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Late-Liberalism and Righteousness: Affective Reflexes and Experiments in Retraining

Helen Graham

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Abstract

Elizabeth Povinelli describes late liberalism as the 'governance of social difference in the wake of the anticolonial movements and the emergence of new social movements'.¹ Taking museums and the impact of the turn towards participatory practice as a focus, I draw on both Povinelli's 'cunning of recognition' and Brian Massumi's diagnosing of Abraham Lincoln's phrase 'of the people, by the people, for the people'² to understand late liberalism as a loop or circuit where impossible to realise ideals, and 'part-concept' tensions create ongoing problematics which require daily negotiation in ways that draw political energy centripetally towards reform.

Righteousness is proposed as an affective reflex – a kind of starter fuel – that works to kick into life the late liberal loop of museum constitution. Reflex – holding the sense of an in-the-moment reaction – is approached through activating two trajectories within theorisations of affect. The first trajectory is that of the relationship between affect, intuition and attachment as developed by Lauren Berlant. The second trajectory explores affect and intensities as taken up in different ways through Lawrence Grossberg and Brian Massumi's engagements with Deleuze and Guattari.

Methodologically, the article proceeds through specifying a contribution that experimental academic writing might make to conjunctural analysis – working with Patricia Clough’s suggestion that experimental writing offers ‘methods ... for cutting out an apparatus of knowing and observation from a single plane ... with the aim of eliciting exposure or escaping it, intensifying engagement or lessening it’.³ In particular it is suggested that experimental writing might offer methods not only for generating political analysis, but also for retraining reflexes to enable political interventions. In the case of the righteous reflex of late liberalism it is suggested that retraining might be supported by turning the types of analytical attention offered by attachment and intensities into political techniques of detachment (following Berlant) and modulation (following Massumi). If the changing nature of museum workers’ reflexes can be amplified and then cultivated to suspend the righteous reflex, then different kinds of practice (not defined by inclusion and representation) might be given new space to emerge.

Keywords

Museums, Participation, Affect, Late Liberalism, Experimental writing

Introduction

Having worked in and with museums, I seek to use this article to investigate the relationship between ideology and affect in everyday museum work. To begin I need to start with this awkward but undeniable fact of my institutional employment. Every time it is asked, ‘who’s not here’, ‘why is this place, project or museum so white’, or ‘how can we be more diverse’, I feel utterly compelled. My white pulse starts to rise. I then find myself jumping in, swept up

entirely and utterly ready to wear the issue as my own. In the past I know this felt purposeful, necessary and clear. Then righteousness vanquished, if only momentarily, uncertainty, fear, complacency and feelings of inefficacy. If anything has changed in more recent years it is not that my body-mind no longer reacts the same way – the same reflex is still activated – it is only that I now also know, intuitively, it is not unambiguously the right thing. Now, in those moments when this righteous reflex kicks in, also jostling are shades of doubt and of shame. Now affective grist offers up slivers of resistance within the reflex. These slivers of resistance might, perhaps, be put to work in retraining myself so I nourish the potential, in any given moment of institutional and political life, to react differently and expand my repertoire of responses.

Late liberalism and the Engine of Loopiness

In seeking to understand the righteous reflex I have described above – and how ‘such feelings do change and can be changed’ in this present conjuncture⁴ – it has been helpful to approach ‘late liberalism’, drawing on Elizabeth Povinelli’s definition: the ‘governance of social difference in the wake of the anticolonial movements and the emergence of new social movements’ (*Economies of Abandonment*, pix). In working through the ideological structure of late liberalism in more general terms I also want to further introduce the particular institutional context for the reflex I described above – museums – and a particular type of practice – facilitating participation.

As I write in 2024, museums still nourish a determinedly enlightenment rhetoric, underscored by a late liberal focus on inclusion and recognition. Museums claim to be

‘forever, for everyone’.⁵ ‘Unhindered access’ is promised.⁶ ‘Access to art’ is framed as ‘a universal human right’.⁷ ‘The cultures of the world’ are ‘brought together under one roof’.⁸ Codes of ethics state that museums ‘preserve ... the natural and cultural inheritance of humanity’⁹ and ‘maintain and develop collections for current and future generations’.¹⁰ The International Council of Museums defines museums as a ‘permanent institution in the service of society’ and ‘open to the public, accessible and inclusive’.¹¹ In instances like these – which proliferate and are not hard to find replicated – the active ideological formula of museums is palpable. There are big claims that are *in themselves* never achievable and act as constitutive deficits that need constant effort (forever, permanent, human rights, universal surveys, transformative impact, inclusive). The big claims are in tension *between themselves* to varying extents, requiring endless negotiation (e.g. between access and preservation). There are expansive constituencies that can only be imagined (humanity, everyone, future generations). There is a political relation of acting ‘on behalf of’ these imagined constituencies (in service of; ‘for’). This is what I have named elsewhere ‘museum constitution’.¹² Participatory practice has been introduced more widely to museums over the past thirty years in the expectation that it will better activate inclusion, access and representation. However, to anticipate the argument I will have made by the end of this article, participation’s direct democratic genealogy and its relational nature – when located within the present conjuncture of increasing racial consciousness in majority white institutions, decolonisation and climate emergency – has introduced new ideological and affective ingredients that cannot be so easily constitutionally metabolised.

The key ideological characteristic of late liberalism I want to draw out – which is a feature of museum constitution – is its ‘loopiness’ and ‘productive paradox’ to use Brian Massumi’s

terms (*Ontopower*, p241). As ‘loopiness’ indicates, the ideological characteristics of late liberalism lies not in any simple stridency or fixed clarity but in a circularity generated by constitutive deficits and tensions which require ongoing animation and adjustment.

For Povinelli – and with relevance for both museums and participatory practice – if the previous period of colonial-liberalism was violently extractive and justified by proffering civilisation, late liberalism is characterised by a certain ‘cunning of recognition’¹³ which works through treating ‘radical critiques of liberal colonial capitalism as if they were a desire by the dominated to be recognized by the dominant state and its normative publics — as if what was being sought was inclusion into the liberal polis of the worthy’.¹⁴ The ‘constitutive deficit’ of museum constitution’s investment in big claims of access, representation and inclusion resonates with Povinelli’s analysis of the ‘horizon’ nature of these types of claims. Late liberal horizon concepts are so idealised as to never be achievable, offering an alibi – *we are trying, we will be better* – while also, as Povinelli puts it, mobilising ‘a spatial imaginary to bracket all forms of violence as the result of the unintended, accidental, and unfortunate unfolding of liberalism’s own dialectic’.¹⁵ Therefore, in Povinelli’s terms, late-liberalism does its ideological work through ‘the difference between the actuality of liberal harm and the promissory note of its coming good’ where ‘the focus is on the drama of the negative as it struggles with its inner and outer global frontiers’ between ‘what liberalism says it is and what it is actually doing’ (*Between Gaia and Ground*, p41). It is the animating gap between the various ideals and the realities that produces an endlessly circuited, centripetal political task which organises political energy towards – in the case of museums – institutional reform.

Another feature of the loopiness of museum constitution is inbuilt tensions between the grand claims, such as that between conservation for future generations and access for everyone now, or in a participatory context, between the knowledge claims of professionals and knowledge claims based on experience. Massumi defines loopiness through drawing out the inbuilt tensions at work in that paradigmatic phrase of the emergence of liberal democracy – Abraham Lincoln’s ‘of the people, by the people, for the people’ (*Ontopower*, p209) – and, in particular, how a tension between direct and representational forms of democracy are ongoing agitators in liberal democracy.

Massumi indicates how ‘of the people, by the people, for the people’ activates different, expansive and conflicting political tendencies within its ‘part-concepts’ (*Ontopower*, p214). The phrase is enlivened, Massumi suggests, through an abstract ideal of a unity – ‘of the people’. It then separates some people from that unity – through ‘*by the people*’ – so they can act ‘*for the people*’ on their behalf and as if it is done ‘*by*’ them’ (*Ontopower*, pp209-210). Each part-concept is ever questioning and unsettling the legitimacy of the other because the phrase’s very formulation makes it always necessary to interrogate *who* is the people (Who isn’t here? Who can’t be heard?) and what needs to be done to justify acting on others’ behalf (What makes us legitimate? How do we deal with disagreement? How do we make decisions more democratically?). As a result, Massumi goes on:

The conceptual formula is ‘problematic’ precisely in this sense: as an abstract matrix for the practical production of problems on an ongoing basis. This is the actual ‘continuity’ that will become: an unfolding riven with tension, driven by the tension’s working out, cut into by conflict every step of the way (*Ontopower*, p211).

In Massumi's terms a 'conceptual formula' becomes 'an operative logic' through the ways in which 'it governs a pragmatic working out': 'The differential tension composing the formula is ... not a contradiction in meaning. It is a paradox demanding in response not an interpretation but a production' (*Ontopower*, p212). The late liberal type of loopy operative logic offers a foundation without a foundation. Its very ability to carry on – its 'continuity' – is enabled by a conflictual and constant need to navigate intrinsic tensions. Museum constitution is in allied ways both problematic and, to recall Povinelli's term, dramatic.

Notably, Povinelli does not see late liberalism and neoliberalism 'as external to each other' (*Economies of Abandonment*, p29). Povinelli argues that 'state forms of late liberalism arose within the struggle between Keynesian liberals and neoliberals ... The apparent conflict between neoconservatives and neoliberals to multiculturalism (and other robust forms of cultural recognition) clouds the fact that both emerged as powerful social forces in the same few decades' (*Economies of Abandonment*, p29). The dominance of these ideals means these 'configurations are ready to hand across these ideological positions because they lie in the deep integrated background of late liberal life, making sense of pockets of abandonment and differential belonging' (*Economies of Abandonment*, p29). In museums an increasingly mixed economy of public funding and trust and foundations funding (both often framed using late liberal ideals) sit alongside corporate funding (itself often guided by corporate social responsibility rhetoric seeped in liberal ideals) and revenue generating activity such as shopping cafes and venue hire – yet a thread can be drawn across these different sources of a shared late liberal museum brand of recognition and inclusion. The loopiness of late liberalism can just as easily be seen at work in holding and organising the contested question

of museum sponsorship by oil companies (as we have witnessed through the 2023 British Museum bp controversy where the issue has been whether oil sponsorship is compatible with the museums' values),¹⁶ as in the question of the extent of editorial control a group in a participatory project should have over exhibition labels (where the issue is whether the museum needs to be more accountable to the group or to the visitor/public in general).¹⁷

A question arising from Povinelli and Massumi's accounts of these circuited ideological structures relates to how the loop is activated. Both treat these political concepts as immanent, in that they need to 'presentify'¹⁸ or become 'cited' (*Economies of Abandonment*, p16) in every new moment. Massumi argues that the problematisation generated by the part-concept tensions in Abraham Lincoln's phrase is not in itself an efficient cause but it 'sets in motion' the practical, everyday ways pragmatic solutions are negotiated between its tensions and 'ideal end points' (*Ontopower*, p215). The effect of which is that Massumi considers operative logics of this loopy type as 'quasi-casual': 'They fold back into the potentializing matrix and inflect its coming expressions. They co-operate in the energizing of the process' (*Ontopower*, p216). My interest is in the role of affect in the 'quasi-casuality' of late liberalism and, in particular, how late liberalism becomes 'set in motion' and potentialised in everyday museum work. If this loop based in deficits and tensions is late liberalism's 'engine' (*Ontopower*, p216), late liberalism also needs certain types of fuel. I want to explore the ways in which righteousness might be considered a potent energy source of late liberalism, kick starting the circuit.

Affective Reflex: Righteousness Articulating Late Liberalism

The impetus for this article is the reflex I experience, pulses rising, when questions like ‘who is not here’ are asked. Righteousness is the affective flash of this reflex. Righteousness has a long history of entanglement with the forerunners of late liberalism. In *Beloved* Toni Morrison describes the righteousness of whiteness as a ‘Look’: ‘The righteous Look every Negro learned to recognize along with his ma’am’s tit. Like a flag hoisted, this righteousness telegraphed and announced the faggot, the whip, the fist, the lie, long before it went public’.¹⁹ In Morrison’s phrase ‘before it went public’ we might hear not only that sense of premonition before a violent action that is the ostensible concern of this sequence of the novel but also, perhaps, a historical phase, the premonition of the righteous ‘Look’ going public through the institutionalisation of coloniality. A ‘Look’ that we might imagine through the evolution of ‘white man’s burden’ from a colonial plea²⁰ into a more classically liberal, Keynesian economics mode (*Economies of Abandonment*, pxvi) and, through a ‘reterritorializing’, into ‘the burden of the fittest’ and the type of urgent responsibility to ‘right wrongs’ in a late liberal mode.²¹

I explore the relationship between ‘reflex’ and ‘righteousness’ drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s use of ‘reflex’ across a number of publications, but in particular in the 2004 article ‘Righting Wrongs’. In ‘Righting Wrongs’ Spivak describes the following ‘conviction’ – one she associates with her students at Columbia University: ‘I am necessarily better, I am necessarily indispensable, I am necessarily the one to right wrongs, I am necessarily the end product for which history happened, and that New York is necessarily the capital of the world’ (*Righting Wrongs*, p532). Spivak’s interest is in ‘undoing’ this conviction through a method of renegotiating the ‘enabling violation’ at work in human rights through cultivating habits of ‘literary reading’ animated by ‘suspending oneself into

the text of the other' in order to activate the promise of the humanities – 'the uncoercive rearrangement of desires' (*Righting Wrongs*, p526). The purpose being the retraining of 'reflexes that kick in at the time of urgency, of decision and policy' *Righting Wrongs*, p532).

Reflex, here, holds the sense of an in-the-moment reaction but one that is conditioned in various ways. Righteous reflex, following Spivak, contains a strong impulse towards a certain type of agency – one characterised by responsibility-taking, ethical certainty and urgency. In the context of a museum constitution iteration of late liberalism I want to propose righteousness as a temporary affective reflex, like a form of starter fluid – the type of volatile and flammable liquid that helps internal combustion engines start before they then run on their typical fuel of petrol or diesel.

To make sense of my own righteous reflex and its shifting nature, I will activate two trajectories within affect theory. The first trajectory is that of the relationship between affect, intuition and attachment as developed by Lauren Berlant. The second trajectory explores affect and intensities as taken up in different ways through Lawrence Grossberg and Brian Massumi's engagements with Deleuze and Guattari.

The phrase a 'trained thing' is used by Lauren Berlant in describing 'intuition' as a 'visceral response'.²² For Berlant, 'intuition' is 'the process of dynamic sensual data-gathering' (*Cruel Optimism*, p52) and 'works as a kind of archiving mechanism for the affects that are expressed in habituated and spontaneous behaviour that appears to manage the ongoing present' (*Cruel Optimism*, p17). This offers a way for Berlant to connect 'the economic and political activity we call "structural"' with its 'normative demands for bodily and psychic

organization' (*Cruel Optimism*, p17). If intuition is the process of a more general 'dynamic sensual data-gathering' which underpins how we understand the world and 'manage living' (*Cruel Optimism*, p52), I'd like to use reflex to understand the impulse to action borne of intuition. The physiological sense of reflex chimes with Berlant's concern with visceral responses, the sense that a reflex happens without conscious volition. The social sense of reflex – of turning back on itself – holds Berlant's sense of recursivity, including sense-making, within the idea of 'trained'.

For Berlant attachment is about an investment 'in one's own or the world's continuity' (*Cruel Optimism*, p13) but also a 'cluster of promises' (*Cruel Optimism*, p16), so that the continuity offers something 'optimistic' in some way. Attachment, in the context of museums, speaks to how certain people are positioned and position themselves in relation to the 'governance of social difference' (*Economies of Abandonment*, p16), in ways that make them more susceptible to a righteous reflex. In museums these roles include those who are employed to facilitate access, engagement, learning and increasingly – the focus of the latter part of this article – participation. These roles are defined by a sort of odd secure-precarity. The structural dimension of the righteous reflex includes the requirement, as set out in job descriptions, to challenge the institution that employs you. The righteousness of the reflex arises from a set of personal commitments that are demanded of you by the institution (e.g. to have faith in the transformative effects of institutional inclusion), but that you need to fight the institutional to achieve. What is being promised in the complexity of attachment is not only the redemption of the institution but also your own in relation to the institution as the contested site of liberal ideals.

The agential dimensions of the righteous reflex are illuminated by the sense of intuitive training, attachment to continuity and the promise of the rewards of responsibility. But I also want to add the ways in which affect has been theorised as intensity in order to explore the overwhelming sense of urgency at work in the righteous reflex. If one definition of affect is – as Massumi put it in his ‘Notes on the Translations and Acknowledgements’ to *A Thousand Plateaus* – ‘an augmentation or diminution of that body’s capacity to act’²³ the righteous reflex is a sort of individualising sugar rush. When the question ‘who isn’t here?’ is asked, put in motion is a redistribution of responsibility from the institution in general to a specific group of staff within the institution (those who have audiences or participation in their job descriptions). This shifting and redistribution of responsibility can be illuminated by Grossberg’s definition of affect as *how*, the quality and tone of this shift in responsibility, and *how much*, the type of invigoration and energy at play as certain people take up that cause.²⁴ This resonates with a more recent account by Lawrence Grossberg and Bryan Behrenshausen in their mapping of Deleuze and Guattari’s affect for conjunctural analysis where they identify a ‘signal’ which operates by ‘triggering or activating particular capacities through the setting in place of particular relations’ (*From Affect to Conjunctures*, p1015).

In the theorising of affect as intensities, along with *how* and *how much* there is also a *how long*. Righteousness in the context of late liberalism can be thought of as a reflex in part because it is a flash, a kick start. It is very intense but also short-lived. It is not a sustainable affective impulse (if any are), it just sets you on a path, activates the quasi-causal loop. The flash of righteousness as starter fluid has to convert to an everyday ticking over. Beyond the righteous and romantic kick start, the late liberal affective circuit is also defined by the romance of tragedy and the impossibility of horizon ideals. In David Scott’s terms, the sense

‘that well-intended human purposes often have unintended consequences’,²⁵ or Marshall Berman’s, that you are caught in ‘a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish’.²⁶ Late liberalism as an operative logic may find itself ‘presentified’ by the intensities of righteousness but – to return to its indexing with intuition and attachment – its efficacy also lies in holding and organising a range of modern affects.

So far I have been giving an account of how righteousness and late liberalism ‘articulate’ (*We Gotta Get out of This Place*, p82). However, my concern is also with how late liberalism and the *how* and *how much* of righteousness may be disarticulating in our present moment. This is not an either/or, articulation and disarticulation are more multivalent than that.

Nevertheless, a number of elements are now in play within the late liberal loop of museum constitution which are making it stutter and are complicating the righteous reflex.

Righteousness Disarticulating Late Liberalism

Stuart Hall’s approach to conjunctural analysis has, as Ben Highmore has argued, a sort of intuition about it – trained yes, but also something that had to be sensed out, ‘have to feel the kind of accumulation of different things coming together to make a new moment’.²⁷

The different things that seem to be coming together in the disarticulation of righteousness and late liberalism in museums include the impacts of the increasing use of participatory practice, shifts produced in ideas of appropriate political agency for anti-racist white people post-Black Lives Matter and, with climate change, the loss of a continuity future.

Adding participation to the 'on behalf of' structure of museum constitution has been to graft on a different political genealogy and a different set of lived conditions for museum workers facilitating participation. Massumi notes, in his analysis of the idea 'of the people, by the people, for the people', that an aspect of the quasi-causality of the phrase lies in the tension between representational and direct democracy. The participatory turn across the public sector is a testament to the ways in which we are still caught up in trying to solve the problematics set in train by the ideal of 'by the people'. In a museum context the effect of participatory practice is both to activate the late liberal loop but also much more than that. Taking participation seriously both opens people to different political ideas – such as those associated with Orlando Fals Borda, Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Ivan Illich or Colin Ward – but also draws people into different relationships with other people. Before participation, museum access and inclusion was quite an arms-length practice of running one off events and workshops, now museum workers might be sustaining and developing relationships over weeks, months and years as part of participatory work. We might locate the turn to participation as part of a wider phenomenon of 'emotional labour'²⁸ and the requirement to produce affective relations as part of this phase of capitalist development, a shift which has certainly inflected public and cultural institutions as well. But for the purposes of evoking the varied elements at play conjuncturally, we might just note that adding participation to late liberalism brings in new ideas and affects into the animation of the loop.

What is being promised through an attachment to late liberal ideas seems also to be shifting. The impact of Black Lives Matter on the UK cultural sectors means that now languages of decolonisation or anti-racism are jostling with inclusion and diversity. With greater understandings of climate emergency and the need for significant adaption, there is

the loss of a continuity future and therefore of the horizon on which late liberalism relies.

The newly resonating insight that coloniality and climate change are intimately linked is only pluralising the new elements at play when the late liberal loop of museum constitution is activated. It is no accident that I've doubled down on carbon metaphors in describing the righteous reflex, it is borne of the same historical processes.

In terms of intensities, the aftermath of the police murder of George Floyd, generated a moment when British cultural institutions felt compelled to write statements, leading to a cauldron of conflicts within organisations as museum workers have tried try to work out their own position in relationship to the institution in terms of race and decolonisation.²⁹

This has included a marked increase in racial consciousness by white museum workers, with terms like 'white saviour' and 'optical allyship' now widely circulating in ways which inflect righteousness with whiteness in ways that interfere with its potential to persist as a reflex. To put it another way – and this is something that has definitely become clearer for me as I have grappled with my whiteness – passionate intensity is palpably now not an acceptable emotional response for white people undertaking anti-racist activity.

These are just some of the 'different things' that seem to be at work in the ways in which the institutional righteousness reflex – while still triggered – may not feel as unproblematically 'good' anymore. If righteousness is less potently available to kick start the late liberal circuit, to give it its fire and to make it present afresh, then perhaps the viability of late liberalism is also waning. The question I explore in the rest of this article is how we might turn our use so far of the affective vocabularies of attachment and intensities into methods of detachment and modulation that can be put to work in retraining our reflexes.

Experimental Writing: Detachment and Modulation as Methods of Retraining

For Spivak retraining the reflexes of her New York based students lies in close engagement with text, in idiom and imagining yourself othered (*Righting Wrongs*, p568). What I am proposing here is a step back from Spivak's fuller method. Much less ambitiously, my focus is on retraining the righteous reflex through cultivating a detachment and modulation within the reflex that kick starts the late liberal loop. This is not – to be clear – to say that it doesn't matter who is here or is not here, it does. But it is to create a different orientation to the assumption in the question 'who isn't here' that what is needed is institutional inclusion and that your (my) role is to mediate institutional inclusion. Lots of other political responses might then arise (and, of course, many others are always-already available). These alternatives have a greater chance of flourishing when the righteous reflex is suspended, ideally, or at least dulled or slowed.

Experimental writing in affect and cultural studies has been a way of attending to what is changing in experience – 'to wait for what's starting up, to listen up for what's wearing out' as Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart put it in *The Hundreds*.³⁰ This is, to reinvolve Berlant's definition of intuition, to open up to different sensual data: 'releasing subjects from the normativity of intuition and making them available for alternative ordinaries' (*Cruel Optimism*, p6).

Indeed, the question of form has been thought by some theorists to be unavoidable in approaching the conjunctural, given the task of identifying 'the totality' of power relations is

somewhat impossible³¹ and inevitably incomplete.³² For this reason, conjunctural analysis has been characterised more as an 'ethos',³³ 'not a goal but a practice, a process, a critical analytic' *Cultural Studies in Search of a Method*, p42). As Highmore puts it, 'while conjunctures are real relations of power, they don't simply exist out there in the world; they are partly the result of the interests and judgements of the analyst' (*Disjunctive Constellations*, p37) and of the aesthetics at work in the writing process (*Aesthetic Matters*, p257). Highmore describes this as 'our whelmings: the constant overwhelming and underwhelming (and that bit inbetween, that denotes just the right amount of submersion into a phenomenal situation)' (*Aesthetic Matters*, p257) and advocates a 'self-reflexive performance of cultural studies – direct and material' (*Aesthetic Matters*, p258). I take Highmore's cue as a way of linking a diagnostic sense of what is at stake now and how it is changing with an active intention to bring this emergence into a form that can give it greater political potency. In these ways, the writing that forms the second half of the article has already been methodological – it was the process of writing that generated an account of experience that has underpinned the argument made so far concerning the liberal loop and its affective kick. In addition, I have also sought to use this writing as a method not only for analysis but also as a method for retaining my reflexes, a modest intention – an attempt to cultivate different modes of being that might prevent me reacting in such a predictable way.

In particular, retraining my reflexes comes through writing experiments that reorientate intuition, attachment and intensities as analytic resources towards political intervention.

Considering attachment obviously gives rise – following Berlant – to detachment as a political method, in this case from the late liberalism loop. Detachment is aided by the varying distances leveraged by certain forms of thinking-feeling, to 'unlearn its objectness'.³⁴

Berlant offers an approach to detachment that takes seriously the ways in which we remain inside and caught within our attachments (*On the Inconvenience*, p151) – after all attachment is ‘what draws you out into the world’ (*On the Inconvenience*, p6). Detachment might be enabled through what Berlant terms a ‘loosening’ which works to ‘slow the object’s movement, to describe its internal dynamics and ... to consider its parts’ (*On the Inconvenience*, p13). I infuse my use of detachment also with Marquis Bey’s sense that ‘the present conditions must undergo an immense detachment; we must detach, unfix, from such conditions if we are to engender something other than this’.³⁵ Detaching here is from a certain mode of responsibility and purpose – a need to be needed and to make yourself useful in and against the institution and its ideals. Detaching offers an individuated response to the individuated nature of the righteous reflex, identifying the promises and undoing them to multiply the reflex pathways that are available when it is asked ‘who isn’t here is’.

The second is modulating (*Politics of Affect*, p195). Modulation is offered by Brian Massumi as a ‘micropolitics’, ‘affective politics, seeks the degrees of openness of any situation’, ‘a way of talking about that margin of manoeuvrability, the “where we might be able to go and what we might be able to do” in every present situation’ (*Politics of Affect*, p195). This makes, Massumi suggests, ‘politics, approached affectively, ... is an art of emitting the interruptive signs, triggering the cues, that attune bodies while activating their capacities differentially’ (*Politics of Affect*, p56). Modulation is, needless to say, therefore not simply about ‘choices’ but about an ongoing background training of qualities and quantities that might shift the nature of the reflexes triggered in any given moment. Modulating is a means of slowing the rush to individuation and laterally opening up to potential and ‘difference without separability’.³⁶

Patricia Clough suggests usefully specific and varied mechanisms by which 'experimental writing' might support my intentions towards detaching and modulating as techniques of retraining:

[Experimental writing offers] methods ... for cutting out an apparatus of knowing and observation from a single plane or for differently composing elements of an apparatus with the aim of eliciting exposure or escaping it, intensifying engagement or lessening it, speeding up the timing of willed influencing or slowing it down, enjoying pleasure and suffering pain or eluding them (*Comments on Setting Criteria for Experimental Writing*, p286).

Taking from Clough's set of possibilities, I am initially interested in capturing the varying circuits, 'cutting out an apparatus ... from a single plane'. In doing this I formally stylise the liberal loops circuits so they can be known, performing the moment of the righteous kick start. The stylised approach then evolves to register the changes in the circuits, playing with varying speeds and proximities towards detachment. Finally, I then amplify the potential for modulation in these circuits, naming the ways in which I might respond in those moments when, otherwise, the righteous reflex would kick in. The different sections offer something akin to linked and repeated exercises in a physical training content. The different writing experiments bring into form what happens in the moment of the reflex, notice ambivalence after the reflex, attune to change and varying responses – so as to enable different reflexes to kick in 'at the time of urgency, of decision and policy' (*Righting Wrongs*, p532).

Writing Experiments in Retraining the Righteous Reflex

The Moment of the Righteous Reflex

And in the museum meeting room pulses start to rise, knowing something must be said.

What needs to be said is expected. It is factored in. It is required by job descriptions saved in shared HR files. It is required by the specification of skills and commitments that were responded to in the job application and already evidenced by the examples of how the job might be done that were given in the interview.³⁷

Yet to say something still feels like something.³⁸ To know that you need to ask *variously* who isn't here ..., how is this going to work for..., should we work with..., how will decisions be made?

Or it is to say *variously* ... that can't work ..., they can't touch that ..., that's not in the conservation plan ..., it can only be on display for ..., it's getting too late, we need these forms to be filled in now.

To say these things can come with a flicker of righteousness, a gathering of intensity. Like the belly uptick of half reading a news article on the train about a government policy on refugees. Like over breakfast listening to a government spokesperson reciting a list of what they have done to alleviate food poverty, tonally provoking an already embedded suspicion that they don't care. A flicker that has colour, texture and depth, articulating with films where what is good is certain, known and triumphs and when, without intention, tears roll

in the cinema dark, brushed away before anyone sees. Or else owned up to, shuffling along the aisle towards the exit, with embarrassed irony. Genre: Romantic, in its own way.

Factored in and mapped in though it is, something does still need to be said. It still needs to be made something in the present of the meeting (*Politics of Affect*, p147). Sometimes it can feel good, desirable, like it is the right thing, 'righting wrongs', your 'alibi' for all the museum has done and still does (*Righting Wrongs*, p523). It can feel better afterwards because it is done.

Sometimes the eye contact in the room can be warm. What is said can be acknowledged, received well – it was expected after all and, after all, it did need to be said. Sometimes eye contact is avoided and a memory of past disagreements in a similar vein balloon and then recede.

Then, after the meeting, what happens tips over. Huddled in the corner spots in open plan offices. In the kitchen, if no-one else is there. On the corridor back stairs, if that's the only option. Coalescing. They didn't say that, did they? A moment is spent pondering motivations or perhaps a shared meta-analysis of why a person or team does-what-they-do and says-what-they-say is tweaked. Then someone adds a note of *trying to be constructive* and energy wanes. Fed if not nourished, meeting rooms are returned to, to try again.

After the Righteous Reflex

Sometimes it has been agreed that you go out and develop a community project. That is your job after all and you had said that it should be done and you said it was needed and you had said that you wanted to do it.

Bumping into another member of staff you tell them where you are going and feel that motive righteousness flicker once more. All the while knowing righteousness never burns as cleanly on the outside, in the doing.

On the bus – or maybe you cycled – something circulates as background positivity, a rhythm, a beat. Like what you want here, what has brought you here, is freedom to just be with, a becoming-with. Like you always want dancing in packed dark to be, and sometimes is. Like dancing sometimes is in films and TV, *in it*, no narrative, no plot, no characters. Potential.

You want that, *to just be with*, but know it will not only be you there. The museum is coming with you. Having sought to use this very encounter to make yourself an alibi for the museum's culpability, you know now you don't have any kind of alibi as you knock on the door – it is your knuckle landing on hard wood.

The door to someone's home is opened, and you try and work out whether to take your shoes off.

Or you are ushered into the ongoingness of a day centre.

Or it's after hours in a community café, quiet and spent.

In some past you might have felt like the museum professional codes of ethics you read and signed up for would offer you protection in moments like these – *if the rules are followed (if you find yourself able to follow the rules)*. The impossible ethics of the public service ideal in the time of the participatory turn – to build relationships free of personal obligation.

Even now it might be that as you irritate every interaction with subtle modes of *being professional* that separate you from those not so bound that, without entirely meaning to, you accept the promise of this protection all the time you know *that this protection against personal obligation will always fail*.

First there's small talk. Though at some point your body gives off some signal you've been trying to conceal. That slight change in energy, leaning out of the chat and towards, as you know you need to take responsibility for moving the conversation onto the matter at hand, onto the reason you walked through those doors. Sometimes you do this well. The flow is maintained, it can feel ok, good even. Sometimes it clunks, heavy and you catch and have to carry that weight. But not only you. Power manifests tangibly in clearly uneven ways. You need something from them which you want to take back. You are offering something which they may want, though *what* is often hard to define even when you both try. And even in the flow of the good iteration, a lurking thought – maybe it shouldn't feel good.

Another time, awkwardly you slip out the consent form. Kind of casual and knowing it can't be as it needs to be a performative moment so the 'partnership' can be passed back through the museum gate. The slightly staged fumbling over a pen, slipping in a micro-personal failure in disavowal of the moment. My pen or yours? (Though of course you have brought

one and know exactly where it is). All that is, has been and will be relationally, turned into a line in the sand.

Sometimes going back through the door of the museum or as you go back into the strip-lighted florescence of those meeting rooms you know 'you will have been wrong' (*The Cunning of Recognition*, p33). Always not on the right side of ethics, while always claiming you are. Always taking responsibility for others in relation to others, never quite knowing if this is being responsible or patronising. Always saying we're not therapists or social workers, while never quite saying, 'no, but never just equals either'. Always motored by your need to be needed – by the institution, by your collaborators. The insertion of yourself in this political tension, a career built on managing this need, this contradiction, by owning it, taking it up as your own, wearing it as well as possible.

Sometimes you have found something almost pleasurable in this. Your implication can almost be enjoyed, tapping into genre-tragedy. That you will never have anything but grubby hands. That you are both 'author and authored' – and that you will never know which at any given time.³⁹ Like walking home in the November dusk, songs about loss and *keeping going* playing on your headphones. Like the closing scenes of 1990s TV programmes. A tragic not-righteousness that draws things together.

Registering Change

Righteousness died on your lips once, as you were in the moment of channelling, of becoming captured and conscripted. Gone from sweet fuel to the kind of bad taste that lingering longer at first can be forgotten but returns unbidden, familiar, as the energetic

constitutional pull fires up and as those same words, structured in that way, appear again.

But now differently.

You are out again. Taking with you a string of terms, jostling. Each on any given use flooding the scene with memories, books, people, policy. The words are: Access. Inclusion. In recent times, also: Plurality. Diversity.

You put plurality into play, the idea of lots of different people's stories. Lots of different cultures. It feels ok to say. Other people maybe come back with 'representation' or 'recognition', but your newer word hangs too. You've let it drag in an aura of relativism, or you've hoped it has.

Conversations unfold.

Sometimes all discussed is possible. It feels strong, the right thing. No contradictions seem to appear. Then what is discussed feels not-right. Anxiety rises, wondering how to move from here back to there. Reasoning and affect 'are out of joint' (*The Cunning of Recognition*, p5). Tolerance's limits having been touched.

You stutter in your grafting of plurality onto the liberal horizon. Your role outside or above this plurality suddenly spatialised concretely. Your public duty to govern acceptable difference now far too palpably achieved through 'a detached, surveying gaze which itself is not relative'.⁴⁰

Things start to rhyme with phrases recently heard as you now find yourself not editing but policing.⁴¹

You bristle as someone makes a claim on you personally and you notice yourself bristling, the kind of interference that creates the tarnished comfort of re-established distance.

Sometimes you can still see the good, the power of recognition in a public sphere.

But sometimes the burden of self-representation is too clear, the consequences of this public act definitely personal.

... And someone avoids the form filling.

... And personal objects coming in for the exhibition supposed to be parcelled up in acid free paper, paperwork signed in advance, are defiantly dropped in reception. The phone rings.

Come down, I am here now.

Perhaps what we are doing is not that important.

Perhaps it is not pleasant to think about.

Perhaps there is too much at stake to look at it straight.

Your whiteness has started to vibrate in every encounter, disclosed to you in real time as it was not before. You see people seeing you as white, as words and phrase from your reading rewrite parts of you in the living. Holding enlightenment in your gut newly in-digests as a bad feeling telling you intuitively something is wrong.

Varying Responses

Sometimes this all figures as ambivalence. Mixed. 'Drawn in Different Directions' (*On the Inconvenience*). Calibrating the different intensities of 'positive and negative' charges (*On the Inconvenience*, p27), combining and hybridising with other forms, doing different things, never under control.

Exceeding tumbles desires and ideas over the edge of the constitutional loop, leaving a political-affective remainder.

Slackening happens. You find yourself playing the same roles but less intensely. You say your lines with conviction, but less. You care but less, less likely to be caught up in the drama, dialling back the melodramatic to some other genre-form. A bit flatter.⁴² Certain things become harder to say. You might find yourself in a meeting where you know what you should say but can't. Or a word once said confidently can't be anymore. Or you try but you stumble over the familiar script, adding a note to your role-playing others can't fail but notice. Or maybe they don't.

Sometimes there is *accelerating*, a certain recklessness cultivated by the distance now in the relation. A doubling down on your preferred side of the constitutional equation, spinning the looping off its axis. You feel it first tipsy, not paying attention. A making eventfulness. But it can become something else more considered, with a deliberate foot down, seeking escape velocity.

Trying happens if an impasse is felt. Some mode that hasn't given up but can't be fired up. Just hard, definitely no romance and not even in a tragic way, neither righteous nor not-righteous. A keeping going after-belief has waned. More endurance than event (*Economies of Abandonment*). Not committed to reform, nor revolution. No goal. But neither any sense of joyous emergence. Uncertain if this can take us anywhere but stolidity in keeping going.

Turning uses the distance in relation differently to reorientate, neither the bristly gap created by professionalism, nor the righteousness of needing-to. 'In-difference'.⁴³ Turning tries to vibrate the caughtness to expand the 'elbow' room not *for* 'against' but *for* 'for'.⁴⁴ A holding open for something else.

Even in those museum too-bright airless rooms sometimes something else can happen, until.

Deeply desired although you can't plan for it or will it into being. In some interval uncaptured and not-channelled. An opening up where a future emerges colourful. Ideas feel new and fluidly change shape in the back and forth of shared, joyful making. Feels like life while it's happening. Whole political designs in potential are conjured and crumble in those intervals.

And it can tip, becoming looped back, just like that. Channelled, re-conscripted upticking righteous for a moment as something else is left over. The sort of relief that never satisfies.

Coda

Ideologies to keep presentifying may well rely on certain kinds of affective fuel (*Politics of Affect*, p147). Different ideologies will need different fuel, fuel that will have quite different qualities and might require varying quantities. I have suggested here that late liberalism, and in particular museum constitution, needs something like righteousness.

In exploring the role of reflex in late liberalism – and in museum practice in the era of its participatory turn – I have sought to draw into dialogue different trajectories within affect theory – those of intuition, attachment and intensities. These different trajectories allow for ‘reflex’ and its sense of an in-the-moment reaction to be informed by the habituated and trained idea of intuition, by the promise of a certain sense of personhood and future offered by the lens of attachment and by vocabularies of intensities of *how*, *how much* as well as *how long*. These different affective elements are potent because they fuel and ‘presentify’ (*Politics of Affect*, p147) the late liberal loop of impossible ideas and tensions.

My ability to theorise the righteous reflex came from experimental writing as a means of generating different orientations to the shifting nature of my experience as a facilitator of participation in museums. I have also proposed experimental writing as a means of retraining by turning round attachment, following Berlant, towards a politics of detachment, and reactivating intensities, following Massumi, towards a politics of modulation. Through this I have been interested in how the intuitive aspects of conjunctural analysis might proceed through particular combinations of the diverse trajectories currently at play in the plurality of affect theory.⁴⁵ The ones I have combined here – intuition, attachment and intensities – seem useful for understanding the righteous reflex of late liberalism, other combinations will be necessary for different types of inquiry. But the broader

methodological question for attending to the relationship between ideology and affect conjuncturally might be: How might we develop a 'feel' for 'different things' through an activation of different theoretical trajectories and varied registers and aesthetics?

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Helen Graham teaches museum and heritage studies at the University of Leeds, UK. Helen's research lies at the intersection of political theory, affect theory and participative and action-led forms of research. With museums, heritage and place as a focus, Helen investigates dynamics of property and rights, of democracy and ideology and of agency and affinity, often through collaborative and experimental projects, both in the doing and on the page.

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