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Undoing mastery: With ambivalence?

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Abstract

In this commentary, we respond to Derek Ruez and Daniel Cockayne's article 'Feeling Otherwise: Ambivalent Affects and the Politics of Critique in Geography'. We do so by picking up ambivalence—or more precisely, ambivalence about ambivalence—as a tool with which Ruez and Cockayne leave us. We find this tool somewhat difficult to grasp, but we understand this as part of its design. Ambivalence undoes the subject's mastery. In doing so, we find that an airing of ambivalence gives other kinds of entangled, indeterminate, and unknowing relations room to breathe.

Keywords

ambivalence, mastery, measurement, psychoanalysis, vulnerability

In this response, we take up Ruez and Cockayne's (2021) call to spend time with ambivalence, a concept that they set up as an inherently *embodied* orientation towards producing concepts and a pathway to 'pluralize the moods and modes of geographic scholarship'. Picking up ambivalence as a tool, we expect that it will deliver us to a frustrating place of work and little forward movement. But then, maybe we have had enough 'forward movement' for the moment—bound up as this prerogative is with modern colonial and capitalist notions of time, progress, and productivity. Perhaps *ambivalence*, which seems unlikely to power anyone forward into anything, will be a different kind of tool, one that might help to pry open an impassive place for relational transformation and inactivity rather than progressive propulsion. This is our experiment.

Ruez and Cockayne make an offering to the reader. It is an offering that seems designed to slip through one's fingers. After wending our way through the interconnected burrows of affirmation, reparation, minor theory, and pluralism, we arrive at this statement in the final paragraph of their article: 'We would like, then, to leave this ambivalence about ambivalence with the reader, as something worth continuing to think about and working with, but not necessarily resolving or working through'. In keeping with the ethos of their text, they have offered us something to *work with* but

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not to *work through*. And this thing to work with—this tool—is not *ambivalence* per se but rather *ambivalence about ambivalence*. This hedging is by design, for by the time we have arrived at this conclusion, Ruez and Cockayne have made it clear that any prescription of proper affects or orientations for critique stumbles and breaks down in a plural and uneven world. It is therefore a fitting enactment of their argument to eschew the scholarly discourse of mastery by leaving the reader not with an argument ‘for ambivalence’ but with something as seemingly insubstantial as ‘ambivalence about ambivalence’.

It is difficult, and certainly against the grain, to abjure mastery in scholarly discourse. Even minoritarian scholarship engages in masterful practices. In *Unthinking Mastery*, Singh’s critical readings of postcolonial texts show how projects of undoing colonial mastery have ‘employed mastery as a concept and practice that was vital to the emergence of a fully decolonized subject’ (2018: 24). If the master’s main tool is mastery, it is perhaps time that we learn how to lay it down. To put Ruez and Cockayne’s argument in this light, whether the demand is for objective, critical (paranoid), affirmative, reparative, or even ambivalent relations to (scholarly) objects, making this demand is itself a masterful practice: that is, a practice that ‘invariably and relentlessly reaches toward the indiscriminate control over something—whether human or inhuman, animate or inanimate’ by ‘estranging the mastered object from its previous state of being’ (Singh, 2017: 10). To leave us with ambivalence about ambivalence rather than with a prescription for ambivalence is thus, in Halberstram’s words, to ‘resist mastery’ by insisting upon counterintuitive ways of (un)knowing (2011: 11–12).

We confess to being ambivalent about this ambivalence about ambivalence with which we are left. How does a tool that itself resists self-identity even work? How does it become ready-to-hand without any fixing of meaning or function? Can we use it *without* stopping it from slipping away—a tool of un mastery? Perhaps one way to stay with the spirit of ‘working with’ rather than ‘working through’ is to play with ambivalence as polyvalent,

as a concept that itself is conflicted and has multiple stories to tell.

For one thing, ambivalence has a story to tell about the role it was recruited for in the Freudian psychic drama. Becoming increasingly important in Freud’s theory and practice over the course of his work, ambivalence in a psychoanalytic register refers to a situation where ‘positive and negative components of the emotional attitude are simultaneously in evidence and inseparable, and where they constitute a non-dialectical opposition which the subject, saying “yes” and “no” at the same time, is incapable of transcending’ (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973: 28). This dynamic was, for Freud, at the heart of the Oedipal conflict, conceived as a ‘conflict of ambivalence’ marked by the co-presence of ‘a well-grounded love and a no less justifiable hatred towards one and the same person’ (Freud, 1926: 102; quoted in Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973: 28). Fueling such torments as guilt-ridden mourning and destructive jealousy, this affective ambivalence is not something the subject wants to know about. Intolerable, irresolvable, and repressed, ambivalence comes to hand here as a passion that does not coincide with itself and that cannot solve its own riddle. This story of ambivalence is one in which its volatile admixture burns a hole in the fabric of subjective coherence.

But this is just one of many stories in which ambivalence plays a role. Colloquially, the meaning of ambivalence has a slippery tendency towards indifference: a non-relation. Take, for example, the statement ‘She’s ambivalent about my suggestion to get ice cream’. Does she not like ice cream and thus feel disinterested in the plan (indifference), or does she love ice cream and detest the idea of my company (ambivalence)? Ambivalence often reads colloquially as a lack of feeling towards a given object. But this impression shrouds an internal dilemma in an aura of detachment, disinterest, or restraint. An ambivalent subject caught in the rapture of indecision therefore finds her space/time of internal battle collapsed into a presumption of un-relation. In Deleuzian terms, indifference could be understood as the effect of a collapsed plateau, wherein the poles (e.g. love/hate) can no longer hold the balance of

intensity, and the space of divergent passions formed between them flattens into a limp pile, easily read as a lack of passion, interest, or life.

The collapsing, conflicted spacetime of ambivalence is akin to a state of quantum superposition. That is, ambivalence refers to a system existing in several separate states at the same time—spinning up and spinning down, heads and tails, loving and hating, passionate and indifferent. As such, the quantum system is ontologically indeterminate, having no definite values until it is measured, at which point the entanglement actualizes as a determinate property (Barad, 2007). It is only upon ‘measurement’—that is, through alignment to a system of legibility and mastery—that the uncertain, un-dichotomized ontology of ambivalence appears to resolve into a single affective ‘truth’ and corresponding action, a going towards or pulling away. Ruez and Cockayne are urging us to ‘stay with the trouble’ of indeterminacy, to linger in the ambivalence of entanglement and superposition without picking up our instruments of measurement and mastery.

It is therefore important to understand that the ambivalence of our ambivalence about ambivalence (with which Ruez and Cockayne have left us) is not indifference, this being but one way in which ambivalence becomes overwritten, its indeterminacy resolved into a specific state. Although indifference might sound like a lackluster state, it is not neutral or passive but rather an active over-coding of the roiling messiness of ambivalence. In the scientific realm, indifference is bound up with a general esteem for ‘detached enterprise, impartial and impersonal’ (Livingstone, 2003: 185). Such airs of dispassion impose ‘clarity on ambiguity’, upholding the idea that science should be ‘disembodied above the messiness of human affairs’ (Livingstone, 2003: 179). Hand in hand with imperial practices of science, indifference is weaponized as a tool of colonial bureaucracy. Expressed as responsibility and ‘impersonal power’, it serves as a pillar in the fortress that excludes ‘undifferentiated outsiders’ from compassion and care (Herzfeld, 1993: 122, 79). Indifference as ‘a poetics of colonial institutions’ disguises plurality as a monolith (Rukmini, 2002: xiv, 226).

Ruez and Cockayne demonstrate that the messiness of unresolved ambivalence is fundamental to

the kind of critique that they envision: a sweaty one. As Sara Ahmed puts it, ‘we have been taught to tidy our texts, not to reveal the struggle we have in getting somewhere’ (2017: 13). Ambivalence in critique urges us to focus not on the outcome but on the struggle in the encounter between researcher and object. It is in essence a call to relationality: to generate ‘sweaty concepts’ rather than polished ones (Ahmed, 2017). This is a hazardous proposal because it threatens to expose to the outside the internal feelings, thoughts, and experiences of the subject in the encounter with an object. This is *vulnerable*, and vulnerability is scary. Vulnerability is exposing. It is disqualifying, unprofessional. Vulnerability situates, particularizes, and conditions. Vulnerability is quite opposite to mastery.

To work in ambivalent relation to an object means to keep open the invitation of divergent pulls. Accepting the offer of ambivalence may be quite uncomfortable, an invitation to the underside of our affective attachments that we would rather not know about. Exploring what is intolerable and unknown means seeking out what we cannot already see, what we may not even believe exists, and exposing this unpleasant nonsense to the eyes of others. This sounds like a whole mess. And it will not get us anywhere. Yet is this not the way of a real engagement with difference, in the sense that Ruez and Cockayne use the term? To be left with ambivalence in relation to an object is to be left feeling multiplicities about it. It is not to feel autonomy in the face of this other, but to relate to it in multiple manners—maybe even sometimes by way of mastery, but never only this. To remain in an ambivalent relation is to give in to an entanglement with an object, recognizing that it may not be repairable, conclusive, or safe. You risk falling prey to your ambivalent entanglement.

What can ambivalence do? Such an ambivalent orientation between subject and object is inconclusive. Like Ruez and Cockayne’s text, ambivalence moves us forward by not moving us *beyond* a problem, but holding us in intimate relation to it. Sustaining ambivalence concedes sovereignty to complexity. We relinquish mastery in the face of something greater: the entanglement and indeterminacy of the object and of our own affective state. Ruez and Cockayne do not argue that ambivalence

is the only proper orientation towards a complex object. Rather, they demonstrate that an ambivalent orientation is one that is elbow deep in the disconcerting irresolvability of complexity. Other orientations are, of course, on the table, and imply other relationships to the object. But being left (however ambivalently) with ambivalence towards ambivalence frames the question of critique one step back: as one of how we are to relate to an object and where sovereignty should lie. This, then, is how we experience the capacities of the tool we find slipping through our hands.

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