Ambivalence as Misfeeling, Ambivalence as Refusal

Prof. Akwugo Emejulu, University of Warwick
a.emejulu@warwick.ac.uk

forthcoming 2022 in https://post45.org

Introduction

In this short article, I wish to examine how ambivalence can operate as oppositional emotion work for women of colour activists in Europe. By ambivalence, I mean the 'simultaneous experience of positive and negative emotional or cognitive orientations toward a person, situation, object, task, goal, or idea and the feelings of tension and conflict that result' (Rothman et al 2017: 33). Ambivalence ushers us into a state of liminality—of being on a threshold, being neither here nor there but precariously balanced between competing ways of feeling. Ambivalence is often considered a problem, an emotional conflict that can be confusing, paralysing and debilitating. Ambivalence is presented as something we should try to resolve quickly or seek to avoid altogether. Since activists are constituted by their labour, ambivalence seems to be an emotion to eschew since it poses a threat to individual and collective action.

Arlie Hochschild (1979: 551) argues that emotions are 'governed by social rules' that dictate which feelings are (un)acceptable in particular social situations. These so-called 'feeling rules' demand from us 'emotion work' in which we try to reconcile our discrete reactions to certain events to expected and hegemonic emotional gestures. Through our struggles to conform to emotional norms, dominant ideologies are encoded onto our minds and bodies. Adia Wingfield (2010; 2021) demonstrates how racialised and gendered feeling rules in the workplace suppress Black workers' emotional expressions and reenforce white supremacy and patriarchy through emotional domination. Feeling rules, however, are not totalising. There is always an exit, a space for refusing this emotional violence—if one is willing to pay the high social costs of resisting. Defying feeling rules is possible through oppositional emotion work in which misfeeling—a refusal to 'perform certain kinds of emotional management necessary to feel' (Hochschild 1979: 567)—becomes a practice of resistance. To misfeel is to purposefully turn away from emotional social conventions. Note, however, that misfeeling is still emotion work, although this is work that can perhaps lead to different kinds of becoming and new forms of solidarity.

I argue that experiencing ambivalence can be a way to misfeel and an emotional process by which solidarity can be built and sustained. There can be deep satisfaction and pleasure in ambivalence as this emotion need not always be understood as a mode of internal conflict. Rather, ambivalence can be understood as a moment of contemplation, of recuperation, a state of critical self-reflection—a pause, a hesitation—before meaningful action can take place. Thus, the feeling of ambivalence can also be seen as emotional repair and the reconciliation of different ways of feeling. For women of colour activists, ambivalence can be a process by which to recover themselves, to recuperate from the gross everyday and institutionalised inequalities and violences they experience as they collectively insist on moments of care, joy and pleasure in their activism. Ambivalence then is that precarious balance between understanding the forces arrayed against you that cause deep harm and the possibilities, the longings for self-tending and pleasure in community with like-minded

others. I'll begin this article with a short discussion about the possibilities of ambivalence and why it can serve as an oppositional emotion. I'll then move on discuss how ambivalence appears to operate in the women of colour activists spaces I study. I'll conclude with some reflections on how and why ambivalence can be incorporated into a broader politics of refusal.

Ambivalence as recuperation

It is not totally clear whether ambivalence is a discrete emotion—a discomfort that arises when different emotions cannot be reconciled—or whether ambivalence *is* that messy and confusing conflict between opposing emotions—maybe it is not a single emotion, per se, but a combination of contradictory feelings. In any event, ambivalence is felt when a range of opposite emotions about a person or situation comingle. Ambivalence calls us into a different state of being, one in which, at least in the Global North, we seek to avoid at all costs: uneasiness. We are uncertain and unsure because we do not know how to feel; the social rules that govern our emotions have broken down and we are set adrift, alone, seeking the firm ground of certainty and clear sightedness. Ambivalence is the process of being unmoored from emotional conventions. Ambivalence contains within it a possibility of being free from emotional domination—that power relation in which our feelings are dictated by others and we are forced to suppress other emotional possibilities. Ambivalence might be a teacher in which we learn other ways to feel and perhaps, we can feel our way to other kinds of social relations and modes of being. Maybe we can feel ourselves to liberation.

Ambivalence is a kind of temporal politics in which, if we are attuned to it, we are forced to slow down, to wait, to pause, to hesitate. Ambivalence makes us uneasy because we are forced to confront ourselves, to spend time with ourselves and to be self-reflective, if only simply to try to reconcile and resolve our oppositional feelings. In this current political moment, in which we are encouraged to always be hustling in service to capitalism, ambivalence becomes an emotional space of refusal, a retreat from the prevailing winds that push us to consume, to compete and to work until we drop. Ambivalence, in a sense, is an anti-capitalist emotion because it is 'unproductive' and forces us forestall and postpone.

Ambivalence can be where an oppositional heart is nurtured. Drawing on Hochschild (1979), I argue that ambivalence can be a practice of misfeeling, a dissenting emotional practice. Ambivalence can be recruited as a way to refuse the emotional domination of white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy. Because ambivalence ushers us into a state of liminality, of being in an in-between state, ambivalence contains within it the possibility for acting *and feeling* otherwise. White supremacy manifests itself in emotions in two important ways (Mirchandani 2003). First, people of colour, and Black people in particular, face serious social sanction and real physical harms if we publicly emote in ways that violate dominant feeling rules. Hence, Black people struggle against being seen as angry or frustrated in public, as this will reenforce negative stereotypes about the 'angry Black man/woman' and will also invite violence from white people and other non-Black people of colour to try to control and police us (Bonilla-Silva 2019). Second, white supremacy manifests in emotions by imposing white ideals of propriety onto people of colour. Here, it is important to see how white supremacy and capitalism interact in the regulation of public emotions. A white bourgeois sense of decorum—to be seen as affable, to be seen as non-

threatening, to be seen as even-tempered—is how conformity is felt and how people of colour are disciplined into feeling in order to stay safe (Wingfield 2013). Further still, capitalism imposes its own discrete feeling rules—most notably for our purposes here, those of consumption, competition and social comparison. Capitalism engenders feelings of perpetual inadequacy, dissatisfaction and deficiency in order to keep us shopping, to keep us lonely and divided from each other through petty jealousies and meaningless rivalries. Finally, patriarchy imposes all the privations of performing hegemonic femininity and masculinity, which generates dislocation and alienation from who we might be if we were not so busy trying to look and feel like 'real' women and men.

Given this complex terrain of emotions and how emotions intersect with and generate particular kinds of politics and political forms, ambivalence can be seen, or better yet, felt as respite. No feeling rules are all-encompassing. They might be difficult to understand as arbitrary constructions and they might be almost impossible to escape, but they can always be refused. What that refusal, that misfeeling, looks like will differ across space and time. However, I am interested in how we can find opposition in unlikely places, in ugly or non-heroic feelings that we would normally disavow or dismiss (Ngai 2007). For me, this is the promise of ambivalence. Because ambivalence is not a celebratory or triumphant emotion, because it is not an obvious way of feeling oneself to liberation, it has the potential to support us in suprising ways to divest from how structures of inequality encode themselves on our bodies and minds.

Because ambivalence forces us to pause—ambivalence is the pause—it makes us stop and consider what our true feelings at that moment about something or someone might be. This is an opportunity to camp out, temporarily, in this liminal space of hesitation. Here, in this in-between space we might take shelter from the feeling rules imposed by capitalism, patriarchy and white supremacy. Ambivalence becomes a gateway to misfeeling because it interrupts our taken for granted emotion work. Ambivalence is a possibility to feel otherwise about ourselves and the social world. This does mean however, that ambivalence must be resolved before action can take place. Rather, ambivalence is the opportunity to pluck us out of these linear modes of thinking and being to consider what we might or might not do instead, how we might or might not act otherwise, through the timeshift that this non-heroic feeling affords us.

What I want to do now is shift to consider how ambivalence operates in women of colour activist spaces—and how that offers us an intriguing model for emotional defiance.

The space between exhaustion and joy

I have been mapping women of colour's activism in Europe over the last 15 years and have been particularly struck by how an expanded emotional lexicon has been adopted by activists across the continent. By 'women of colour activists' I mean cis and trans women and non-binary femmes who experience processes of racialisation, minoritisation and gender hierarchies and organise and mobilise in public space to advance their interests (Bassel and Emejulu 2017). As public discussions about mental health are slowly being destigmatised, this has also created a space to speak more frankly about emotions and how they are experienced individually and collectively. Activists, of course, discuss and deploy emotions all the time in their work—fear, anger and hope are commonly used to mobilise

comrades and to persuade the wider public to their cause. However, these rather commonplace emotions in activist spaces have also been supplemented by discussion of exhaustion, trauma, joy, pleasure and the burden of managing others' emotions—oftentimes mislabelled as 'emotional labour' (Emejulu and Bassel 2020; 2021). The presence of these emotions and their articulations is not the focus on my concern here; rather, I'm interested in the implications of the comingling of this range of emotions and how the process by which activists might reconcile themselves to oppositional emotions creates new possibilities, new emotional expressions that have material consequences.

It is very interesting how two key emotions have come to prominence over the last five years or so in activist spaces—exhaustion and joy. I have written about how these emotions operate in women of colour activist spaces elsewhere and won't repeat my arguments here (Emejulu and Bassel 2020; Emejulu and van der Scheer 2021; Sobande and Emejulu 2021). However, I want to make a firmer connection between these emotional trends and consider their meaning in relation to misfeeling. I think that it is no coincidence that we see exhaustion and joy explicitly discussed by activists in this unstable political moment. We are still living with the consequences of the 2008 economic crisis—the household wealth that was wiped out, the eliminations and privatisations of public services, increases in poverty—this precarity which always existed but which was worsened by the crisis and subsequent austerity measures has never been seriously addressed. And now, almost 15 years after the crisis, it seems clear, as was the case with previous crises, that it will never be a policy priority. Precarity is a way of life—especially for the most marginalised groups, women of colour. Added to this institutionalised precarity is the mainstreaming of far-right groups, parties and rhetoric. The successful colonisation of far-right ideology on both the mainstream left and right—whether that be in the form of virulent xenophobia and Islamophobia, biological essentialism masquerading as 'women's rights' or blanket denials of the existence of institutionalised racism—we are in a harrowing moment of revanchist politics.

Given these dynamics, women of colour activists are exhausted. These are exhausting economic and political circumstances which are further exacerbated by the on-going conflicts within multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-class activist spaces in which racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and classism are also reproduced. Seemingly there is nowhere to turn, no safe space for retreat and recovery. In response, activists declare themselves exhausted and burnt out. And who can blame them? And yet, simultaneously, we also see activists insisting on creating moments of pleasure and joy amidst the sorrow, pain and frustration. Joy, the activists declare, following the poet Toi Derricote's (2008) lead, is an act of resistance. And they're absolutely right. To refuse to be demoralised and disillusioned is a powerful dissenting act. To join together with like-minded others for play, for pleasure, for fleeting moments of happiness is what binds activists together. Joy sustains solidarity and makes it possible to go out again into the unkind world that wants to destroy you. In my research with activists, they have discussed how organising parties for trans migrant women with all the profits from the entry fees and bar sales going directly to their pockets is resistance politics. They say how cooking together and sharing meals, just being in community together is a recuperative act of defiance. Building and sustaining a 'beloved community' (to borrow the old phrase from the American Civil Rights Movement), is a radical act.

The exhaustion of precarity and the far-right backlash. The longing for pleasure and joy. These emotions are co-constitutive in their opposition to each other. Feeling precarious and yearning for happiness cannot be understood outside of one another and the broader socio-political context which sets the terms of feeling in this moment. I argue that the fact that activists are feeling exhaustion and joy simultaneously marks a moment of ambivalence that creates new possibilities for being and becoming. These lines of desire, of wanting to feel individual and collective joy are stained by the pain of precarity, exhaustion and disappointment. The joy that is possible is somehow limited—but then so is the pain. This is the terrain of ambivalence. We can see here how misfeeling is generated by these oppositional emotions. One can learn from the feeling of ambivalence. Activists understand that the joy they experience is contained and reduced by the violence of precarity. They also learn that the exhaustion and disillusionment they feel has a boundary, that it can repelled, but not resolved, through collective pleasure. This is joyful pain in which one learns about structural harms from the joys one pursues, and one learns the limits of happiness from the harms that cannot be avoided. The ambivalence that is generated from these joyful harms is what can help to build a politics desirous of something else, of something better: another world in which joy exceeds misery, in which misery need not be the political project of the state. It is in the comingling of these oppositional emotions—exhaustion and joy, pleasure and precarity—that ambivalence can be harnessed as a defiant feeling allowing activists to dissent and refuse the world as it is and help feel themselves towards building the world anew.

Conclusions

Thinking about ambivalence as a misfeeling allows us to consider how the violences that women of colour face in this unstable political moment—ruinous austerity measures, a deadly far right backlash—can be combatted and refused through different modes and registers. Considering the emotion work—the misfeeling, the refusal—to be disillusioned and disheartened when the circumstances demand such emotions from activists is radical. Focusing on joy does not mean that fear, exhaustion, sadness and anger are not also present in women of colour's activism, but rather that joy functions as defiance in the face of relentless harm and contains the possibilities of building alternative feeling rules for women of colour. Precarity and exhaustion are an emotional fact of life for activists but contained within these negative emotions is an education in desire, an emotional transgression against the dominant feeling rules that demand misery and alienation. Holding onto exhaustion and joy simultaneously creates an ambivalent subject yearning to feel otherwise. Deciding what to feel, how to feel, when the world is so dark is the urgent task of this moment. The lesson here is that we do not to make this decision by ourselves—we can talk, think and feel together. These collective acts might not resolve our ambivalence, but they create a possibility of breaking out of the dislocation and loneliness of this time, to join with others in our respective ambivalences and consider who we might be, what we might do and how we might feel in order to bring some beauty to this ugly world.

Bibliography

Bassel, L. and Emejulu, A. (2017). *Minority Women and Austerity: Survival and Resistance in France and Britain*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2019) 'Feeling race: Theorizing the racial economy of emotions'. *American Sociological Review*, *84*(1): 1-25.

Dericotte, T. (2008). 'Joy is an act of resistance, and: Special ears, and: Another poem of a small grieving for my fish Telly, and: On the reasons I loved Telly the fish'. *Prairie Schooner,* 82(3): 22-27.

Emejulu, A. and Bassel, L. (2021) *Women of Colour Resist: Exploring Women of Colour's Activism in Europe*. University of Warwick. Coventry: United Kingdom.

Emejulu, A. and Bassel, L. (2020) 'The politics of exhaustion' *City: Analysis of Urban Change, Theory, Action* 24(1-2): 400-406.

Emejulu. A. and van der Scheer, I. (2021) 'Refusing politics as usual: mapping women of colour's radical praxis in London and Amsterdam.' *Identities*: 1-18.

Hochschild, A.R. (1979) 'Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure'. *American journal of sociology*, *85*(3): 551-575.

Mirchandani, K. (2003) 'Challenging racial silences in studies of emotion work: Contributions from anti-racist feminist theory'. *Organization Studies*, *24*(5): 721-742.

Ngai, S. (2007) *Ugly feelings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Rothman, N.B., Pratt, M.G., Rees, L. and Vogus, T.J. (2017) 'Understanding the dual nature of ambivalence: Why and when ambivalence leads to good and bad outcomes'. *Academy of Management Annals*, *11*(1): 33-72.

Sobande, F. and Emejulu, A. (2021) 'Black Feminist Joy, Ambivalence and Futures', *Culture, Theory and Critique,* DOI: 10.1080/14735784.2021.1984971

Wingfield, A.H. (2021) 'The (Un) Managed Heart: Racial Contours of Emotion Work in Gendered Occupations'. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *47*: 197-212.

Wingfield, A.H. (2010) 'Are some emotions marked" whites only"? Racialized feeling rules in professional workplaces'. *Social Problems*, *57*(2): 251-268.