hear. So what is the purpose of asking how someone is when there is only one correct answer? In that case, the question “How are you?” becomes a method of policing each other’s emotional state: one can only answer positively or risk punishment through social ostracization or reprimand. The unhappy subject would likely pretend that nothing is wrong and say: “I’m fine.” Out of guilt, or fear, or simply the unwillingness to try to dig any deeper into the root of their unhappiness, the unhappy subject would start to ignore and cover up their negative feeling so as not to upset others or appear abnormal. This person then becomes emotionally subordinate to the more “positive” dominant affects. So, one must ignore any potential negative feelings they may have in order to maintain social harmony. But

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<sup>1</sup> Freedman, Estelle B., and Kathleen Hanna. “Riot Grrrl Manifesto.” *The Essential Feminist Reader*, Modern Library, 2007, p. 396.



resisting the temptation to deny one's true feelings is the first and most important step to causing change in the context of the social issues. The most effective way to call attention to the problems of a system is to disrupt it. In this section, I will use Sara Ahmed's book *The Promise of Happiness*, to show how happiness has been used as a method of discipline and became the norm, the potential of how attending to our less pleasurable affects can cause social change, and the consequences of ignoring them. I will later explore how anger from marginalized groups has been papered over through this use of happiness and explain how anger has been far more instrumental in creating change for oppressed groups throughout history. To explore this argument, in addition to Ahmed's work, I will be utilizing Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect* (2004) and Audre Lorde's essay "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism."

In the second chapter of *The Promise of Happiness* entitled "Feminist Killjoys," Sara Ahmed describes happiness as involving "a form of orientation," meaning that we are told by others the things we must do to be happy (54). One of the problems with this idea of happiness is that it is culturally constructed without considering individual experiences of suffering (of often marginalized groups); suffering, then, becomes unintelligible to the properly dominated person –the 'normal' subject- who sees someone else with the superficial ingredients for happiness, but still does not feel happy. The 'normal' subject will interrogate this unhappy 'abnormal' subject, perhaps angrily, and the unhappy one, cannot articulate the reason for it because he/she/they have followed the necessary formula for happiness, and have still failed to achieve it. The problem is that the expectations of what suits the needs of the dominant culture (white patriarchy in the Western context) become the standards by which everyone is expected to adhere to

achieve happiness. Marginalized people who then express unhappiness with this paradigm or perhaps find happiness through different means can thus become unintelligible to the dominant culture.

It is in this affective hierarchy that happiness becomes a means of oppression. When subjects are unable to express their discomfort within dominant norms, social and institutional structures, these structures become all the more dominant and cannot be difficult to interrupt. It is only when one is able to answer “I am uncomfortable. I am not fine. I am suffering,” or “others are suffering, uncomfortable, and unhappy,” that allows for questions and criticism of a system of happiness that has left people unhappy. Ahmed uses the example of systemic racism as an example of this, she says:

You learn not to see racism as way of bearing pain. To see racism, you have to un-see the world as you learned it, the world that covers unhappiness, by covering over its cause. You have to be willing to venture into secret places of pain...[Happiness] can also work to conceal the causes of hurt or to make others the cause of their own hurt, (83).

To “un-see” a “world that covers unhappiness” would require a new way of talking about happiness—a new vocabulary in which pain and hurt can be articulated, a vocabulary that comes out of sitting with a negative feeling long enough to understand it and name it. But simply naming unhappiness is not enough, though it is the first step.

But before one can name unhappiness, one must see how their affects are influenced by the expectations of others. One way this happens is through the question “How are you?” which becomes what Foucault would refer to as ‘the examination’ stage of discipline. This concept “combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible

to qualify, to classify,” (Foucault 197). This means that “How are you?” becomes a way of policing someone’s emotional state by evaluating their level of happiness and punishing it through social isolation or condemnation if that level is below what is expected or desired, though some more compassionate interrogators may try to ‘fix’ this person’s unhappiness instead. But trying to ‘fix’ someone’s feelings is still punishment because it subjects the unhappy one to the standards of the dominant narrative of happiness as the end one must work toward.

This examination becomes the way in which happiness as domination is perpetuated interpersonally in a way that affects the way individuals relate to their emotions. It creates a ‘docile body’, as Foucault calls it, which does not complain or make demands of others, and thus also does make others uncomfortable about the status quo. As Foucault says, “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved...The[y] were not only a way of illustrating an organism; they were also political puppets, small-scale models of power,” (Foucault 180). These docile bodies become the ideal for those invested in maintain the status quo because happiness can be projected upon these often feminized and racialized bodies and they will not protest. Such a system that succeeds in suppressing pain to create docile bodies, especially when considered in a sociopolitical context, becomes insidious. These docile bodies shift from subjects to oppressed objects whose affects can be shaped and framed by powerful institutions like the government. It is in this way that happiness become a Norm; in Foucault’s words “The normal is established as a principle coercion,” (196). These social punishments become a means of coercing people to hide their unhappiness and the less

unhappiness is discussed the less 'normal' it seems. And those who are seen as outside the Norm are seen as problems.

Returning to Ahmed, her second chapter presents the figure of the 'feminist killjoy,' whom Ahmed defines by her ability to disrupt other people's happiness (65). The feminist killjoy resists becoming a docile body and prevents others from becoming docile as well by refusing to cover her own unhappiness. She would not hesitate to answer in the negative to someone asking, "How are you?" But it is not so easy to overcome systemic domination. Ahmed points out "Feminists are typically represented as grumpy and humorless, often as a way of protecting the right to certain forms of social bonding or of holding on to whatever is perceived to be under threat," (65). This shows how happiness as a system of domination will vilify that which disrupts it. When happiness is threatened it uses its power to write those that disagree with it as a problem. The implications of this are that there need to be many competing narratives of unhappiness to outweigh the dominant narrative of happiness. The goal of activism is to fight against this type of systemic domination. Activism forces institutions to confront their suffering and disrupt the carefully constructed happiness of the dominant groups. The emotional (and often physical) suffering of the oppressed as a symptom of a larger problem cannot as easily be and it is because activists' refusal to be complicit under the tyranny of happiness.

Imagine answering the question, "How are you?" by responding "I am angry!" and how the asker would react. Immediately your answer, while honest, is read as hostile and so you are then read as hostile. Anger disrupts the norms of this casual exchange so drastically that there is no way to overlook it, though many will try or attempt to diffuse

it. But sometimes the asker, if they have a sense of basic respect and decency, will respond with “What’s wrong?” This simple question opens up a space to practically address anger and the cause of it. This exchange seems rather banal, but having the platform to address one’s anger properly has been a struggle for many marginalized groups over the years.

Historically, women’s anger has been used against feminists as a means of discrediting their ideals and the subsequent movements that feminists have inspired. Despite the archaic notion that women are more inclined to be more emotional than men, their anger is often considered an overreaction. It is almost never considered justified or revolutionary in the way that male anger is in the case of, say, the Founding Fathers, when they were outraged over a tax on tea that led to the United States gaining independence. But when women are outraged over things like sexual assault, human trafficking, racism, and gender discrimination, they are written off as hysterical and irrational. However, women’s anger has been instrumental in making strides toward gender equality. Anger, like all affects, is transmitted interpersonally and can influence large groups of people who may or may not be assembled, it is in this way that anger can move from an individual woman’s outrage to a social movement. I argue that it is because of this refusal to acknowledge women’s anger as valid that their anger is more radical and politically relevant than men’s anger and that it is the most effective tool activists have in causing change; to prove this I will be using Audre Lorde’s writings on anger as a spotlight on sites of injustice.

Anger is an active affect; it spurs action in oneself and often in others. If a person is angry, and that person lashes out at another, the other person will likely lash back. The

anger spreads and leads to a heated argument. This ‘heatedness’ is a surge of energy in both parties that they did not have prior to experiencing anger. But this surge of energy accompanying anger does not have to be negative like in the case of an argument. Audre Lorde points out in her book *Sister Outsider*, “Anger is loaded with information and energy,” (127). By this, she means that anger as a response to oppression, informs others that there is a problem that would not have been identified otherwise. When the anger of a group rises so does its energy and that groups potential to have an effect on legal policy, social expectations, or (at the very least) another person’s perspective. As Ahmed would agree with her concept of the “killjoy,” anger can spur positive action, especially when it is a collective experience in response to oppression.

I define anger as an affect that disrupts one’s own emotional contentment and that this affect can be transmitted between people thus also disrupting the contentment of others. In Brennan’s chapter “Transmission in Groups,” from *The Transmission of Affect*, she explains how affects can affect multiple people at the same time both physically and mentally, though they may be interpreted differently by individuals within a group. By ‘group’ I mean a social group, not simply a gathering people in one place. A social group, as described by Iris Marion Young in her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference* where essentially, members of a group are defined by their social position and the ways they do or do not experience oppression, they also do not choose to be part of their particular group. This also means that if these people are not physically assembled, they are still a group. It is because of this last detail that anger can be transmitted between group members even when individual members are separated. Because many groups are often formed around experiences of oppression and because the response to oppression is

anger, group members are able to experience and understand each other's anger in a way that makes it a collective anger. Brennan describes this as "a basic assumption" (borrowing a term from Wilfred R. Bion), a term which is defined as a group's affective defense against adversity. "All the basic assumptions can be running through a given group at any one moment, but one will usually dominate," (Brennan 2004 63). My focus in this particular section is centered on how anger functions socially when it is the dominant basic assumption (affect).

Brennan also explains how anger can still be taken up by members remotely when she says, "the group remains a group when it is ungathered because it is linked always by these basic assumptions, by resonances they trigger, and by the positions they assign" (2004 64). Here Brennan means that if a group is defined by its experiences of oppression, and anger is the dominant basic assumption in response to that oppression, then a group will also be defined by its anger, a specific type of anger that comes out of the unique type oppression that a group experiences. If one accepts that anger can be transmitted person to person and cause a physiological shift in others than one must accept that humans are not self-contained. This a radical feminist idea because the notion of a self-contained individual is a patriarchal one that influenced other patriarchal systems such as capitalism and the church, both of which have historically put women at a disadvantage and in positions of powerlessness. Emotions and the body have also been historically associated with women and perhaps it is because the body's permeability and the ability of affects to travel between them that these things have been associated with women. Thus, a self-contained individual can only be patriarchal because it dismisses the relationship of affects and their effects on the body because these ideas have been

historically feminized, as Brennan says, “the way the psyche conceptualizes its self-containment means...denying the mother’s agency,” (2004 20). From an individualistic perspective, the subject must think of himself as his own entity, not as having come from another (feminine) being to be considered a “healthy person” who “has established ‘boundaries’” and “successfully negotiated the relationship to the mother,” (2004 24). So, by willingly engaging with other people’s anger, we first realize that we (people of all genders) are not self-contained beings and second that women’s anger is already disruptive of oppressive patriarchal norms. Further, after recognizing that women are, indeed, human beings that experience the full gamut of emotions including anger (as do men!) then it obvious that these racialized and gendered associations are doing some kind of sociopolitical work.

This work, I argue, is to keep women and other marginalized social groups in a state of oppression. As long as someone appears to be willing to go along with their particular arrangement there is no need for the oppressor to recognize his/her/their potential to oppress another person. An example taken from Lorde tells us: “Mainstream communication does not want women, particularly white women, responding to racism. It wants racism to be accepted as an immutable given in the fabric of your existence, like evening-time or the common cold,” (128). If one accepts and is content with racism because it is has been normalized, responding angrily to it would likely seem irrational, like getting angry about “evening-time or the common cold,” but Lorde also notes, “every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being,” (127). Here, anger disrupts the idea that racism (and sexism as Lorde is talking about both) is



normal and while it may seem irrational at first because of that idea, more women are likely to angry about racism as more women become aware of their “well-stocked arsenal of anger,” and thus racism will no longer be taken as the norm.

Beginning in October and continuing well into November of 2017, Harvey Weinstein was officially accused of sexual harassment and rape by multiple women (most of whom were also celebrities) and was eventually fired from his own company for it. While Weinstein has yet to face any legal action, his life has crumbled into dust since he has been fired, his wife has left him, BAFTA (The British Academy of Film and Television Arts) suspended his membership, expelled from the Oscars, had his membership in the Producers Guild of America terminated, had his Du Bois medal from Harvard taken away, as well as his BFI Fellowship, expelled from The Television Academy, and was expelled from Warner Bros.<sup>2</sup> This was surprising for two very important reasons.

One: Weinstein’s predatory behavior was an open secret in Hollywood and had been for many years, meaning that many people knew about what he had done, but none spoke out.<sup>3</sup> The odds that any one woman had finally come out to expose him were highly improbable, but it was many women who had organized and brought the initial allegations against him. Their collective anger is what brought so much attention to this case because it would have likely been surprising to the general public that Weinstein had

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<sup>2</sup> “Harvey Weinstein Timeline: How the Scandal Unfolded.” *BBC News*, BBC, 28 Nov. 2017, [www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-41594672](http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-41594672).

<sup>3</sup> Harris, Aisha. “Harvey Weinstein and Hollywood’s ‘Open Secret’ Culture.” *Slate Magazine*, 18 Oct. 2017, [www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/represent/2017/10/harvey\\_weinstein\\_and\\_hollywood\\_s\\_open\\_secret\\_culture\\_of\\_sexual\\_assault\\_and.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/represent/2017/10/harvey_weinstein_and_hollywood_s_open_secret_culture_of_sexual_assault_and.html).

assaulted one woman but the sheer volume of women who had come forward and the many more suspected to be remaining silent. over eighty so far,<sup>4</sup> has brought unprecedented attention this case and has turned Weinstein's name into a synonym for predator.

Two: Weinstein has actually experienced consequences for his actions. This is an infrequent result in cases of sexual assault. According to RAINN's (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) official website, out of every 1000 rapes, 994 of these perpetrators will not be jailed. Out of these 1000, only about 310 are reported, and out these reports, only about 57 lead to an arrest<sup>5</sup>, only 11 get referred to prosecutors<sup>6</sup>, only seven will be given a felony conviction<sup>7</sup>, and six will actually be sent to jail<sup>8</sup>. That means less than 1% of perpetrators will experience any consequence for assault. These women, known now as "The Silence Breakers" after *Time* Magazine named them "Person(s) of the Year<sup>9</sup>," were able to bring about Weinstein's downfall through coming together and sharing their anger over his behavior and letting the anger give them the spark they needed to take action.

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<sup>4</sup> Winton, Richard. "6 Women Sue Harvey Weinstein, and His Former Assistant Makes New Accusations – LA Times." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 6 Dec. 2017, [beta.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-me-weinstein-sued-women-20171206-story.html](https://beta.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-me-weinstein-sued-women-20171206-story.html).

<sup>5</sup> Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 2010-2014 (2015)

<sup>6</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Incident-Based Reporting System, 2012-2014 (2015)

<sup>7</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Incident-Based Reporting System, 2012-2014 (2015)

<sup>8</sup> Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Felony Defendants in Large Urban Counties, 2009 (2013)

<sup>9</sup> Zacharek, Stephanie, et al. "TIME Person of the Year 2017: The Silence Breakers." *Time*, Time, Dec. 2017, [time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/](https://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/).

These women also sparked a wider movement against sexual harassment starting with civil rights activist Tarana Burke and Me Too, which was then picked up by actress Alyssa Milano, who sent out the tweet “Suggested by a friend: If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote “Me too” as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem,”(Milano) and encouraged people who have experienced sexual harassment or assault to reply: “Me too.” Thousands of women (and men) responded, many sharing pieces of what happened to them. After this explosion of voices came more allegations towards men in Hollywood and in politics including, but limited to: Trent Franks, Danny Masterson, Matt Lauer, Charlie Rose, John Conyers Jr., Russel Simmons, Al Franken, Louis C.K., Kevin Spacey, and Roy Price.<sup>10</sup> Most recently, female performer Melanie Martinez was also accused of sexual assault by fellow female artist Timothy Heller.<sup>11</sup> All of those that came forward were taking up each other’s anger and the anger of those that had previously spoken out and were thus enabled to speak out. The momentum built up after the angry public to the Harvey Weinstein scandal is what help all of these victims -male and female- feel energized enough to call for justice on their own behalf. When I said earlier that affects could be transmitted in groups that do not necessarily have to assembled, this is precisely what I was referring to. In this case,

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<sup>10</sup> Almukhtar, Sarah, et al. “After Weinstein: 40 Men Accused of Sexual Misconduct and Their Fall From Power.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 10 Nov. 2017, [www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/10/us/men-accused-sexual-misconduct-weinstein.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/10/us/men-accused-sexual-misconduct-weinstein.html).

<sup>11</sup> France, Lisa Respers. “Melanie Martinez, Former ‘Voice’ Contestant, Responds to Rape Allegation.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 6 Dec. 2017, [www.cnn.com/2017/12/06/entertainment/melanie-martinez-timothy-heller-rape/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2017/12/06/entertainment/melanie-martinez-timothy-heller-rape/index.html).

the group is victims of sexual assault and they were able to take up each other's anger via twitter, television, and other news outlets.

Of course, there is also the possibility of becoming attached to anger in a way that depletes us and eventually causes physical and psychological damage. Brennan warns of the possibility of 'dumping' affects onto others in a way that only drains. Dumping is similar to projection in that it is a process removing one's own unpleasant feelings and depositing them into others (2004 30). Dumping may seem energizing for the individual doing it, but it is wholly draining for the person or people receiving it. This is the danger of using anger as an activist tool because we may inadvertently let the anger move in a way that will end up draining each other and thus interfering with solidarity and group efforts. But as I will explain further in my final section, Brennan offers a means of avoiding this danger through the process of discernment—mindfulness of our affects.

In conclusion, anger—especially women's anger and even more especially the anger of women of color—is a powerful disruptive force that can cause real social change in the world provided that it is understood as valid i.e. insofar as it disrupts people's contentment with the way things are, as shown by Audre Lorde. Anger is transmitted, as explained by Teresa Brennan, between people in social groups in a way that builds the energy and momentum needed for a social movement. Anger is also inherited trans-historically in the #MeToo movement that has come out of centuries of feminist and racial outrage, and while there are some who have believed that women's anger is disruptive in a bad way it is undeniable that without anger, feminism would have achieved nothing and would likely never have been conceived. It is through the silencing

and dismissal of women's anger that they remain subjugated and oppressed and left vulnerable to harm and exploitation.

DEVELOPING AND REDIFINING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AS  
LIVING ATTENTION

*“...living attention that discerns and transforms the affects grows in climates of love and hope,”*

*-Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect**

As I hope the previous sections have shown, affects and our ability to understand them are vitally important for both political and personal justice. However, in order to both analyze and apply our affects properly, we develop our living attention (similar to, but different from emotional intelligence) through a process that Teresa Brennan calls “discernment” as described in *The Transmission of Affect*. I will explain what living attention entails in moment, but there a few details on the subject of emotional intelligence that I would like address first and why I believe it is an insufficient method for our experiences with affects. My first qualm with the concept of emotional intelligence is the tendency that many have to use the acronym EQ as in “emotional quotient” following IQ or “intelligence quotient.” There are a number of reasons I do not think is a good way of understanding emotions, starting with the origin of that name which comes from IQ which has fraught history of racism, sexism, and elitism and certain connotation of fixity that I do not believe can or should apply to the affects. The second problem is that the word “quotient” recalls something that can be measured and tested which I believe is impossible to do accurately and without bias for both intellect and emotion and this kind of formulaic thinking is not in the spirit of the empathy that living attention seeks to cultivate. Lastly, the phrase “EQ” separates “emotion” from

“intelligence” which I have painstakingly argued are rightfully intertwined. The ability to empathize is a type of intelligence in the same way spatial reasoning, linguistics, and logical-mathematical abilities are all different types of intelligence.

Moving on, I must explain what I mean further by “living attention.” The definition that Brennan gives is “the thing that gives that affect energy is the living attention it absorbs, while the thing that depletes it is the lack around which affective pathways congregate in directing that attention to specific ends,” (2004 40). It is an energizing force that allows us to direct our affects towards specific objects and beings of our choosing; it is the ability to 1) perceive the affects of others, 2) discern the emotions that arise from them and where they are coming from, and 3) manage and apply your own emotions and the emotions of others when necessary. Working backwards for a moment, this third step recalls an idea from Aristotle that asserts that virtue is feeling the right emotion at the right time. While each of these steps is highly important, this third step is often where many get stuck. As Brennan points out, many of us are resistant to idea that we are permeable beings that can be affected by other whether or not we are consciously aware of that outside influence. But being able to recognize how we affect and how we are affected by others is the foundation for any ethical system. This is not to say that we are all affected to the same degree and in the same way, nor is it to say that we *should* be, but rather simply recognizing the ways that we are vulnerable to each other is an important first step to a more generous understanding of one another.

Living attention allows us to move beyond the individual. As Jane Caputi writes in “On the Lap of Necessity: A Mythic Reading of Teresa Brennan’s Energetic Philosophy” (2001):

The splitting involved in the foundational fantasy includes a rupture between subject and object, resulting in the ego that imagines himself as separate and contained. This self-concept is intrinsic to oppressive and splitting practices such as objectification, prostitution, racism abandonment of the homeless and the elderly, and genocide...As the ego is annihilated, a different conception of the self is freed to emerge, (10).

Living attention, which requires the formation of habits that take the needs, desires, and energies of another and the other, seeks to heal the rupture that the foundational fantasy has caused. I reiterate that the transmission of affects is not limited to humans or even just animals, rather all beings, including plants and bacteria and even the planet itself, are capable of transmitting affects and taking them up; an idea that Brennan picks up from Spinoza. And so, the objectification of those groups listed by Caputi and others that she refers to in other parts of the article—like woman, animals, and the planet—is mitigated when we acknowledge these living beings as living beings who are not only effected by those that are considered subjects, but also effect, in turn, those subjects. Living attention “emerges as the thing that directs affects to certain objects,” that is, it works to ask us to direct our energy towards those that we (through discernment) have determined to be important to us (Brennan 2004 40). Who or what requires our energy? Are they taking too much? Are we taking too much?

The second step requires Brennan’s definition of discernment which she stakes out as being different from judgment as such. Judgment, in Brennan’s terms, are an evaluative interpretation of affects (the physiological shift) that deploys energy toward an object and is thus an affective force in itself (2004 126). Our judgments are distinct to us and are shaped by the social nature of affects and how we have been trained and coerced to respond to events and beings in specific ways—our judgments do not exist in vacuum,



rather they tend to be reflection of one's societal experiences; as Brennan says "when one judges, one is possessed by the affects," (2004 119). Discernment, in contrast, describes a level of detachment from the affects that, when guided by reason, allows us an awareness about our emotion's origins and causes. It also enables us to achieve a level of emotional granularity so as to more accurately name the emotions that we have which in turn allows us to analyze and manage them better. This process starts in the physical senses and their expression in words. Like judgment, discernment is not always accurate and can make mistakes and only be processed partially. Brennan goes on to say, "Discernment, when it doubts the ego's judgment, registers as a feeling," but this is only partial discernment, full discernment requires "the ability to investigate its logic," (2004 120). Meaning that discernment means more than just being able to name a feeling, but also why one has interpreted an affect as a certain feeling.

Brennan also makes a distinction between cultural discernment and personal discernment. Cultural discernment is practices of discernment that are systemically inscribed through spiritual, civil, and social codes that are designed to curb the affects of individuals in such a way that ideally prevents the continued transmission of negative affects. This is not always necessarily in compliance with other social norms however. Brennan explain that affects are supposed to move through us, not stop with in us, so when we receive negative (draining) affects and do not then transmit them back out because we have discerned this is not the right response, then discernment "may lead one to oppose the general will as an undesirable affective force" (2004 124). Brennan calls this disruption of the general an act of kindness because it is a "refusal to pass on or transmit negative affects and the attempt to prevent the pain they cause others," (2004

124). Thus, living attention as refined through discernment be a valuable sociopolitical tool for achieving justice because it disrupts harmful cultural norms and the “general will” if that will is encouraging the transmission of affects that drain people, such as prejudice, fear, and hate.

Personal discernment is a bit different; it is a series of habits and practices that involve meditation and/or reflection that involve comparison, recollection, and memory that would lead to some degree of detachment from one’s affects so as to better discern the emotions that they bring about (2004 126). Brennan argues that judgment is disruptive to these habits because it leads to affects possessing us rather than allowing them to pass through us. If we become possessed, then we can no longer detach ourselves from our affects and thus cannot properly discern them. It is only by fully acknowledging our bodily permeability and the transitory property of affects that we can successfully detach from them.

In fact, Brennan specifically ties the ability to properly discern affects with the success of movements towards justice:

I submit that justice, and the process of being justified, means taking no more affect than is appropriate for one’s actions and thoughts, and giving the affect that is also appropriate for what one receives as living attention from the other (2004 125).

Affect, Brennan says, is an interactive energetic economy whereby we are able to exchange energy in ways that energize or drain us and those beings around us, but we must participate in this exchange so as not to take too much from our environment nor give away too much of our own energy—or in other words, we must not ‘dump’ our affects into others nor allow ourselves to be dumped into. This dumping is representative

of energetic exploitation which Caputi explains concisely: “the subject dumps his (the subject is masculine, Brennan writes, though both females and males can assume that position) negative affect onto and into the other. At the same time, he is enriched by mining the resources of loving attention (living energy) of the other” (12). In this way, the subject removes himself from the interactive energetic economy and takes on the role akin to the metaphorical capitalist vampire that Marx describes which “only lives by sucking living labour,” (163) or what is now referred to pop culture as an energy vampire, a figure which only takes and never gives back. Which brings me to the first step of living attention which requires an acceptance of this energetic exchange so as to be more sensitive to the affects of other and to be mindful of the way that we use our energy.

This energetic economy functions via a biological process of “entrainment,” which Brennan defines as “the form of transmission whereby people become alike is a process whereby one person’s or one group’s nervous and hormonal systems are brought into alignment with another’s,” (2004 9). Essentially, this means that the human body can be physically altered by the energies of another. When taking in the affect(s) of another, it is literally being taken in. In aligning one’s physical body with another’s via the transmission of affect it creates a physical solidarity as well as a mental one which is important when discussing social group and activism, especially when considering the energizing ability of anger, for example. As I mentioned in the previous section, anger itself is a disruption. When anger is taken in by an individual, it can lead to charge of activity: outbursts, arguments, fights, when it is taken up by groups it also leads to activity: protests, marches, and in the most extreme cases, riots. Anger starts as internal

disruption of a person's contentment then turns outward to others thus becoming a social disruption. When many people are no longer content with their (or other people's) position in the world they form a movement, like the many recent sexual assault victims speaking out against their assailants.

Living attention is not only important for interpersonal relationships. As Brennan explains in "Social Pressure" energy can become bound in fixed pathways through trauma, experience, and fantasy so that it becomes fixed and cannot move freely, she writes "the greater one's experience, the more energy is bound in pathways, and the less one's access to freely mobile energy, and hence presumably the ability to adapt," (1997 263). As I have noted at length in my first section, the attachment specifically to fantasy leads to this energetic inertia because, while focused on the maintenance of fantasy, our attention and our energy cannot be brought back to our environment and the beings around us. This is also true in cases of trauma, though it is much more difficult to unbind energy in these cases because trauma generates more significant obstacles than fantasy, keeping us stuck in moments or periods of our lives that prevent us from living our present moment, often out of fear or guilt. Brennan explains: "As long as trauma is unhealed it keeps the victim open to the same affects (and attracts them...) there is something in trauma that permits such affects permanent entry," (2004 48). We become unable to function fully and adapt to new circumstances because our energy becomes bound to the memory of that trauma. This is exemplary in cases of PTSD in which a person cannot help but relive a traumatic moment in their life and the fear associated with that moment is carried into the present when circumstances have (likely) changed.

Not only does the binding of our energies prevent us from transmitting our energies elsewhere, it also prevents us from receiving energy from others which Brennan links to aging, being aged, and death, as Brennan (building on Freud) sees inertia and the lack of movement as a type of death. We can say here that inertia runs counter to a striving life force (or *conatus*) that Spinoza describes because it takes one out of the energetically interconnected world that Brennan and Spinoza are revealing. Brennan argues that attachment to fantasy (specifically the foundational fantasy) has been effective in its aim to undermine the “original logic of nature” that Spinoza upholds and that modern technologies have an energetic effect on us (2000 51). As Caputi goes on to argue, this binding of energies has affected our world in a material way, she writes, “Consumer objects, dominating our habitats and made in the image and likeness of the ego and its desires...are characterized by bound energies. In these commodities, living energies are fixed, slowing down their motion and re-entry into the life cycle,” (13). When these objects are removed from the life cycle they cannot release their energies that would then be taken back up by other beings, thus when we surround ourselves with such objects, we pour out our own energy, but cannot then take energy back up from our environment. In other words, these objects are draining to us.

But there is one specific affect that is required for living attention that is also part of the solution to unbind these energies and thus continue the life cycle. Brennan writes: “reason and love are both names for aspects of living attention; living attention is the condition of reasoning and the embodiment of its connective ability as well as the gift from mother to the child or the lover to the beloved,” (2004 41). Brennan specifically connects love with the life drive as they are both “shared processes of connection,” (2004

131). Love, in Brennan's work, is able to help combat the detachment to the living world that those bound to a fantasy experience. It requires an interpersonal connection (though not just between humans) that is energizing for all of those in a loving interaction. Love is also able to transform negative draining affects that can be criticized and reordered because love is a "process of making or sustaining connections consistent with the known facts or the needs of others and psychical and physical health, In short the tendency to bind and bring together, to make things cohere, follows the logic of the life drive," (2004 132). Therefore, in order to practice living attention, we must also practice love.

It is a hard time for love at this moment in history and certainly there are people who appear to be actively against it. They resist both loving and being loved; it is these people who oppress, abuse, and exploit. I do not wish to tell oppressed people that they should love those that have hurt, which is often the way the argument in favor of love is has been framed. Rather I believe that love between oppressed people and solidarity amongst the marginalized is more effective. If we think of love as an energizing affect, then directing our living attention to those who are being drained through oppressive sociopolitical forces seems to be a step in the right direction towards creating movement. As I have mentioned in the previous section, anger and grief are affects that are also capable of this, but grief and anger are also most effective when interpreted through a loving lens. If we are angry because someone or something that we love (including ourselves) was hurt or mistreated, we are more likely to use that anger in a way that addresses what has caused the suffering—that is, as a step towards justice. If we are grieving, it is necessary that we had loved the person or thing we have lost before we lost it. We show that love when we grieve publicly for those that have been deemed

ungrievable. And while love may find a place within humor and happiness, the way that we have tended to express these feelings has been without much love or empathy.

Though in practicing Living Attention, it is also important to create empathetic boundaries so that we are not drained entirely by focusing our energies on those things that do not energize us in return. To do this, we must also have empathy for ourselves and pay close attention to physical, emotional, and mental changes within us when we are around certain beings or objects. Living Attention as a practice allows this the ability to discern these changes to become easier over time, but there are other ways of building these boundaries as well when interactions with draining beings and things are unavoidable. The most important step is to try to limit one's time with them or take breaks from them; for instance, when one is stuck in an office or classroom for most of the day it is important to take breaks from these spaces and go outside, or if this is not possible, perhaps introduce some things that do energize us like natural light or some indoor plants. When it comes to other people who drain us we must learn to say no (even though this can be difficult for some), limit our time with them, or help them to understand that they have been draining others—often the people who are draining are consciously unaware of it even if they feel more energized after draining someone. Brennan would also implore us to remember that because we are permeable and affects can pass into us, so too will the pass through us. Affects are temporary and will pass after we have acknowledged them. If we fail to acknowledge them, i.e. recognizing when we are being drained, then they will consume us and drain us to the point of feeling sucked dry.

This idea of “living attention” is the crux of Brennan’s work, so much so that the volume of the SUNY series on Gender that was compiled in her honor bore this phrase as its name. Living attention is more than empathy for the other: it is more than understanding our own affects, it is more than emotional intelligence, it is more than discernment. It is the opposite of draining, it is the giving and receiving of life and love. It is the sustained conscious effort of oneself to not only recognize the way that all beings are connected and affected by another, but to honor this connectedness. To properly do so we must connect the ideas of affects and emotions with ideas of justice and reason and love. We must also honor the affects we take up that do not always make us feel good because they are necessary as well. We must discern what are emotions are trying to tell us because this information, such as taking up the negative affects of others leads us to being able to identify instances of injustice, allowing the opportunity to be kind to one another by interrupting the spread of negative draining affects.



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