Dispatches from Queer Potluck: [Extra]ordinary Affects as a Project of Belonging

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This essay takes an approach that is part autobiography, part meditation on theory, in order to engage with the tension between “ordinary affects” (Stewart 2007) and the queer extraordinary. Drawing on my own experiences as part of an intentional community in Philadelphia, I consider what it means for me to experience affect in queer space. How does that manifest in the body, and the world in turn? How do these experiences fit into a larger desire for kinship and belonging? My purpose here is not to make broad claims about what affect is (or is not), but to provide a template for auto-ethnographic writing about the topic that is critical, self-aware, and exploratory. Situated within a queer context, it highlights connections between moments of everyday life and participation in discursive processes about what being [extra]ordinary means.

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We sit silently in a circle, on cushions and mats, some of us bare to the waist, some of us in flowing fabric. We sit around a string of beads lying in the center on the floor. One of us – I can’t remember who – tossed it there to serve as the talisman or skeptron: whoever takes it up will have the right to speak and be heard. The room is warm but dim, high-ceilinged and with walls covered in paintings. There is soft music and the smell of freshly-burnt sage in the air. Memories of silent worship at Friends schools are on my mind, and I think of the spirit moving me to speak. But I have nothing to say, at the moment; and it’s my first one of these meetings, so whenever I feel about to stir to action, the impulse is noticed, caught, and suppressed. I want to see how it’s done. So I wait until some imperceptible cue catches me off-guard: the twitch of a hand, a tension in someone else’s shoulders, their intake of breath. After a moment, it happens. We all know [he] is about to do it just before [he] does it, leaning to grab the beads and begin –

What I want to do here is feel my way in. For some time, I’ve been keenly aware of the difference between attending potluck – one of the core activities of this self-proclaimed radical association – and being present at potluck. At some point (when?), I transitioned from showing up to entering. Many of those who come to the dinners each week, spanning the range of the gender spectrum or casting it off entirely, have become my friends. Thursday night rituals of greeting, embracing, lining up with plates in hand, have become second nature. But as comfortable as I am now with being here, listening and learning, I still feel that something keeps me from total engagement with the spirit of the group. I want to write my way into this, recording my senses before they are assigned too much meaning; the aim is one of “disorienting and disrupting […] impermanence and change” (Holman Jones and Harris 2019, 7).

I became aware of the group through social media comments from friends of friends, allusions to parties and dinners, the occasional oblique reference in literature. It is an intentional community: wholeheartedly and unabashedly queer, centered around elders (but ultimately without hierarchy), politically and civically engaged, a dash of universalist spirituality. For years, I moved on the fringes, and when I was finally granted access, it was by luck more than anything else. It was during a date in Manhattan, as we sat at Christopher Street Pier watching the sunset; my companion mentioned the group and suggested I come to an event the next night. (I didn’t want to seem too eager, but I accepted.) It wasn’t exactly the camaraderie I’d hoped for and needed, at least at first – life in New York was too hectic, the get-togethers too performative. Only after moving back to Philadelphia a few years later did it begin to feel like I had time and breathing room to appreciate it more deeply.
I’ve been thinking about the experience of my body in queer space, trying to capture with definitions the intensities it feels and the way stimuli create responses. In its presentation, my body signifies oppression: white, cis-male-presenting, mobile. The challenge is to know exactly how much to self-negate, and how much to actively flex my embodied and exbodied privilege for the benefit of others. Within spaces where queerness is the default position, I am aware of relaxation. My movements feel more natural, less pre-judged and pre-determined. It seems like an entirely different body than I am used to, unstable but celebratory. But when I think about affect, I lean towards its preconscious aspect, occupying the interstices between actions and conceptions, tangible in the body before it can be definable (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, Massumi 1995). Given the array of approaches to grappling with a topic that is, by (some) definition, indefinable (Figlerowicz 2012), here is my own attempt at operationalizing affect: the landscape of not-quite-noticeable physical intensities that underlie our experience of the world, which give rise to things we name and categorize as emotions, reactions, understandings... To be more metaphorical about it, maybe affects are the seeds (or rhizomes?) whose character only becomes apparent after they have already bloomed into discernibly different flora. They render themselves unknowable, and yet each blossom carries the material to pollinate the next.

It is an imperfect definition. But it is what I use for the ruminations in this essay, whose structure owes a great deal to Patricia Clough’s (2008) genre-bending work. Feeling and writing my way in means reading between the lines of my own history, looking for the affects in the negative space. And when it comes to queerness — well, to paraphrase Eva Green in Casino Royale, there are queer affects, and then there are queer affects. This is my attempt at the latter. First and foremost, it is the story of my participation in a network of like-minded queer folks.

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My eye gets lost in the artwork covering the walls, wide strokes of tempera paint on sheets of brown paper, abstract but with shades of Haring. In the half-lit room their riotous colors are somewhat muted. I know that the apartment’s owner created them, though I never watched [him] do any of these particular pieces; I have seen [him] make other works; and my mind combines these two pieces of information to visualize [his] hands holding the brush, tacking the finished paper to the plaster. This assumed history unfolds even as the two of us are sitting together on the other side of the room, talking about who-knows-what. Later, [he] will see me drawing sigils of my own; later still, one of these will take their place in the kitchen, like a proud parent adding a child’s scribble to the fridge. But how do I confess that [he] was the one who inspired me to try in the first place? That the echo of [his] past is what the wandering eye translated into the unlocking of (one small corner of) my future? It feels too simple to call this inspiration, but I search for some other way to honor what moments like this have done for me, to articulate the connecting spark —

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(I’ve resisted using many specifics here when talking about the community. This is not out of a desire for secrecy but to maintain privacy, even given the encouraging feedback from members who have read the draft of this essay, some of whom appear in it. Perhaps I’m also afraid of disturbing the enchantment that I’ve been able to feel time and again within the boundaries it constantly seems to re-invent. But as one friend said before I made contact with the group in New York, “If you need to find them, you’ll find them.”)
My first experience with the Philadelphia branch was one of these potlucks, at an apartment in Center City, a space rich with more body positivity, fluid identity, and ritualism than I had ever encountered at one time before. Tables groaned from the surfeit of homemade dishes. There seemed to be much greater bodily, psychological, and socioeconomic diversity among those present than among the New Yorkers. They were not as self-conscious about their overt expression of queerness; they cared more about safety and survival, an atmosphere of home, recognizing and understanding each other. Certainly there was all the language and structure of “fictive kin,” interactions that indexed a familial connection, echoing Weston’s descriptions of dinner with a self-declared family of choice (1997). But forming deeper ties that endured from one week to the next was a benefit, not the Point; what stands out to me as the central experience was the process of displacement, sense-making, and alignment that kept recurring every week. Each time I walked through the door, arms full of vegan, gluten-free casseroles, there was the potentiality of that cycle. Halberstam (2011) talks about forgetfulness as a strategy of disconnection from more retrogressive, even damaging, ideas of kinship. Given the large size of the community, there were always different configurations of people with shifting gender expressions, names, relations. To strategically forget was a prerequisite of attendance, creating a fugue state from which new potentialities of queer kinship, new social ties and the significances they bear, could emerge.

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We begin by joining hands and announcing our names and pronouns. The pronouns are a recent addition, and some of the more traditionally-minded are not fond of the change. But there are many younger folks here now, bearing different ideas about the world and how it is put together, so we want to be respectful. We go around the circle one by one. There are some faces I recognize, and some I don’t, either of which may correspond to the names I recognize, or don’t. (People come and go so strangely here!) The wave of voices comes to me, and I say for the first time about my pronoun, “whatever you like.” I mean it, I realize. Does it make a difference to me if someone in this space refers to me by this third-person pronoun or that one, especially if I’m not standing there to hear it? Not particularly. There is a nervous sensation that I begin to understand is a feeling of liberation; I think I came to a decision about gender and my destination in relation to it. Some part of my brain conducted that into my answer just before I spoke it. Now the words are echoing in the air, which is when words always feel truest. And then the pause is over, and the next voice begins to sound –

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Affect seems to occur in the moments when our shared breaths mysteriously synchronize. I am suddenly, specifically aware of the bones and muscle tension in my neighbor’s hand as I hold it. There is someone across the room who I find myself attracted to, or more precisely intensified by. Before this is translated by the undeniable privileging of sexuality in queer space, there is a sudden, inexplicable compulsion to merely be close that pre-empts lust. Each sensation is recognized and assigned meaning in a queer context; it is like gathering wildflowers.
Lately, as though it were some kind of bibliomancy, I’ve been flipping through Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* (2007) each night before bed, looking for resonance in the slice-of-life vignettes that populate the book. When I first read it, some of the moments, framed by Stewart’s theoretical comments, felt familiar to me; others call on places and circumstances that are so foreign, I struggle to find any kind of connection with the people (should I call them subjects? characters?) that are described. The affects that echoed in me as I read and digested those stories resolved into feelings that didn’t sit right, that were almost clinical. *How sad. How charming.*

What I recognize now is that I had approached these stories on unfamiliar terms rather than their own. Perhaps it’s just that as a queer urbanite, moments from the rural U.S. don’t generate the same intensities in me. Maybe I’ve internalized a combative stance towards what they represent, reading into their heteronormative framework an implicit (or, at certain points in the book, explicit) homophobia. Whatever the cause, I find myself searching too consciously for connections between my own experience of affect and what is going on in this book. Why can’t I get hold of it? Stewart’s language is by turns elegant and meditative, always as complete as it needs to be; linguistically, I can understand the content, so what is the fundamental break?

If *ordinary* affects underlie some set of universal experiences and sentiments, then presumably there must be *extraordinary* affects as well, with the basic denotation of “outside the ordinary” – nothing more, nothing less. But it’s all relative, of course. Martin (1994) and Love (2015), among others, take queer theorists and those who seek to enact their ideas to task for creating a differential experience that doesn’t necessarily have to exist. Why try so hard to be extraordinary or deviant at all? I think there is room for both attitudes: as long as mainstream culture continues to draw lines of exclusion, then folks who do queerness ought to reclaim and reframe their deviance as exceptionality. Yet surely most people believe that the average moments of their lives aren’t *that* special. Cavalcante (2018) argues for broadening the concept of the ordinary to encompass the everyday experiences of those whom mainstream society usually considers and represents as anything but (in particular, transgender folks). And even affects arising from the most substantial events, generating the most dizzying of emotions, must eventually lose their extraordinary character with enough repetition or time to acclimate to them. But if forgetfulness is a virtue, isn’t it possible to resist that? What would it mean to keep the affects always extraordinary, to make a life out of those? *How unusual! How queer!*

It’s too easy to say that my experiences in the community never seem to get old (because they often do), or that they are always entirely new (because they often aren’t). Rather, as they build up a life, they are in turn built upon an impossibility of expectations. Like a villanelle or a ghazal, being part of the community has a rhyme scheme and refrains, but the frisson comes from the anticipation of the unknown that fills in the rest of it. Extraordinary affects are the ones you never feel coming, even though some part of you knows they will.
I offer what I can. For some folks, this might be their only meal today, and I want to contribute. This evening I've made something that I hope will tick all the dietary-restriction boxes: sweet potato and apple crumble, verified gluten-free oats on top, soaked in maple syrup steeped with ginger. [They] come to the table, looking over the ingredient cards and considering what is edible and what is not. My dish is put to the test: vegan, gluten-free, soy-free, perfect! But alas! [they] don't care for sweet potato. There is a tightening in my chest that resolves into a mix of emotions that can't be teased apart, although certainly disappointment is in there. As I sit across from the table in silence, I see [them] hold one hand over a bowl of hummus, dangling a pendulum that oscillates in small loops. Disappointment gives way to curiosity as I comprehend that [they] are divining the food. What sensation must that produce? I imagine it would be, and thereby I feel through some kind of sympathy, a flutter in the stomach. But more likely it's a tremble in the hand, some distinctive magnetism that points this way and that–

To move queerly through the world entails an experience of queer affects, and if those proceed from the body, they can also be positioned in space. The same could be said of queerness itself: whether it is an affect, an identity, or some other construct entirely, it has something to do with the body – therefore space. I am thinking in particular of how Ahmed (2006, 2010) outlines a form of queer phenomenology that addresses this concept, and points to how far it extends. Individuals, deep-seated social and cultural structures, arrangements within arrangements of objects... what is it like to encounter them? Perhaps the most useful thing I’ve learned by going to potluck is to resist the attribution of gender, reflexively. Having met so many wonderful people who mix, flex, and otherwise trouble the parameters of gender has made it easier, but the affect still persists. My eyes take in the visual data of clothing, body shape, facial features, et cetera. In that yawning half-second where they are assembled into an individual, the impulse to categorize male/female is still there, and I don’t know if it will ever go away.

(Note that Stewart (2007) refers to herself as “she” throughout her book in order “to mark the difference between this writerly identity and the kind of subject that arises as a daydream of simple presence” (5). The approach appeals to me, but my daydream, and the daydream of the others who populate my memory, have become progressively more ungendered. If third-person gender must be assigned at all, I want it to be bracketed, asterisked, to denote its uncertainty.)

There should also be a distinction drawn between queer and extraordinary affects, even though the definition of the former implies that it must be part of the latter. Take the dinner table, for instance. (As Ahmed (2006) points out, “Queers have their tables for sure. Stories of queer kinship will be full of tables” (167).) If I were thinking queerly, I look at the potluck table and know, before I even realize that I know, that there is difference here with every other potluck table around which I’ve sat outside this space. But then I also recognize difference of the experience itself, simultaneous to my recognition of the object. The meanings layered into the table that follow my translation of that intensity separate: I understand the nature and non-standard familial origins of the food, queer by virtue of what this represents in discourses of various shapes and sizes. And memories of all the encounters with potluck tables in my life become a metric in my mind, extraordinary by virtue of what this represents only for me.

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[She] is young, barely twenty-two; [she] identifies as Black, and [she] is in the process of transitioning (transgressing, transcending) gender. [Her] nerves sometimes fire unexpectedly: a gasping laugh, a strained exclamation, the flutter of hands. We are in another room of the apartment after the meal has finished, sharing a decaying couch as we gather with others at the coffee table, sorting through markers and sketches. I could hardly be more different from [her], and it is true that we have little common conversational ground. [She] has endured more hardship than I could ever dream of. But we are physically close, our skin just about touching. Energy thrums between us. It generates an impulse to say something, do something, as though by overcoming our immediate nearness, I should do my part to narrow our ongoing distance, negotiating the disparity between these two coexisting states. But I am not the one who acts. A cup of cheap wine is passed around like communion. [She] gives it to me, teaches my hand the feel of reassurance. A firm and warm reminder that [she] is still here—

What can I call gratitude? It’s not just what stems from the physical sensation of nourishment, or from the honest acknowledgment for those in need; I am fortunate to have other parts of my life where I receive these things. What the group has taught me most in its coming-together, what I am most grateful for, are the lessons in hearing from others’ experiences, understanding the differential between theirs and mine, and the encouragement to do something about it. From each according to [their] ability, to each according to [their] needs.

The trap is the inclination to center my own experience at the expense of others, running the risk of committing one more form of violence. The intersectionality of my identity is largely unhindered by forms of systemic discrimination. And while that of many other potluck guests can become a “prism” (de Vries 2015) that sheds complex light on the unfolding of identities, bodies in space, it would be inappropriate for me to make claims about how that revelation happens for anyone else. This account is self-centered because it has to do with affect, which is about as intensely personal and phenomenological a thing one can explore. I did not conduct interviews or provide direct quotations, this time. (In this regard, besides his attention to the difficulties and horrors of the trans experience, de Vries’ work is a further inspiration for its interplay of perspectives.) Yet the feeling of contrasting experience in interaction has been enough to make me question my own positioning, as I try to grasp what affects I might engender in others, before they become full emotions. If someone at potluck tells me I make them uncomfortable, it is my duty to change my behavior, but my hope is that this never has to happen. Before their moment of conscious discomfort, my task as one of the most unreasonably privileged is to allow awareness to permeate my muscles, nerves, and skin, habituating myself to automatically do or not do whatever it takes to put others at ease. I have to accept that this is not always possible, and equally that I must keep trying.
Ahmed (2006) refers to the “hesitation” that characterizes putting a queer body forward into space, an exposure of the body that – depending on the nature of the place, the nature of the body and its expression, and that of other bodies present – opens up a range of possibilities from violence to “[giving] the world a new shape” (102). I recognize my own bodily capital. Key elements of the gender identities I perform can be put on or removed, stored in a backpack or hidden under a coat as I walk to and from the potluck through the Philadelphia Gayborhood. My being doesn’t really challenge anyone as I pass, which is a source of something that grows into guilt, especially when I hear stories of the harassment or threats that others have received for their more overtly non-binary appearance and behavior. I tell myself that I should be flexing my privilege and trying to tear down heteronormativity in my own city; I fail to do so, again and again. On some level, maybe I feel that I deserve happiness, and as Heather Love (2007) puts it, “Sometimes it seems that the only way for queers to start being happy is to stop being queers” (62). But it is ridiculous for me to feel that I have to suppress myself, when there is already so little to suppress, and balanced against that is my desire for kinship, for solidarity.

It is on my mind more or less constantly now. Queer space emerges wherever queerness is present. The intensities present among the members of the community begin to intrude elsewhere in my life.

We see each other in the coffeeshop on some random Tuesday afternoon; I am stopping in on my way from point A to point B, [he] is there canvassing for work. We hug and exchange pleasantries; I show off my latest nails, an iridescent navy topped with blue glitter that took me an hour to get right. At the table for two, covered in flyers, stickers, clipboards, these few minutes feel like a micro-potluck. The same rules apply. There are no assumptions of gender. Yet there is something uneasy, as though we have pulled back the curtains on our own private space and let the world gather at the window. [He] is wearing a nametag with [his] Christian alias, not the name I know [him] by. And when the barista calls mine, my throat tightens into embarrassment. Now we have been given weaponry to use against each other, that we did not ask for and will not use. I take my coffee in hand and say my farewells. We hug again. I move towards the exit, feeling that I could have added something more or done something differently –

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My goal here was not to be opaque or self-important about affect and my relationship with it. But I think it is a concept we all could think about a little more, not just within the queer community. Increased attention to how the world brushes against us (and vice versa) can lead us to greater self-awareness. That being said, any group that is consistently reified as an Other needs every tool it can get its hands on to make sense of every quality of their experience. To be labeled as queer suggests that one’s affects are seen as similarly skewed. I believe in writing into this experience: even though there is insufficient language to accurately convey the preconscious, there is still some benefit to be gained in describing what it surrounds. To narrate one’s own history, to dig as deep as one can down the roots of the emotions therein, to pay attention to one’s own body as it moves through space and encounters other bodies, floating among the webs of discourse – all of these are valuable elements of a project whose end goal is, perhaps, a queer and affective belonging.
I don’t mean to say that everyone who identifies as queer will have the same visceral reaction to everything that befalls them, in no small part because such a wide variety of other factors influence what does. Nor will every queer individual interpret their responses in the same way. But what does cut across this diversity of phenomena is the outsider’s expectation that those responses will be something other than “normal,” their impressions of the world distorted by their queer orientations (Ahmed 2006). Rather than allowing this to be a mark of negative distinction, we can build contexts where it becomes a source of strength. Despite all the fractures within the queer population, the affects we share can empower us to reject the normative understanding of how one “should” approach the world. And while I have focused on queer issues here as the disjoint I feel, the same potential is there (as long as it is borne out of support and validation) for any group whose way of being is nonstandard, demonized, or suppressed. From what I have experienced, I believe the best way to find that kind of existential security is through sharing space with those of like mind – or rather, not-quite-mind, the thing that comes before thought.

This essay was an attempt to explore one possible unfolding of this idea, with its communitarian result. I do sincerely believe that queer space enables intensities that are somehow ineffably different, if for no other reason than they are discursively positioned as such. Even in that difference, some kind of comfort and connection can be found. In the most esoteric, ritualistic moments, the ones that would most perplex those who most stringently believe in normativity, there is an opportunity for a new and familiar kind of ordinary that is simultaneously extraordinary.

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After the plates have been cleared and the compost tucked into plastic containers, some of us are sitting or reclining on cushions, chatting and listening to music. We talk flea markets, politics, recent moves across town. A track comes on the speaker with an insistent beat that moves underneath our talk. It’s impossible to say how it starts: someone begins tapping [their] fingers against a metal bowl, someone else the armrest of a chair. Heads nod. Feet move. Even as we keep discussing the matters of the week, rhythms arise and dissipate as each person’s body in the circle finds its own way of engaging with the music. Our host steps away for a moment and returns with more bowls and a drum. Soon enough, the conversation is drowned in percussion and – from one corner – wordless singing. No one prepared for a jam session, but everyone was ready for it, it seems. The kind of synchronicity and improvisation one might expect from session musicians is replicated here, around the potluck table. Motive force replies to motive force. This is our affect – kinship created by the unified action of bodies, upturning chairs now and banging on floors, someone has produced a trumpet, of all things, from who-knows-where – just another night at potluck in something we can call home –


