Introduction

UNBEARABLE AFFECTS/ AFFECT'S UNBEARABILITY

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Editor's Preface

I first encountered Eirini Avramopoulou's work when the two of us (along with fabulous Anna Gibbs) were invited to be keynote speakers at the conference "(E)motions in Changing Worlds" at Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, Greece in early November of 2023. Eirini and I swapped a few emails in anticipation of meeting up. Then, sigh, she contracted covid and had to deliver her talk remotely. But, even at a distance, Eirini's pointedly political, impassioned presentation knocked me (and the assembled attendees) over. It was a necessary reminder of how/why affect and affect theory must always rise up to meet the challenges and unbearabilities of the present. At that moment in November 2023 Gaza and Israel were barely a month into what would rapidly become a genocide. Meanwhile, the day-to-day crises in Greece, Turkey, and around the Mediterranean are intimately interwoven with the fates of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers—intensely vivid and visceral: extending, of course, beyond this region of the world.

The day after her conference presentation, I messaged Eirini to ask if she would consider writing something for *Capacious*, and she agreed. We are so glad she did. While this issue of the journal has been a bit delayed, Eirini's thinking-writing-feeling here has only grown more timely (and/or untimely?) since its submission in early 2025. The sense of unbearability has been rapidly ratcheting up in the intervening months. Those of us in the United States, but not only here, will likely feel interpellated by a question like: "what might it mean to be attentive to the reverberations of daily resistances that still manifest their dynamics, and

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to processes of social healing that need to take place when ultra-nationalisms, far-right anti-gender politics, neoliberal authoritarianisms and masquerading conservatisms prevail daily…"? It is worth noting too that I am writing these remarks in the midst of ICE's violent incursion into Minneapolis and the point-blank murder of Renee Good: something that feels like a tipping point (one of many). In the face of such overt and escalating fascism, one hears, over and again, Eirini's affect-oriented refrain: What to do? What are the capacities to?

Those who wish to dig more into Eirini Avramopoulou's instructive and prescient work should read her *Affective Activisms and the Right to Have Rights in Turkey* (Palgrave, 2025). Like Noor Ghazal Aswad's book on Syrian resistance *Searching for Solidarity: Revolutionary Dreams and Radical Social Movements* (Ohio University Press, 2025), the different lessons for affect theory in these accounts forcefully address many of the most urgent demands of our continued collective existence.

—Gregory J. Seigworth, co-editor-in-chief

Unbearable Affects/Affect's Unbearability

What can a smell do? What is it capable of? Paraphrasing important theoretical questions that defined the emergence and development of critical engagement with discourse, identity, and representation through affect theory since the 1990s, I pose these questions so as to prompt us to think through the affects exuded at moments when the dense affective atmospheres we (co-)inhabit turn unbearable. I wish to understand how such unbearability provides us with useful lenses through which we could both question the reproduction of toxic norms as well as let ourselves imagine reparative strategies of "bearing the unbearable encounter with the unfinished business of being—not just its incompleteness but also in its desire for and resistance to being accounted for" as Lauren Berlant (2014) poetically writes in response to Lee Edelman in their book *Sex, or the Unbearable* (68). The authors engage in a vibrant discussion around the most pertinent question of "What would it mean, [...] to take seriously the question of what it means to face living with negativity?" as posed by Edelman (2014, 66). At the same time, Berlant wishes to bring to account "the fantasy of theory and its relation to how

narrative binds and seduces us toward impossible repairs and resolutions" (68). This highlights an important issue that informs their exchanges and, more than that, it raises, nowadays, a number of important ethical and political questions in search of a politics of writing that does not insist only on the representation of things, nor remains on their pure surface. On the contrary, the authors alert us towards forms of writing that mobilize the impossible task of analytical thinking when faced with unbearable atmospheres where existence "is hanging on a push of the lungs" (Cavarero 2005, 169).

What can a smell do, what is it capable of? I have often pondered this question in recent years as I have been conducting ethnographic research on the multifaceted, but interrelated, stories of asylum management, governmentality, biopolitics, and everyday life in the island of Leros in Greece. The islanders' economic survival has almost entirely depended on the operation of asylum institutions, and, in people's accounts of their entanglements with these institutions, narratives of smell were both dispersed and salient.As I have analyzed elsewhere (Avramopoulou 2022 and 2020), to escape the fate of extreme poverty usually reserved for those living on small Mediterranean islands in the late 1950s, many locals were employed as hospital guards in the psychiatric hospital. The conditions under which this hospital operated-stigmatized its inhabitants by hailing them complicit with what was described in the international press as "Europe's guilty secret" and as "a crime against humanity"-and for which no official authorities were ever held accountable. The professional category of being employed as a guard was created for Lerians who would be employed as unskilled workers assigned to the care of nearly 5,000 patients who arrived from 1958 onward. Most of the psychiatric patients were destined to live and die in Leros under inhumane conditions. Hospital guards would perform all the tasks related to the *care* of people toward whom they held mixed emotions— namely, the fear, aversion, and repulsion generally attached to those deemed "mad," even as they profited from the tragedies affecting their lives. Nevertheless, the stories they shared with me also conveyed caregivers' burnout: having to endure a job carrying along the unbearable smell of stool and the unbearable guilt of 'treating people like animals' and having to 'put your hands in shit,' as they would always phrase it. At the same time, they slowly developed intimacy, genuine care, and love on account of the unavoidable co-dependency and coexistence. Those mixed feelings were again animated later when the psychiatric hospital's terrible stench continued to haunt the senses and sense-making of the local population with the eruption of the so-called refugee crisis. In such a context, as I have argued, complicity becomes an unbearable affect unsustained by, and fleeing from, the toxic structures animating it while binding people together and simultaneously setting them apart (Avramopoulou 2022).

What can a smell do, what is it capable of? I often wondered about the dense affective atmosphere exuded by that sticky smell that got stuck in the skin while permeating the surface of bodies and social relations, or of the "affective economy" (Ahmed 2004) of fear, guilt, complicity and denial stigmatizing its inhabitants, especially when it later found new expression in the newly built refugee camp's stinky atmosphere, indicating the affectively spatial proximity between the psychiatric patients and the refugees.In 2015, the decision to build a refugee camp in Leros recalled past traumas, as more than 38,000 refugees passed through the island, whose permanent population numbers fewer than 9,000 inhabitants. Bearing witness to the eruption of what has been characterized as the biggest refugee crisis in Europe over the last years which followed the devastating effects of Greece's economic crisis, impacting a population struggling to survive huge levels of unemployment and agonizing over impoverishment, seemed to re-animate the smell of fear, hate, guilt and denial circulating around the question of who would/could profit from another human tragedy. People's daily rumors echoed: 'Everybody profited from the psychiatric hospital' appeared in parallel to 'Everybody profits from the refugee crisis' or 'they 'eat' the money of the refugees, as they did with the mentally ill.' Moreover, in the more xenophobic accounts of some of my interlocutors, the use of derogatory designations like "the smelly/dirty refugees" or "the smelly/dirty psychiatric patients" were becoming salient expressions of hate speech and fear of Otherness. Such discourses serve to remind us of what Mary Douglas (1966) perceived long ago as a metaphor for a crucial disruption to a normative structural order that needs to hold on to the fantasy of the self's integrity by excluding what could be perceived as dirty, or an anomaly, the abnormal, the Other figured as aversion, and in Julia Kristeva's terms, an abject (1982). Here, xenophobia and empathy collide, as "dirty refugees" morph into "poor refugees," from whose "shitty conditions" others can "profit." Once again, then, a protracted crisis has cast its long shadow across this island, rearticulating the fear, loathing, guilt, and denial circulating around the question of who can and who will profit from an unrepresentable, unspeakable, and indeed unbearable, human tragedy.

What can a smell do, what is it capable of? Through this question, I often asked myself: how can one tell a story through a smell? How can one speak of its affective value? More importantly, how can we think of it as a departure point for addressing methodological questions related to desire, affect, and politics in anthropological writing? Or, how can we imagine processes of decolonising (knowledge about) the body through the lingering affects of a smell that trouble the ethics of representation?

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What can a smell do? What is it capable of? Through this question my intention is not to impose theory on everyday life, nor to claim that ethnography has the ability to reveal itself in most surprising and unthought of ways despite the fact that it does many times. On the contrary, if we agree (even to disagree) that theory cannot be disentangled from lived life, but provides a way to find a different entry into it and, at times, to resist life's unlivability, or at least to reflect on how to make it less unlivable and more bearable, then the fantasy of letting theory do the work of reparation becomes a way of unpacking pertinent political and ethical methodological and theoretical challenges about *an ordinary world* that *we cannot not bear.What can affect do? What is it capable of?* As Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (2010) mention in the first affect theory reader: "because affect emerges out of muddy, unmediated relatedness and not in some dialectical reconciliation of cleanly oppositional elements or primary units, it makes easy compartmentalisms give way to thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs." (4). If affect theory inserted an important "representational trouble" into the work of social anthropologists and of other social scientists during the early 2000s, this also resonated with theoretical/methodological transformations already happening in gender/queer studies, feminist philosophy and postcolonial theory. This "trouble" entailed asking questions differently than those focusing on the evocative power of the "events," the emancipating potential of defiant subjects and the promising futurity attached to heroes/heroines. Using affect as a methodology enabled social anthropologists to pose questions without being falsely attached to inquiries about truth-making regimes, linear narratives, clear cut meanings, fixed identity roles and representations. Deconstructing hard data and ambitious emancipatory visions, what was named, after Patricia Clough (2007), as the "affective turn" and the theorization of affect in non-representational theory, encouraged social scientists to start looking for ephemeral evidence of everyday life (Muñoz 2008), to become more attentive in giving analytical attention to ordinary affects (Stewart 2007 and 2008), to prompt "the unresolved" or the "unfinishedness into our storytelling" (Biehl 2013, 574), to let desire be a way of deconstructing racial and sexual stereotypes (Rodriguez 2014), and, most importantly, without projecting Western categories on the rest of the world (Navaro 2017). Indeed, affect theory also became a way of reconsidering negativity's hold in the affective geographies we co-inhabit (Navaro 2012). And these are just a few examples out of a long list of contributions that has amplified over the last years.

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What can affect do? What is it capable of? "Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and 'felt the atmosphere'?" Teresa Brennan (2004) famously argued (1). Discussions about its transmission still remains, despite the critiques, a prism through which affect theory entered anthropological inquiry and ethnographic explorations. Inspired by (but also diverging from) Brennan, Sara Ahmed (2004) poignantly argues that affects "do things," as they bond and bind bodies together, mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, the individual and the collective. By emphasizing the performative value of affect, Ahmed rightly suggests that we need to consider arrival in space as an intensely mediated moment defined by the subjects' differentiated positions which are defined by gendered, sexualized, racial, etc. scenarios of power. Perceiving affect as formative and, most of all, *per*formative of social relations and contemporary political articulations, it then becomes an important tool for analyzing the re-constitution of collectivities, social movements and political demands for rights, recognition, justice and democracy. However, this approach does not simply celebrate affect's unquestioned visceral potentiality and affirmative qualities, but rather engages with all the risks that this entails. After all, Judith Butler (1993) has shown, long time ago, that performativity is not about the celebration of agency because at the heart of the potential undoing of norms, there is a risk as any act of non-complying with the norms often comes at the price of discipline, punishment and violence.

Considered through this prism, affect theory allowed us to ask again: how can we re-imagine what is it that motivates crowds to risk their lives so as to claim them back as (more than) liveable? How can the commons reassemble through conflicting, fleeing, and constantly differentiated subject positions? How can we grasp resistance beyond it being led by a white, male, rational, and logocentric subject? How can social change happen without being limited by politics of identity and the principles of representation? Overall, affect theory enables us to ask along with Susan Ruddick (2010) "how do we fashion a new political imaginary from fragmentary, diffuse and often antagonistic subjects, who may be united in principle against the exigencies of capitalism but diverge in practice, in terms of the sites, strategies and specific natures of their own oppression?" (22).

What can affect do? What is it capable of? In reviewing the origins of the use of the term affect, Ann Pellegrini and Jasbir Puar (2009) explain that the point of different accounts of affect is not simply to map the different ways of analyzing the bodies and the subjects of politics in modernity, but to rethink and reimagine the space of the political (38). Following this lead, one of the main focuses of my ethnographic endeavors over the last several years has revolved around the question of how can we make affect speak the language of the political, or else how to

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mobilize affect theory so as to understand crucial processes of politicization and solidarity enabled and mediated by the valuable lenses of gender and sexuality, at times of hope-lessness: like those we experienced in the past; like those we are living through at this very moment. For example, in *Affective Activisms and the Right to Have Rights in Turkey* (Avramopoulou 2025), I argue that activism is a performative and affective language that is defined by intersectional hopes, desires and dreams, as much as it engages with legal battles that define who or what might appear as being broken under specific historical, political and cultural settings.

I learned much while doing fieldwork in Turkey at a period that has registered for many as 'the golden era' of politics—'the golden era' of social movements in 2008-2010; this was a period of political transformations which led to the Gezi Park protests in 2013, the alleged coup d'état that followed in 2016, the persecution and imprisonment of thousands of people and to the establishment of an authoritarian regime. All these alerted me to what it might mean to be attentive to the reverberations of daily resistances that still manifest their dynamics, and to processes of social healing that need to take place when ultra-nationalism, far-right anti-gender politics, neoliberal authoritarianisms and masquerading conservatisms prevail daily, not only in Turkey or on European soil, but also internationally. Thus, the urgent need to think through the creation of local and transnational alliances nowadays, as *Affective Activisms* reveals, lies in our insistence on understanding fieldwork in activist affects and embodiments today as fieldwork in human rights philosophy. In this sense, "the right to have rights" (Arendt 1949) pushes us to reflect on how power works beyond human rights themselves, or more correctly beyond the logic-grammar that has defined them as processes of producing exclusions. In other words, it pushes us to be attentive to the political and affective surplus value invested in the need for rights which lies both in the search for ways of institutionalizing and implementing rightful demands, as well as in the desire to claim affective democratic visions, citizenship, and a life worth living vis-à-vis the re-emergence of authoritarian regimes, sexual harassment, gender violence, homo/trans phobia and Islamophobia worldwide.

What can affect do? What is it capable of? Nowadays, more than ever, affect theory allows us to ask: what is it that matters in theorizing everyday life as a convoluted scene defined by complex affectscapes that trigger the senses and sense-making mechanisms while they condition and/or limit people's resilience, endurance, duress, agency, and resistance in view of newly emerging forms of patriarchy, white supremacy and sexism, of trans/homo-phobia and the reign of far-right anti-gender ideology, of culturalism, Islamophobia and xenophobia, of anti-woke agendas proliferating in tandem with Trumpism's triumph around the globe, of

the production of deepened poverty and precarity continuously intensified by processes of neoliberal governmentality, sovereign regimes, authoritarianism, neofascism and the daily production of massive destruction, genocide and death machines? To put it abruptly, how can we even hold on to the fantasy of finding solace in (affect) theory after Gaza? What would reparative writing mean under such conditions?

What can affect do? What is it capable of? If Daniel White (2017) is correct when he writes that "theory is *of* the world it so describes" and that "affect and affect theory are here, now, for good reason" (179), then the current cruel and inhumane conflict in the Middle East—rearranging the world through the production of unspeakable pain, destruction, and death—becomes evidence of how the senses partake in the production of the political and leaves the following question hanging: how can unbearable affects designate space for affect's unbearability? Again, then, what would reparative writing mean under such conditions?

What can unbearability do? What is it capable of? Debarati Biswas and Laura Westengard (2024) poignantly argue in the introduction of a recent special journal issue on unbearability:

> 'Unbearable being' is an affective state of being and becoming that indexes the intolerableness of existence within the normative. On the other hand, 'unbearable beings' are the subjects who inhabit abject and/or revolutionary positions in relation to the sociopolitical apparatus and offer alternate possibilities of living and being in this world (17).

In this same special issue, Juana María Rodríguez (2024) writes:

> The mornings are the worst; it is then that I wake from the sweet warmth of darkness into the half-light of genocide outside my window. Like most cogs to empire, I endure. I shuffle along, I try to schedule my crying for the mornings before I attend to prepping the class, answering the emails, and completing the mundate chores of my cozy life. Still in my bed, I hold my phone and shatter the buffer between myself and the world. In my hands, I watch haggard bodies stagger into their own routines amid a grey rubble of trauma a world away. I look for Bisan on the socials, check for her safety, and then fall into a doom scroll, bracing myself for what is to come. Today I learn how Israeli snipers aim for the knees of the youngsters who throw stones at

> their tanks to fell the opposition. The result is thousands of limbs left on the ground of occupation, bodies cut off from parts of themselves without the aid of anesthesia or condolence. On TikTok, I see bone-thin children speak about wanting to die to escape the thirst and hunger that has replaced their daily bread; I see a father dig through the remains of yet another Israeli missile strike with his bare hands in search of a beloved's fleshy remains. Closer to home, I see trained snipers aiming their weapons at student protesters, and a professor, old and outraged like myself, thrown to the ground for protesting a live-streamed genocide. Meanwhile, in the upside world that the media insists on projecting, the rich starve themselves for fashion, more bothered by the traffic delays than ethnic cleansing, and name the victims terrorists and the oppressors victims. Time and space collapse and spin out again into a dizzying morass of all that seems too much to bear (277).

Following Rodríguez's (2024) powerful writing and her insistence to call for a collective awakening that grieves and dreams together and in rage (279), I need to forcefully ask again: what would bearing the fantasy of finding solace in (affect) theory after embodying the stench of human tragedies, like those haunting Leros, do? What would bearing the fantasy of finding solace in (affect) theory after Gaza do? Or, overall, how can (affect) theory change (us/our writing) after witnessing and living among unspeakable inhumanities and fascisms, after and during an ongoing genocide? What would these processes be capable of?

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