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Creative paranoia: Affect and social method

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, various critics have proposed that scholars should turn from critical hermeneutics to engage with new modes of social inquiry. The common charge is that critique has become paranoid and cannot register the dynamic affects that vitalise everyday life. In response to this shift, my paper poses several questions. For instance, are the suspicious sentiments of critique so disconnected from our current civic atmosphere? And do the times and spaces we are living in truly demand methods that are less wary and reactive? To explore these questions, the paper examines an intriguing, internal conflict within Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (2007), a text that has been widely acclaimed as an answer to calls for methodological change. Though it is marked as a departure from 'paranoid reading', I argue that Stewart's ethnographic work, set amidst environments of precarity and fiscal crisis, gives us cause to reconsider the social utility and creative potential of suspicion.

Over the past decade there has been a growing chorus of discontent with what are perceived to be the suspicious reflexes of critical methods. The common charge is that critique has become paranoid and stagnant; unable, and often unwilling, to register the dynamic attachments and affects that vitalise everyday life. Bruno Latour, for instance, argues that critique's 'debunking' and 'iconoclastic' narratives (2004: 238) have 'had the immense drawback of creating a massive gap between what was felt and what was real' (2010: 4). Rita Felski similarly claims that critique is 'a stance of permanent scepticism and sharply honed suspicion […] propelled by a deep-seated discomfort with everyday language and thought' (2008: 13). It is, she states, a method that 'requires us to go behind the backs of ordinary persons in order to expose their beliefs as deluded or delinquent' (13). Both Latour and Felski argue that a suspicious stance devalues ordinary logics and divorces the critic from their social environment.

In this article I would like to raise some questions that unsettle the seemingly disparate identities that justify this turn – the critical, structural forms of attention assigned to the critic on one side and the affective, dynamic attentions that animate everyday life on the other. For example, are the suspicious, wary sentiments of the style of critique under question so disconnected from the atmosphere and actions of our current civic sphere? And do the times and spaces we are living in truly demand methods that are less critical, wary, and discerning? As a way into these questions, this article will address an intriguing, internal conflict within a text that has been widely commended for its response to calls for methodological change, Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (2007). Though it is marked as a departure from 'paranoid reading', I argue that Stewart's work gives us reason to reconsider the potential, character, and social utility of suspicious attention, and thus the division of critical and social methods. By highlighting this counter-narrative within Stewart's work, my discussion also addresses broader questions about the nature of affect and the value of critical reading that have arisen in recent and prominent debates about methodology.

In line with Latour and Felski, further arguments against suspicious reading claim that it is not germane to our political present. In their editorial opening to 'The Way We Read Now,' for example, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus argue that 'symptomatic reading' is no longer relevant to contemporary political realities, and has

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come to seem 'nostalgic, even utopian' (2009: 1–2). They describe this perspective as a common, collective sentiment, stating: 'Those of us who cut our intellectual teeth on deconstruction, ideology critique, and the hermeneutics of suspicion have often found those demystifying protocols superfluous in [the current] era' (2). This sense of waning relevance echoes the writings of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who suggested, as early as the 1990s, that the paranoid forms of reading applicable to the Cold War era and during the 1980s AIDS crisis had taken on a 'dogged, defensive narrative stiffness' (Sedgwick, 1997: 23). Sedgwick argues that criticism retaining a paranoid structure has 'done so increasingly outside of a context where it had reflected a certain, palpable purchase on daily reality' (2007: 640). More recent affect theory has also described critique as inadequate for the task of understanding social dynamics. Brian Massumi argues that critique 'loses contact with other more moving dimensions of experience' and 'doesn't allow for other kinds of practices that might not have so much to do with mastery and judgement as with affective connection' (Massumi in Zournazi, 2002: 220). Due to what he describes as affect's autonomous, indefinable nature, Massumi states that '[affect] is not ownable or recognisable, and is thus resistant to critique' (1995: 88).

This representation of a critical hermeneutics as out of touch with social life has inspired a call for new methods. Many of the critics mentioned above, as well as others, have proposed alternative methods (Sedgwick, 1997; Law, 2004; Warner, 2004; Thrift, 2007; Felski, 2009; Latour, 2010; Bewes, 2010; Muecke, 2010). These proposed forms of inquiry are variously described, in contrast to critical reading, as free of suspicion or judgement and more accommodating of divergence and ambiguity. In an argument for fictocriticism, a method that combines both critical and fictive genre elements, Stephen Muecke states that in contrast to 'traditional sociological texts', his text 'is organised around flows and coagulations of thoughts and feelings (Muecke, 2010: 1). Outlining his 'Non-Representational Theory', Nigel Thrift similarly explains that 'it is imperative to understand […] multiple registers of sensation operating beyond the reach of the reading techniques on which the social sciences are founded' (12). According to such arguments, to reunite with vital forces of contemporary life, scholars must break from suspicious and demystifying forms of social inquiry.

In consonance with Stewart, I am in favour of inclusive forms of inquiry that consider non-human-centred modes of change and agency, however, I envision that this approach would mean not excluding a range of methods and possibilities from the outset. With this in mind, instead of asking how critique could be more than suspicious, with the hope of forging a new method, I want to ask a slightly different question, namely, how might this suspicion be more than critique? And by 'more than' I mean how might the desire to reveal hidden motives and agencies have a broader social location and purpose? How might it resonate in and with logics that blur what are presumed to be the distinct realms of critical and common thought? In this frame, we have the potential to decenter critical hermeneutics in a way that does not seek to exclude or dismiss it as erroneous or obsolete, but rather considers the way that all methods – not just a select 'better' few – are immanent to the social affective spaces they engage.

As Ben Anderson notes in *Encountering Affect* (2014), 'there is now an extraordinary proliferation of versions of what affect is and does' (7). He explains that this is because an interest in affect orients 'inquiry to life and living in all its richness' (7). However, critical voices within affect theory have variously argued that certain questions about living, namely critical questions about identity politics and structural inequalities, have sometimes been set aside unnecessarily (Hemmings, 2005; Thein, 2005).[1] Anderson aims to address the conflict between critique and affect by offering 'a specific practice of critique [that] can sit alongside and compliment speculation and description as ways of relating to affective life" (19). With my close reading of Stewart's ethnography I hope to show that we could also face this conflict by considering how existing forms of critical attention, in all their suspiciousness, might already be viable methods for navigating social shifts. My argument therefore joins efforts to diversify the methods we can use to engage with affect by addressing a key theoretical and methodological tension within the field. It raises questions about how we ascribe values and affects to particular modes of analysis and reenlists critical hermeneutics, via Stewart, as a creative, dynamic social method.

1. Provocative paradox

Stewart has been portrayed as one of the primary advocates of 'non-representation,' and 'creative experimentation' (Blackman and Venn, 2010: 13), and *Ordinary Affects* as one of the 'most widely circulated books on affect,' (Frank and Wilson, 2012: 873). In *Ordinary Affects'* 115 autobiographical fragments – the longest stretching across 5 pages, the shortest just 4 lines – Stewart narrates scenes from her everyday life where people she knows, meets, or sees, respond to as-yet-undefinable, affecting forces. The fragments are prefaced by a short, critical introduction that positions *Ordinary Affects* as a correction to critical, structural, and representational forms of social science, and, in realisation of the current methodological directive, as an intuited and creative rendering of everyday life. In the very first sentences, Stewart aligns her study with the aims and terminology that codify the intervention described above. '*Ordinary Affects* is an experiment, not a judgement' she argues, '[c]ommitted not to demystification and uncovered truths that support a well-known picture of the world, but rather to speculation, curiosity and the concrete […]' (Stewart, 2007: 1).

The ethnography can be read as a realisation of the proposals for methodological change cited in my introduction. In the opening pages of *Ordinary Affects*, and in a series of related articles, Stewart draws inspiration from the turn against critique's key theorists. In 'Weak Theory in an Unfinished World' (2008), for instance, Stewart cites Sedgwick's arguments against paranoid reading as an impetus for her work (72, see also 2011). In 'Atmospheric Attunements' (2011), Stewart also names Thrift and Latour as inspiration for her 'writing and thinking experiment' (Stewart, 2011: 445). 'Following these tendencies to rethink theory and writing,' she explains, 'my point here is not to expose anything but to pencil in the outline of what Thrift (2007) calls a geography of what happens: a speculative topography of everyday sensibilities […]' (Stewart, 2011: 445). Noting precedents for *Ordinary Affects*, Stewart also praises fictocriticism's blurring of fact and fiction, which, marked as more sensorial than critical prose, 'leaves the reader with an embodied sense of the world' (2007: 6).

Stewart represents affect as unresponsive to structural, analytic, and critical methods. Such methods, she contends, cannot capture

[1] In cultural geography (Davidson and Bondi, 2004; Davidson and Milligan, 2004) and the sociology of science (Lloyd, 1984, Keller, 1985), feminist scholars have advocated for the recognition of affect and emotion as important social agencies, rather than unexplainable irrationalities. It is not surprising that critiques of the tendency to oppose affect to emotion - in a way that echoes earlier dichotomies between reason/emotion – have also arisen from feminist theorists of space, embodiment, and culture (see Hemming, 2005 and Thein, 2005 as cited above, but also Papoulias and Callard, 2010). For a thorough review of literature within the field of feminist studies dealing with affect see Gorton (2007).

the affective dynamics of everyday life. According to Stewart, traditional '[m]odels of thinking slide over the live surface of difference at work in the ordinary to bottom line arguments about "bigger" structures and underlying causes' and 'obscure the ways in which a reeling present is composed out of heterogeneous and non-coherent singularities' (4). Affects, she argues, 'are not the kind of analytic object that can be laid out on a single, static plane of analysis' (3). Echoing Massumi's arguments about the stagnating effects of representation and critique, Stewart also explains that her work 'tries to slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique long enough to find ways of approaching the complex and uncertain objects that fascinate because they literally hit us or exert a pull on us' (4). To avoid categorising affects or trying to determine their cause or identity, Stewart employs stylistic techniques that, on the one hand, forestall a definitive description of affects, but on the other hand, determine affect as naturally indeterminate. Most notably, affect, in her descriptions, is tentative and unclassified, referred to only as 'something': 'An opening onto *something*' (2007: 72); 'a something waiting to happen' (72); 'things throw themselves together into something that feels like *some*thing' (76); '*Everyone* knew that something was happening, that they were *in* something' (79).

After shedding the static and paranoid impositions of structure and critique, Stewart, we might assume, is set to reveal an unsuspicious and uncritical public. However, what we find in *Ordinary Affects*, contrary to the arguments of some of its cited influences, is a collective commitment to anticipatory reading and causal sense-making as methods, not just of scholarship, but of survival. Stewart's introduction reinforces the claim that a hermeneutics of suspicion has lost its everyday purchase, however, in stark contrast, her ethnographic fragments present an unmistakeably hypervigilant public.

Stewart's fragments are populated by the characters and settings we might expect to find in the postmodern paranoia novels of Thomas Pynchon, or the offbeat Americana of David Lynch's television miniseries *Twin Peaks*. In North American trailer parks and strip malls, citizens are vigilant and reactive. *Ordinary Affects*' 'atmosphere is,' as Ben Highmore notes, 'simultaneously small-town gothic, blue-collar naturalism, and main-stream surrealism' (2011: 8). Stewart includes social anxieties about day-care centres and ritual abuse (2007: 64), the moral panic of teenage massacres (74), impending Christian apocalypses (108), mysterious illnesses (43), border anxiety (123–124), 9/11 (121, 124), and public surveillance (82). Trailer park eccentrics and citizens fight, or fail to fight, the chemical companies whose covered-up contamination of the water supply is responsible for their ailments (28, 84, 33, 91). Disgruntled young men, in forgotten, post-industrial cities turn to neo-Nazism, wanting someone to blame (56). People are addicted to poker-machines (72, 95), wonder drugs (75), and wander around in shopping centres aimlessly looking to fulfil a mysterious desire (61). With strikingly symmetrical irony then, Stewart's critical framework, which draws from Sedgwick's argument that paranoid reading is a tired, ivory-tower method (Stewart, 2008: 72) and gestures away from concerns about cause and underlying agencies (2007: 4), is challenged by her own commitment to documenting the ongoing ubiquity and gravitas of suspicious reading in everyday life.

Stewart's ethnography can be read as a realisation of the methodological calls described in the opening of this paper. However, I argue that its paradoxes also challenge the redundancy of the hermeneutics of suspicion – as a common, interpretive method – in a world where authorial agency is radically distributed, and yet, individual culpability remains an immediate concern. In this social context, people may be privy to the social and economic dynamics that filter their choices but must at the same time contend with powers – for example, credit and insurance companies – that increasingly hold them individually accountable for risk and action. Drawing out this tension, my reading locates suspicion, as a living, dynamic form of attention, at the heart of Stewart's ethnography. I argue that if we recognise, rather than dismiss, the vitality of suspicion, we can begin to unravel why wariness is such an untiring form of attention in scholarship *and* within the wider rhythms of social life. Breaking from an essentialist reading of the hermeneutics of suspicion as an inert and uncreative method, we can consider how 'paranoid reading' might already be a feasible way to deal with the shifting ambiguities of our mercurial social structures and the authorial agencies they involve.

2. Ordinary paranoia

The world Stewart creates in her fragments compels us to ask whether paranoid methodologies are *obscuring* the true voice of the social, or if the paranoia of critical methodologies is a manifestation of a broader, social atmosphere. To readers, an internal conflict becomes evident. Stewart aligns her position with Sedgwick's characterisation of paranoid reading as an out-dated methodology, however, what we see consistently and persuasively in the ethnographic fragments of *Ordinary Affects* is that paranoia is a vital, orienting method in the social milieu Stewart represents. Reading experiences of suspicion in this context also lends a different texture to structure, readability, and wariness than the broader turn from critique, and Stewart's introduction, puts in place. Drawn directly from Stewart's post-9/11 North American context, a setting of immediate political, ideological, and economic unrest, these characters – call-centre employees, neo-fascists, and retirees alike – sense momentums that 'threaten' to gather or disperse, unhinging their lives in banal and dramatic ways. In the environment Stewart studies, it is not the imposition and rigidity of structure that causes a sense of unease among publics, but the *volatility* of such determinants.

Despite initial positioning against structural concerns, Stewart's ethnography is consonant with a current resurgence of sociological interest in how demographics emerge or change in response to economic crises (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Hardt and Negri, 2009; de Peuter, 2011, Standing, 2011a). Guy Standing, an economist and public intellectual, signals an emerging class called the 'precariat', a heterogeneous demographic united by their perpetual state of economic insecurity. It is a global class, Standing argues, that feels: 'Everything is fleeting' (2011b). For Standing this is a feeling that can be anchored in processes such as the casualisation of the workforce. The demographic Standing argues for, the 'precariat', resonates with the 'emergent' class that Stewart describes in *Ordinary Affects*. The ethnography is awash with citizens who are wary of widespread financial instability, who are living in a permanent state of simmering unease. In a fragment called 'short circuit', for example, Stewart articulates the affective toll of industrial dispute, risk and uncertainty, an anxiety that defines the 'precariat':

> [H]er brother makes foreman at GE after twenty some years on the line […] There's a strike over healthcare cuts and job security. He and the other foreman have to cross the picket line. It's horrible. He's been a union steward. He's given union speeches. Now things are getting ugly. Something powerful and painful flashes through him. (2007: 14-5)

Though Stewart marks affect as 'something' here, the flash is readable as the lived struggle of structure. The foreman has a sense of solidarity with his fellow workers, but is threatened by the obligation of his new role and the living it provides him. The

workers' rights erode before his eyes, as the workforce becomes more 'flexible'. His affective experience is a profoundly sociological one. It is the feeling of being implicated and systemic, complicit in what grips you. As Judith Butler states in her recent work on global ethics: 'Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency' (2012: 148). In this pithy description, Butler presents precarity as a condition that emphasises our citizenship in a broader social economy, or ecology. Butler describes this experience as the response to contemporary fiscal-crisis, and it is this economically unstable world Stewart documents in *Ordinary Affects*. Edging her vision closer to sociological commentaries about the impact of economic instability than she acknowledges, Stewart's fragments offer a description that unsettles the division between '"bigger" structures' and fluid, everyday affect s set out in her critical introduction (4).

The stories in *Ordinary Affects* speak to discourses other than the desire to revolutionise method. Indeed they can be read as a compelling case for the quotidian value of suspicious reading. Delving into Stewart's previous oeuvre reveals quite a stated fascination with the cultural importance of paranoia in contemporary U.S. culture (1999a; 1999b; 2000; 2003). In *Paranoia Within Reason*, Stewart's essay, 'Conspiracy Theory Worlds' (1999a), for instance, places her research within a body of work that recognises conspiracy culture as more than just a hangover from Cold War McCarthyism. In these essays, suspicious feelings are located at the heart of ongoing political problems. Douglas R. Holmes' 'Tactical Thuggery: National Socialism in the East End of London' (1999), for example, gives an insight into how the British National Party has used rhetoric conflating the decline of the welfare state with incoming migration, in a deliberate manoeuvre to breed nationalist and racist paranoia. Ten years beyond the publication of this article, and exacerbated by the instability surrounding the global financial crisis, this same sentiment was seen in the BNP's dubious attempts to explain the 2011 riots on the streets of London.[2] Stewart's inclusion in this volume positions her within a discourse that sees paranoia, and specifically the productive, everyday force of paranoid reading methods, as a topic worthy of ongoing analysis. Here, paranoia is outlined as a common structure of thought, a schema for how knowledge is collated and then acted upon in everyday scenarios. The prevalence and risks of pattern-reading, in this context, begin to signal a more general act of interpreting and inferring causality.

Though intended as a departure from paranoid narratives, the fragment form Stewart adopts in *Ordinary Affects* also encourages a meditation upon causal and relational forms of deduction. The fragment structure derives from the pottery shard or the torn papyrus: the irresolvable, incomplete archaeological form. In *The Fragment*: *An Incomplete History*, Glenn W. Most suggests that: 'Precisely by being incomplete, [the fragment] stimulates our imagination to try and complete it, and we end up admiring the creativity that would otherwise have languished within us' (Most in Tronzo, 2009: 12). A collection of splinters works as an asyndeton, encouraging the reader to engage in a hermeneutic reading method, anticipating and assuming that what constitutes the whole can be read in a part, or even an omission. The fragment form operates within a frame of causality. We read patterns, make deductions about their relation and the arrangement of agency within them. Thus while Stewart's fragments aim to work against a sense of totality (2007: 1), Stewart also relies on the connective inferences of pattern recognition to weave *Ordinary Affect*'s moments into a zeitgeist.

Suspicion drives knowledge; it is the knitting together of seemingly disparate events and utterances into a pattern that can be read and responded to. It serves the desire for meaning and explanatory logic that Stewart, following Barthes, pushes into the background, but nonetheless pursues *and* provokes. It is not as though causality or meaning are imposed structures, that, when miraculously removed, will reveal a public undesirous of meaning and justification. Processes of relation and deduction are integral to thinking and creating and living. It is precisely these ever-evolving patterns of causality that drive *and* test the people of *Ordinary Affects*.

The scenes that Stewart recounts in her ethnography affirm the ordinariness, the commonplace nature, of the hermeneutics of suspicion as a methodology for relational living. They create a picture of American life where people are permanently attuned to the threat of mysterious 'somethings' threatening to 'throw themselves together'. The individual suffers an anxiety of influence, grappling with the social authorship, or the radically distributed agency, of life. Capturing the tone of the book, as well as creating a point of origin, Stewart begins her first fragment 'Dog Days' with the ominous line 'It's been years now since we've been watching' (10). 'Something surges into view like a snapped live wire', it is both 'real' and 'delusional' (9). 'The dogs take to sleeping in nervous fits and starts' and 'cower under legs for no good reason' (9). They 'whimper at the sound of branches brushing up against the bathroom window in the still of the night' (9). The dogs are attuned to some mysterious threat, but then just as easily snap out of it and resume their tail-wagging play. In this fragment we are introduced to the kind of world Massumi describes in 'The Autonomy of Affect' (1995), where forces surge beneath our human perceptions, affecting our everyday lives. Though as we can see, this is not a world devoid of scrutiny, as a turn away from critique might assume. Rather, the autonomy of affect creates perfect conditions for suspicion. The subject remains ever alert to an unseen presence – their agency is always already thwarted in the face of a power that they allegedly cannot name or even perceive.

Thus, despite a series of proposals from scholars such as Latour, Sedgwick, and Massumi that insist everyday life is no longer animated by a desire to determine the true cause of events, and that affect is impervious to such attention, in *Ordinary Affects* we finally arrive at an illustration of this much-invoked 'ordinary' only to discover that the indeterminacy of affect *fuels* paranoid reading. Stewart introduces us to a milieu where people cannot define exactly what forces are at work but nonetheless always have an inkling that 'things are happening' (2007: 21). The vigilant attention that is introduced in the first line is repeated again and again throughout the book. In the very next fragment 'Attention is distracted, pulled away from itself. But the constant pulling also makes it wakeful, "at attention"' (10). This guarded motif is one of the most prevalent in the book:

> And the habit of watching for something to happen will grow (12)
>
> There's a politics to ways of watching and waiting for something to happen (16)
>
> It's the paying attention that matters – a kind of attention immersed in the forms of the ordinary but noticing things too (27)
>
> Watching and waiting has become a sensory habit … Hypervigilance has taken root (35)

[2] The then leader of the BNP, Nick Griffin, narrated the London riots via Twitter, attempting to infer a causal connection between multiculturalism and the riots. A sample of his posts can be read on the Twitter platform: http://chirpstory.com/li/2171.

> [Rogue intensities] incite … the most ordinary forms of watchfulness (45)
>
> It's like flexing one's watching and waiting muscles, keeping them limber […] Not exactly "passive", it's hypervigilant (50)
>
> Forms of attention and attachment keep [the self] moving: the hyper-vigilance … the vaguely felt promise that something is happening, the constant half-searching for an escape route (58).

As the repetition of this motif demonstrates, vigilance is intrinsic to Stewart's representation of everyday life. This 'Watchfulness' (45), linking the anticipation of others and Stewart's own ethnographic 'gaze', works against *Ordinary Affect*'s introduction to draw the hermeneutics of suspicion, and the hermeneutics vital to simply *living*, into alignment.

Stewart does not break from paranoid logic; she effectively locates herself in a circle of constant watchfulness. Often engrossed in hyper-paranoid milieus, she watches, indeed joins with, those who are watching and waiting for 'something' to happen. In this context, the idea that affect, as a radically dispersed and unrecognisable non-human agency, is governing our actions and events, does not quell or suspend suspicious attention. It does not dampen the desire to pre-empt and anticipate. Rather, hypervigilance, as a form of responsive attention, is actually exacerbated by the notion that agencies beyond our control can arise from anywhere at any time. *Ordinary Affects* is a noted exemplification of the affective turn's method proposals, and yet a pejorative description of paranoia unravels in the ethnography. It is precisely this paradox that marks *Ordinary Affects* as a motivating point from which to refocus the current desire to adequately represent what motivates and matters to people, and to regauge suspicion's salience to this practice.

3. The social rhythm of suspicion

Ordinary Affects, despite its affiliation with Thrift's theory, is not an example of 'non-representation'. Indeed, its theme fits neatly with received notions of paranoia, like the delusions of people fretting over alien experimentation or fluoride in the water-supply. Leo Bersani suggests that stereotypical iterations of paranoia are 'used as if it were merely synonymous with something like unfounded suspicions about a hostile environment' (1989: 99). Stewart comes close to offering us this tropological paranoia, with all the requisite ingredients, yet by affirming the ordinariness of this affect at other turns, the characters which populate *Ordinary Affects* point to 'something' that is a little more ambiguous.

Stewart participates in the turn against critique, framing social sciences' critical methodologies as 'unhelpful'. However, in spite of its posturing, one *could* read *Ordinary Affects* as an account of how suspicion is not a malaise, or threatening attack that must be fought off, or from which people need to be saved. Instead, paranoia gives a tenable rhythm to people's lives. It has a counter-intuitive, even positive momentum that creates coherent identities and communities. In *Ordinary Affects*, the sense that something is always slightly off-beat, unites people, as often as it divides them.

In the fragment 'Being in Public,' for instance, sociality is ultimately anchored in a shared suspicion. Stewart writes that, in public: 'There are hard lines of connection and disconnection and lighter, momentary affinities and differences' (42). To exemplify this, she lists ways that people simultaneously differentiate themselves from and align themselves with social groups:

> Little worlds proliferate around everything and anything at all: mall culture, car culture, subway culture, TV culture, shopping culture, all teams and clubs and organisations […] addictions of all kinds […] diseases of all kinds, crimes, grief of all kinds, mistakes, wacky ideas. (42)

Then in the fragment's closing line, to gather together her lists, Stewart offers a final drawstring: 'But everyone knows there's something not quite right' (42). This fragment can be read as working against the idea that suspicion is fractious. It posits a suspicious inkling as the common thread that unites 'everyone' – be they in the 'country club' or the 'sex group' (42). Similarly, in 'The 'We' of Mainstream Banality' people are united in their mutual belief in government conspiracies, importantly in a light-hearted way, adorning their cars with bumper stickers, like the playfully homonymic 'Bush bin Lyin' (28). In both these fragments, people create identities and communities through shared suspicion. In creating a 'Them,' they also create an 'Us'.

In this case, paranoia is not simply a delusional social malaise, or 'an unfounded suspicion about a hostile environment' (Bersani, 1989: 98); it is an effective mechanism with which to navigate the real-time revision of social orders. Indeed, paranoia emerges to be, as Marita Sturken describes in her work on contemporary culture, 'a social practice' 'rather than a pathology' and 'an integral aspect of the ways in which citizens mediate their relationship to political power' (1997: 77). The ubiquitous sense of suspicion is a constant reminder that the foundational narratives of our lives are precariously positioned due to constant shifts in the agential arrangement of social authorship. *Ordinary Affects*, read this way, compels us to consider not how 'unhelpful' the scholarly desire to know and name is, but how alike it is to our everyday desire to be part of 'something' recognisable or to give an authentic account of ourselves to others; to know where we stand.

Stewart does not acknowledge this paradox between the condemnation of a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' as an irrelevant discourse and the affirmation of hypervigilance as a pervasive form of social attention as it runs through her body of work. Is this because she sees the paranoia of academic reading as separate from the hypervigilance of the everyday people she writes about? This separation, and it also operates within other arguments against critique, seems to assume that when everyday people are compelled by something they perceive to be operating beneath the surface they gesture to affect, whereas if a scholar has the same experience, if they read a text and are unsettled and instructed by something lurking within it, 'something' that is not self-evident but somehow present and potentially volatile, then, to draw on Latour's diagnosis, they are a savage iconoclast (2004). However, in *Ordinary Affects*, this division cannot be sustained.

Stewart is magnetised, as the endurance of her work on paranoid culture attests, to the vigilant, interpretive attention that is also her own. Writing is *of* life. As the physicist Niels Bohr noted: 'We are part of this nature that we seek to understand' (in Barad, 2007: 26). Though this connection languishes in *Ordinary Affects*, the unity of professionals and publics pursuing hidden agencies can be seen nonetheless. Latour, Sedgwick, and Stewart argue that paranoid frames are out of touch with social imperatives, but it is the stylistic correlations between their own arguments, their own 'conspiracist' motifs, that point to the ubiquity and obvious relevance of practices of scepticism, wariness, and de-mystification in everyday life.

Latour's and Sedgwick's characterisations of critique as a virulent and insidious malaise lines up perfectly with Stewart's suspicious citizens, who see veiled threats emerging everywhere, from the supermarket to their neighbour's lawns. For Latour, critique has fallen into the hands of 'conspiracy theorists' like 'weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party'; it 'disarmed once matters of fact', eat[ing them] up [with] the same debunking

impetus', resulting in a 'sort of darkness' 'fall[ing] on campuses' (2004: 232). For Sedgwick critique threatens 'if it persists unquestioned, [to] unintentionally impoverish the gene pool of literary-critical perspectives and skills' (1997: 21). These malignant characterisations are so like the fears of the characters in *Ordinary Affects* that, when reading these proposals, readers cannot help but see the parallels between the concerns of scholarship and the concerns of everyday citizens.

Thus, *Ordinary Affects* leaves us questioning just why these sleuthing methods seem to be so entrenched, so omnipresent, not just in academic methodologies but in popular culture, in our everyday dealings with people, and in our very economic system; a market that feeds on confidence but also rumour and fear. Why is suspicion's hold so powerful that even those who claim to violently break from it are still entranced? The affective turn's warfare metaphors and the political imperatives of their arguments are themselves driven by the suspicion that their own 'matters of concern' are under threat. In the struggle over authorial agency that lies at the heart of paranoia, Baruch Spinoza's process of being concomitantly affected and affective is clearly illustrated (2001 [1677]). This state of scrutiny centres on the very anxiety between what is self and what is other, between what is a compulsion or a choice, or who is authoring and how. Paranoia is a process dedicated to speculation, to cartography, to taking itself and others apart to see how they work. Such suspicion is an unrelenting, vital process that never seems to reach the closure it desires, but continues to desire it nonetheless. It expects change, and braces for the resonating effect a tremor might initiate in the social fabric.

Thus, rather than being a method to dismiss, suspicion seems to be precisely the place to look if we are to understand the nature of social organisation and how it is responsive to itself. By foregrounding the practices of reading patterns and inferring authorial agencies, we can begin to consider structure, not as something static to be attenuated by altruism and creativity, but rather as a fluid process of structuration where people must navigate life even as its co-ordinates shift.

4. 'Creative paranoia': a social method

Reading Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* alongside Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011), which she cites as an influence, clarifies Stewart's experiment and lends insight into how the experience of everyday suspicion is textured. Berlant's text has similar themes, but differs from Stewart's in style. Though it also deals with social experiences of contingent presents and projective fantasies, Berlant tries to locate them with existing attempts to chart how people live in particular affective landscapes, such as Marxist and queer theory or the sociology of everyday life. Berlant carves out a slightly different critical space to Stewart, but it is one where Stewart's work can be read, with critical reparation, in light of different kinships. In this context, what Stewart has to say about paranoia, as a social atmosphere, becomes a constructive dialogue with, rather than a subscription to, 'the affective turn'.

Importantly, Berlant picks up on the same tenor of hypervigilance that Stewart documents and marks it as a key theme of modern citizenship. Berlant clarifies that her work "focuses on dynamic relations of hypervigilance, unreliable agency, and dissipated subjectivity under contemporary capitalism" (2011: 9). In Berlant's text, as in Stewart's, being vigilant is how people feasibly deal with the turbulence of political, economic, and social climates. Individuals try to be alert to how their attention is constantly being diverted toward spectres of prosperity, whether it is in the orchestrated detours of shopping malls or the wish-fulfilling images of advertising. Hypervigilance escalates as people 'get wise' to the emptiness or endless deferral of such promises. Exploring citizen's everyday response to contested agencies, these texts make a markedly different argument to the affective turn with which they are associated. Here, the pragmatic approach to social change that the affective turn is so eager to create is already apparent in everyday citizens' shrewd incredulity, their guarded attempt not to be duped and to stay afloat amid social unease.

To be vigilant, in *Cruel Optimism*, is not to be delusional. Instead, one *needs* to read the present with a tentative wariness if they are to keep up with society's structural indeterminacy. The shifting nature of social currents, and the conflicting perspectives that interpret and reinterpret these shifts in real-time, demand that people be 'anticipatory,' one of the key markers of 'paranoid reading' (Sedgwick, 1997: 9). 'If the present is not at first an object but a mediated affect,' Berlant explains, 'it is also a thing that is sensed and under constant revision, a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now whose very parameters (when did "the present" begin?) are also always there for debate' (2011: 4). In the reality Berlant describes, people live tentatively. But they must also make decisions and take actions even though they cannot always control the consequences, or even the original terms by which these decisions are made. The conventions of life's genres, its structural determinants, are socially authored in the very acts of living and interpreting. The hermeneutics of suspicion, in this context, is not habitual in an inert sense, but utterly vital and transformative.

In *Ordinary Affects*, people, usually those already on the edge, find ways to survive in this precarious state, sleeping with one eye open. They dwell in a space that Berlant terms, 'the impasse,' which brings dimension to Stewart's 'something'. Berlant's definition of the term links this space to a necessary, everyday vigilance:

> [T]he impasse is a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one's sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event. (2011: 4)

The impasse is the period where 'something' is still taking shape, coming into vision, and is not yet clearly defined. It is a state that signals disruption and causes anxiety, but importantly has its own structural comfort, like the proverbial calm before the storm. For some, living with the threat of doom is preferable to living with certain doom. This state of being perpetually heedful offers trepidation but also hope. Paranoid reading, then, is an everyday reading practice, armed and ready, applying its full critical attention, prepared for the worst but also hoping for reprieve. A de-mystifying mind-set, in this case, is vital to improvisation, or the creativity that survival demands.

Indeed a return to philosopher Paul Ricoeur's original formulation of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', in *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1970), reveals that the term itself was invoked as part of a project to complicate, if not dismantle, the opposition of negative and positive positions. After tracing the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of faith as a received opposition, Ricoeur ultimately points to the 'profound unity of the demystifying and remystifying of discourse' (1970: 54). '[T]o destroy idols, to listen to symbols,' he asks, 'are these not one and the same enterprise?' (54). Although Ricoeur's term, 'the hermeneutics of suspicion', is used throughout the wider turn against critique as the apt descriptor of one side of a polemic, namely, to leverage a return to positivity, in its original context Ricoeur

deploys it in defiance of such oppositional ways of thinking. Hermeneutics, for Ricoeur, is 'animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect and willingness to listen' (27). It is this very either/or mentality that Ricoeur aims to unravel in his original analysis of the hermeneutics of suspicion.

In his study of Pynchon's novels, *Creative Paranoia*: *In Gravity's Rainbow* (1976), Mark Seigel notes that, for Pynchon too, paranoia is an innovating space of potential, but one which is complex rather than simply disabling or enabling. Seigel explains that, in his representations of paranoia, 'Pynchon finally promises neither annihilation nor transcendence; he is sure only that life as we know it is changing. With creative paranoia Pynchon balances his fears for the future with his hopes' (1976: 120). Seigel adds that, to think about social dynamism pragmatically, Pynchon is not only interested in potentials, but also probabilities: '[*Gravity's Rainbow*] is a book of possibilities which seeks to divine the future through an examination of probabilities' (7). Slightly altering the Deleuzian definition that is prominent in affect theory, Pynchon's use of the term 'potential' describes more than boundless and liberating possibility.

For potential is not only about the potential for academic work to be inspiring, and interesting, and creative. It is about a period of indeterminacy in which people must make decisions in the dark. Social flux is not always freeing; it can create calamity. In a space of potential, people pragmatically need to infer probabilities and make adjudications to prepare for particular potentials. Novelty is informed by and responsive to history. In this practical context, the context Stewart equivocally directs us toward, reading patterns and anticipating likelihoods is vital to living social dynamism. Interpretation is intrinsic to creation, not its lagged, inert aftermath.

As Stewart's fragments infer, this method of social participation, of being wary and using one's discretion based on probabilities and existing narratives, need not dampen the potential for surprises to emerge. Probabilities do not always eventuate and known scripts can be edited by new experiences. For instance, a fragment called 'Relief' describes an experiential sense of how the paranoid frame can melt into another kind of affective response:

> Unwanted intensities simmer up at the least provocation. And then a tiny act of human kindness, or a moment of shared sardonic humor in public, can set things right again as if any sign of human contact releases an unwanted tension. …
>
> She and Ariana are out walking in the neighborhood. White woman, brown baby. Some teenagers pass them, scowling. Brown boys dressed tough, showing attitude. But as they pass she hears one of the boys say to the others in a sweet boy's voice "did you see that *cute* baby?" (2007: 50)

In this scene, the probabilities we carry – the wariness of a woman alone with a child and faced with a group of tough-looking young men – are happily surrendered for other affects such as renewed hope or gratefulness or surprise. Discretion is not, in this context, simply the choice between being jaded or naïve.

In 'Relief,' Stewart gives us a pragmatic and dynamic definition of paranoia that is more inclusive and workable than the definition she subscribes to with reference to Sedgwick and Latour. Where their definitions see paranoia as a barrier to the contingency of everyday life, particularly the productivity of belief or attachments, Stewart opens paranoia up as *the* space in which people are already navigating how truth is lived and distorted and constantly rewritten according to dynamic social currents. Stewart represents a public that makes 'something', whether it is a support group, or a conspiracy theory, or change of scene, out of both their fear *and* their hope, affects that we learn are *both* necessary to living in a society where agency is dispersed and social perimeters are contested. Stewart's ethnography therefore lends a different texture to the debate about hermeneutic methods, a scope in which paranoid reading is more than just a perfunctory reflex.

5. An everyday hermeneutics of suspicion

In this context, Stewart's work is better served by Berlant's wary reading of reparative solutions than Sedgwick's original formulation. Berlant honours Sedgwick's vast contribution to her field and gives what is perhaps the most eloquent reading of what Sedgwick hoped to achieve with her argument 'against the hermeneutics of suspicion' (2011: 123). However, Berlant adds that, while she admires Sedgwick's dedication, she 'also resist[s] idealising, even implicitly, any program of better thought or reading' (124). 'How would we know,' she asks, 'when the 'repair' we intend is not another form of narcissism or smothering will? Just because we sense it to be so?' Berlant suggests that such a proscriptive ideology, albeit dissenting, leads back to the very projection of values it hopes to avoid. In Berlant's estimation, scholars cannot afford to stop scrutinizing their own evaluations and invest in a program of altruism that assumes the critic can deliver final emancipation (124).

Scholars are more likely to be among the citizens of *Ordinary Affects*: grappling curiously and hopefully for answers and often stumbling, rather than successfully and finally realising how sociality can be made fully legible. If the ethnographer is *of* the ethnographic, then it is no wonder that resonances of paranoia reverberate across sociality in a particular epoch, sounding in forms of everyday thought from the prosaic to the philosophical. In her reading of Sedgwick, Berlant tacitly repositions Stewart within the salt-of-the-earth sociality of her own ethnography, rather than with the claims to methodological succession that preface *Ordinary Affects*.

Read together, these two texts affirm that the way structure is theorised by recent critics, as a fixed and fading notion, is not representative of how people negotiate their lives; or to use Spinoza's affect schema, how they manage structuring and being structured on a day-to-day level. In the fragments of *Ordinary Affects* paranoia is not inert. It is the labour and ingenuity, the 'creative paranoia,' or concomitant fear and hope that people draw upon to carve out a space for themselves – an intelligible and tellable life – amid a bustling, contested public. A de-mystifying and anticipatory 'paranoid reading' is no longer merely a tired and static genre, but the means by which people already try to keep up with tweaks and tremors in the social atmosphere, or how their lives are unsettled or redirected by political decisions, economic fluctuations, and public events.

Citizens stay attuned to structural shifts in real-time, ready to respond or revise their life-story accordingly. This revision then reifies a particular structure. If we conceive of this structural negotiation on the level of genre, we can consider how the question of representation is lived in a dynamic process. Paranoia is not simply a genre of scholarly reading in this sense. It is the real-time response to and stimulation of genre shifts, reading for the markers of recognisable forms in a live, differentiating act. In this practice of social authorship, like the poets of Harold Bloom's famous study (1973), one feels an 'anxiety of influence,' or the sense that one's life is also being authored by diverse authorial agents, pushed and pulled in various ways. Berlant eloquently describes this responsive act as, 'the improvisation of genre amid pervasive uncertainty' (2011: 6). In this process the form an event or its repercussion will take is contingent. This living, changeable process of differentiation calls for people to respond, to stake their claim, and to be ready to revise it if things do not go their way. Structuration, then, is a creative process generating its own forms of confusion and mess,

but it also provides a workable scaffold for how to live or communicate.

Improvisation, here, is not an expression of uninhibited play, but an interpretive response that grapples with the threat or the pressing need to realise a liveable reality. Rather than an asocial, ineffable indeterminacy, affect emerges here as a saturating, socially-generated atmosphere that pulls people into certain shapes, sometimes in ways of which they are not immediately aware. Akin, perhaps, to Émile Durkheim's 'collective effervescence', a surge that is created and sustained by the very social it takes hold of and transforms (2011 [1912]). Affect, in this light, is not separable from causal structures or human agency or efforts to be intelligible, for it is inherent to these things.

I have argued that the fragments of *Ordinary Affects* defy some of the critical limitations set out in Stewart's introduction. Read from this perspective, Stewart's ethnography offers us a way to rethink descriptions of critique as out of touch with everyday concerns. Rather than providing an antidote to suspicion, *Ordinary Affects* provides evidence to question the need for such an antidote. Its meditation on the vigilance intrinsic to an ontology of affect troubles the division of affect from hermeneutic forms of attention. In addition, I have shown that when we look at the everyday work of vigilance and inference, we see that it is not so different from the forms of critical reading scholars have used to deconstruct and reveal the inequalities that social and linguistic structures can reproduce.

Following this, I propose that rather than thinking about certain methods as 'better' for engaging with affect, or more immanent to social life, we might consider how affect, as a structuring capacity, informs our interest in and evaluation of particular methods over others. Our wary attention (including a wariness about critique) could be symptomatic and generative of the very world it observes. Read as structuring, affect no longer flourishes in the essential morality of one genre while eluding the feeble grasp of another; scenes of volatile life and explanatory narrative become difficult to differentiate. Critical interpretation is no longer an external distortion, or a mere representation, but life itself, coalescing and refiguring its many expressions in the present. The attention in these occurrences, the paranoid reading, anticipation, and inference that occurs is a creatively critical, social method. Always already contested, it is an everyday hermeneutics of suspicion; a productive act of reading that is never entirely confident of its own lens.

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