

ORDINARY AFFECTS



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Ordinary Affects is an experiment, not a judgment. Committed not to the demystification and uncovered truths that support a well-known picture of the world, but rather to speculation, curiosity, and the concrete, it tries to provoke attention to the forces that come into view as habit or shock, resonance or impact. *Something* throws itself together in a moment as an event and a sensation; a something both animated and inhabitable.

This book is set in a United States caught in a present that began some time ago. But it suggests that the terms neoliberalism, advanced capitalism, and globalization that index this emergent present, and the five or seven or ten characteristics used to summarize and define it in shorthand, do not in themselves begin to describe the situation we find ourselves in. The notion of a totalized system, of which everything is always already somehow a part, is not helpful (to say the least) in the effort to approach a weighted and reeling present. This is not to say that the forces these systems try to name are not real and literally pressing. On the contrary, I am trying to bring them into view as a scene of immanent force, rather than leave them looking like dead effects imposed on an innocent world.

The ordinary is a shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges, a scene of both liveness and exhaustion, a dream of escape or of the simple life.¹ Ordinary affects are the varied, surg-

¹ See Lauren Berlant's essay "Cruel Optimism" (*Differences*, forthcoming) for a brilliant discussion of how objects and scenes of desire matter not just because of their content but because they hold promise

ing capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences.² They're things that happen. They happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, and in publics and social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like *something*.³

Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they're also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give circuits and flows the forms of a life. They can be experienced as a pleasure and a shock, as an empty pause or a dragging undertow, as a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation. They can be funny, perturbing, or traumatic. Rooted not in fixed conditions of possibility but in the actual lines of potential that a *something* coming together calls to mind and sets in motion, they can be seen as both the pressure points of events or banalities suffered and the trajectories that forces might take if they were to go unchecked. Akin to Raymond Williams's structures of feeling, they are "social experiences in solution"; they

in the present moment of a thing encountered and because they become the means of keeping whole clusters of affects magnetized to them.

² See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, vol. 1, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), and *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, vol. 2, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

³ See Lauren Berlant's introduction to *Intimacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) and her essays "Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal: Post-Fordist Affect in *Rosetta* and *La Promesse*" (*Public Culture*, forthcoming) and "Slow Death" (*Critical Inquiry*, forthcoming) for discussions of an individual's abstract yet contingent desire to feel like he or she is "in" something or can recognize *something*.

“do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures.”⁴ Like what Roland Barthes calls the “third meaning,” they are immanent, obtuse, and erratic, in contrast to the “obvious meaning” of semantic message and symbolic signification.⁵ They work not through “meanings” per se, but rather in the way that they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds. Their significance lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible. The question they beg is not what they might mean in an order of representations, or whether they are good or bad in an overarching scheme of things, but where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them in a state of potentiality and resonance.

Ordinary affects, then, are an animate circuit that conducts force and maps connections, routes, and disjunctures.⁶ They are a kind of contact zone where the overdeterminations of circulations, events, conditions, technologies, and flows of power literally take place. To attend to ordinary affects is to trace how the potency of forces lies in their immanence to things that are both flighty and hardwired, shifty and unsteady but palpable too. At once abstract and concrete, ordinary affects are more directly compelling than ideologies, as well as more fractious, multiplicitous, and unpredictable than symbolic meanings. They are not the kind of analytic object that can be laid out on a single, static plane of analysis, and

⁴ See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 133, 132.

⁵ Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills,” in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 318.

⁶ See Nigel Thrift, *Knowing Capitalism* (London: Sage, 2005), for a discussion of how capitalism forms an “animate surface” to life.

they don't lend themselves to a perfect, three-tiered parallelism between analytic subject, concept, and world. They are, instead, a problem or question emergent in disparate scenes and incommensurate forms and registers; a tangle of potential connections. Literally moving things—things that are in motion and that are defined by their capacity to affect and to be affected—they have to be mapped through different, coexisting forms of composition, habituation, and event. They can be “seen,” obtusely, in circuits and failed relays, in jumpy moves and the layered textures of a scene. They surge or become submerged. They point to the jump of something coming together for a minute and to the spreading lines of resonance and connection that become possible and might snap into sense in some sharp or vague way.

Models of thinking that slide over the live surface of difference at work in the ordinary to bottom-line arguments about “bigger” structures and underlying causes obscure the ways in which a reeling present is composed out of heterogeneous and noncoherent singularities. They miss how someone's ordinary can endure or can sag defeated; how it can shift in the face of events like a shift in the kid's school schedule or the police at the door. How it can become a vague but compelling sense that something is happening, or harden into little mythic kernels. How it can be carefully maintained as a prized possession, or left to rot. How it can morph into a cold, dark edge, or give way to something unexpectedly hopeful.

This book tries to slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique long enough to find ways of approaching the complex and uncertain objects that fascinate because they literally hit us or exert a pull on us. My effort here is not to finally “know” them—to collect them into a good enough story of what's going on—but to fashion some form of address that is adequate to their form; to find something to say about ordinary affects by performing some of the intensity and texture that makes them habitable and animate. This means building an idiosyncratic map

of connections between a series of singularities.⁷ It means pointing always outward to an ordinary world whose forms of living are now being composed and suffered, rather than seeking the closure or clarity of a book's interiority or riding a great rush of signs to a satisfying end. In this book I am trying to create a contact zone for analysis.

The writing here has been a continuous, often maddening, effort to approach the intensities of the ordinary through a close ethnographic attention to pressure points and forms of attention and attachment. *Ordinary Affects* is written as an assemblage of disparate scenes that pull the course of the book into a tangle of trajectories, connections, and disjunctures. Each scene begins anew the approach to the ordinary from an angle set off by the scene's affects. And each scene is a tangent that performs the sensation that something is happening—something that needs attending to. From the perspective of ordinary affects, thought is patchy and material. It does not find magical closure or even seek it, perhaps only because it's too busy just trying to imagine what's going on.

I write not as a trusted guide carefully laying out the links between theoretical categories and the real world, but as a point of impact, curiosity, and encounter. I call myself “she” to mark the difference between this writerly identity and the kind of subject that arises as a daydream of simple presence. “She” is not so much a subject position or an agent in hot pursuit of something definitive as a point of contact; instead, she gazes, imagines, senses, takes on, performs, and asserts not a flat and finished truth but some possibilities (and threats) that have come into view in the effort to become attuned to what a particular scene might offer.

From the perspective of ordinary affects, things like narrative

⁷ See John Rajchman, *The Deleuze Connections* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 4–13, for a discussion of the analysis that works to make connections.

and identity become tentative though forceful compositions of disparate and moving elements: the watching and waiting for an event to unfold, the details of scenes, the strange or predictable progression in which one thing leads to another, the still life that gives pause, the resonance that lingers, the lines along which signs rush and form relays, the layering of immanent experience, the dreams of rest or redemption or revenge. Forms of power and meaning become circuits lodged in singularities. They have to be followed through disparate scenes. They can gather themselves into what we think of as stories and selves. But they can also re-main, or become again, dispersed, floating, recombining—re-gardless of what whole or what relay of rushing signs they might find themselves in for a while...

THE OWL

She's at a Laurie Anderson show at the Soho Guggenheim. The show is called "Your Fortune, \$1." A white plastic owl is perched on a stool in a darkened corner spewing out a stream of two-bit advice, trenchant commentary, and stray advertising lingo. Its me-mechanical yet sensuously grainy voice drones on and on, transfixing her in a flood of Hallmark greeting card schlock. But somehow the owl's simple repetitions intensify the ordinary background noise of slogans and cries of alarm, giving it a sensory texture that is at once deadening and weirdly ponderous.

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Then the owl says something she swears she was just unconsciously chanting to herself: "Sometimes when you hear someone scream it goes in one ear and out the other. Sometimes it passes right into the middle of your brain and gets stuck there."

SOMETIMES WHEN YOU HEAR SOMEONE SCREAM . . .

A train wails in the still of the night. It often wakes her. Or it lodges in her sleep, reemerging as a tactile anxiety in the dawn.

She scans her dreamy brain for what might have happened or what might be coming. The morning air is saturated with the smells of kumquat trees and mimosa blossoms and the sounds of mourning doves and pet parrots that long ago escaped their cages and now breed in the trees.

She knows why the train cries. Danny's friend Bobby passed out on the tracks one night and was killed. He and his old lady had been down at the free concert on the river. This is a charged event for the street people. There are graceful moments: a dance gesture, a wide-open smile, a sudden upsurge of generosity, the startled amplitude of pariahs suddenly rubbing shoulders with the housed on a public stage, perhaps even playing the role of party host, making announcements or giving directions or advice. There are crashes too: the people falling down drunk in front of the stage, the vomiting, a man huddled and pale, too sick to party tonight. There are fights.

That night Bobby had a fight with his old lady and stomped off alone. He followed the train tracks to the camp. Then, in Danny's story, Bobby sat alone on the tracks, taking stock in a booze-soaked moment of reprieve. Bobby loved the romance of the train: the high, lonesome sound in the distance, the childhood memory of the penny laid on the tracks, the promise of movement, the sheer power. He lay down and closed his eyes. Then, in the middle of the long train passing, he raised his head, awakening. They say if he hadn't, the train would have passed right over him. But who can sleep with a train passing by overhead?

Sometimes now she gets stuck at the railroad crossing waiting for the train to pass. One day, a boxcar full of Mexican immigrants drifted slowly by, waving and smiling as if they were staging their own welcome to the United States. Another time she drifted into a memory of the coal mining camps in West Virginia where the coal trains would block for hours the only road in and out of town. People would get out and lean on their trucks to talk.

Once a quiet claim began to circulate that someday somebody was going get a pile of dynamite, blow the train in half, and clear the road for good.

The train shapes a story of abjection mixed with vital hopes. Something in the exuberant waving of the new immigrants, the explosive claims in the coal camps, or Bobby's lying down to sleep on the tracks, suggests an intoxicated confidence that surges between life and dream. It's as if the train sparks weighted promises and threats and incites a reckless daydream of being included in a world.

This is the daydream of a subject whose only antidote to structural disenfranchisement is a literal surge of vitality and mobility. A subject whose extreme vulnerability is rooted in the sad affect of being out of place, out of luck, or caught between a rock and a hard place, and who makes a passionate move to connect to a life when mainstream strategies like self-discipline or the gathering of resources like a fortress around the frail body are not an option. A subject who is literally touched by a force and tries to take it on, to let it puncture and possess one, to make oneself its object, if only in passing. A subject for whom an unattainable hope can become the tunnel vision one needs to believe in a world that could include one.¹⁴

This kind of thing happens all the time. It's an experiment that starts with sheer intensity and then tries to find routes into a "we" that is not yet there but maybe could be. It's a facility with imagining the potential in things that comes to people not despite the fact that it's unlikely anything good will come of it but rather because of that fact.

It's as if the subject of extreme vulnerability turns a dream of possible lives into ordinary affects so real they become paths one can actually travel on.

¹⁴ See Rajchman, *The Deleuze Connections*, 140–44, for a discussion of how all "belief in the world" is lodged in sensation.

Abject and unlivable bodies don't just become "other" and unthinkable. They go on living, animated by possibilities at work in the necessary or the serendipitous.

THE VITAL, SWEET, AND SAD

Some who live on the edge claim a certain craziness; for others it's very much nose to the grindstone, running in place to keep the wolves at bay.

The wild ones say they're wide open and they spend their lives suffering the consequences. It's like they never learn; it's like they use themselves as testing grounds for the forces at play in the world.

They build their identities out of impacts and escapes. They push things to see where they'll go.

Danny grew up in a place in rural North Carolina where young men earned the honorific title of being called by their full names—"Danny Webb"—by doing crazy things that took nerve and skill and a complete disregard for what could happen to them. Like the time Danny climbed, drunk, to the top of a telephone pole in a lightning storm, balanced precariously on the top, arms thrown open, and then fell. Or the time he was in a hurry to get to the beer store before it closed, so instead of taking the road, he drove straight through a mile of tobacco fields, tearing up a path through the crops. Then he used the path whenever he needed to, even after the owner of the fields tried to shoot him.

Danny has stories. Stories filled with mad, momentary victories and violent impacts suffered. And stories filled with wild surges to somehow radicalize the world through sacrifice.

One Christmas, when he and some friends had been drinking heavily all day, they decided to attack the life-sized wooden Santa Claus propped up in the living room. After a few rounds, Danny grabbed a meat cleaver and ran across the room, plunging the

knife deep into the wood. His hand slid down the blade, leaving two fingers cut to the bone and one hanging off. But the high point of his story is the scene of getting pulled over by a cop while he and his friends were speeding down the highway to the hospital in an old pickup in the middle of the night. Still drunk, they told the cop it was an emergency and he told them to get out of the truck. Danny said, “No, really,” and opened the towel pressed around his wound. The blood gushed out, spurting all over the windows to the rhythm of his heartbeat. Some of the blood hit the cop’s face. His face went white and he waved them on, shouting, “Go! Go!”

Danny and his friends have big parties out in the country or at “the compound,” where he has finally settled down in a hard and sweet utopia/hell down by the tracks. They play music all night and the music resonates in their bodies: Matt becomes fiddle, Danny becomes guitar, Rebecca becomes mandolin. They build a bonfire, smoke some ribs, tell stories.

Sometimes they perform an attack on the American dream, like smashing a television set and throwing the pieces on the bonfire while they dance around it.

They cherish derelict spaces. They occupy a zone of indeterminacy. They’re slippery.

They live the life of a sheer collaboration produced through circuits of debts, gifts, affects, and hard necessities. If one of them finds work, he will cut the others in. When they work, they work hard and fast. They build fences and furniture and sheds, cut down massive trees, xeriscape flowerbeds, haul brush, run electricity or plumbing. They gear up for a big job and then knock it out. Then they party while they’re still sweaty, exhausted, satisfied, together.

In the down times, there are long days of hanging out in living rooms set up in the fields beside their shacks. Days of peace or helpless despair. There are art projects built out of rusted metal and aged wood. There are love affairs. There are rages, fights, ad-

dictions, hunger, sickness, withdrawal, suicide. There are those who come unhinged at times. Those who float, unable to connect desire to reality. There are days, or weeks, or months, or years, of sad, exhausted, emptiness. There is crazy talk about shooting conservative presidents and robbing banks, taking a few rich people with you on your way out.

They are living the rhythm of a struggle to wrest a “something” out of an everyday life saturated with dragging, isolating intensities of all kinds. More often than not, this is not really a willful act but more like an undoing or a willing mutation that draws the subject into the prepersonal zone of affect.

One thanksgiving, Danny spent hours handing out flowers to people on a busy street. It was like he was trying to jump start a zone of contact in the world.

Another time, he tried to get a commercial coffee pot installed at the VA hospital for the guys in long-term rehab, so they could have their own pot and a place to gather. He called businesses until he found a Mr. Garcia who was very happy to help. Mr. Garcia donated a huge, used, stainless steel, commercial coffeemaker with three burners. Danny borrowed a truck, picked up the coffee-maker, drove it the ninety miles to the hospital and installed it. There was a lot of paperwork. He called a couple of weeks later to see if it was working out. A clerk said they weren't letting patients use it because it was a used machine. He said well, if the patients couldn't use it he was going to come pick it up. Then he started making calls again to see if he could find a new machine someone wanted to donate. He was careful to let Mr. Garcia know what was going on. This is the kind of thing Alphonso Lingis calls trust. “Trust is a break, a cut in the extending map of certainties and probabilities. The force that breaks with the cohesions of doubts and deliberations is an upsurge, a birth, a commencement. It has its own momentum, and builds on itself . . . like a river released from a lock, swelling one's mind and launching one on the way.

. . . To have put trust in . . . (someone) is to have to put still further trust in him. Once trust takes hold, it compounds itself.”¹⁵

Living in the state of being “wide open,” these guys can take on all the good and bad in the world at one time or another. But this is not a state of chaos or sheer negation. It’s more like a work of initiating, calling out, instigating, inciting. Just to see what happens. Even if it’s not much.

¹⁵ Alphonso Lingis, *Trust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 65.