

## Forms and Scenes of Attachment: A Cultural Geography of Promises

### Abstract

Attachment is everywhere and nowhere in contemporary cultural geography. Cultural geography is full of relations which look like attachments. But attachment as a concept is mostly absent, used interchangeably with association, connection or simply relation per se. In this paper I respond to dissatisfaction with the flattening effects of the relational turn by arguing for a cultural geography orientated to attachments. Engaging with the work of Lauren Berlant and other feminist and queer theory in dialogue with actor-network theory, I conceptualise attachments as enduring trajectories which 'bring closer' something which comes to feel necessary to a way of life. This means that 'objects' of attachment – whether a person or a place, a song or a nation, or anything else – come to be encountered as promises. To understand the (de/re)composition of attachments, the paper offers two concepts. *Forms of attachment* are arrangements which make available promises to be attached to. They channel the optimism of attachment. The presence of the promissory object intensifies in *scenes of attachment* – everyday space-times of limited duration which give an affective push to forms of attachment. The result of orientating inquiry to forms and scenes of attachment is a cultural geography of promises.

Key Words: Culture, Affect, Attachment, Promises, Relations

## Forms and Scenes of Attachment: A Cultural Geography of Promises

“Any social theory worthy of its ambition requires a space for enigmatic, chaotic, incoherent, and structurally contradictory attachments ... “  
(Berlant, 2011: b: 685)

### Introduction: Unsettling Attachment

Midway through Doreen Massey's (1991) enormously influential essay *A Global Sense of Place*, she gently chides her readers for their relation with attachment. Massey insists:

“There is a need to face up to – rather than simply deny – people's need for attachment of some sort, whether through place or anything else”.  
(Massey, 1991: 26)

Massey's essay could be read as an attempt to not shame people's “need for attachment”, or simply end it, but to “face up to” both the object of attachment and need for attachment by offering a progressive sense of place. “Face up to” implies a difficulty that might trouble and unsettle, here perhaps both the specific objects of attachment (the ‘local’, in the context of the association of the local with the backward and politically regressive), but also the fixity and closure and coherence which attachment can sometimes imply against a valorisation of flux and dynamism. But what is interesting about Massey's piece is that whilst attachment is the animating problem in the background, it is otherwise absent as a descriptor, concept or even everyday term. Attachment and attached are not used elsewhere in the essay, and surface only very occasionally in Massey's other writings (e.g. Massey (1992) on lack of attachment to place).

The absent-presence of attachment is not unique to Massey's essay, but a feature of the relational approaches that Massey's work did so much to inaugurate and inspire. Human geography after the poststructural relational turn, and cultural geography in particular, are full of relations which might look like attachments, if for the moment we define attachment as a bind, bond, or tie to something which, in some way, becomes cherished, adored, beloved or otherwise positively valued; home, Gods, Brexit, lost hopes, how another person laughs, non-human worlds, land, whiteness, nation, a phrase. The list is almost endless, and inevitably heterogeneous. Anything can potentially become an ‘object’ of attachment, although not everything actually does<sup>1</sup>. There is also much work on types of attachment, even

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the paper, I use ‘object’ of attachment as a general term to refer to anything – an abstraction, a feeling, another person, an object, an event, a place, etc – which is produced through the

if the term attachment is rarely used, most notably belonging (e.g. Mee and Wright, 2009) and intimacy (e.g. Wilkinson, 2014). Attachment was previously foundational to the post 1970s humanist split between space and place, with the distinction sometime resting on the presence or not of some form of attachment, even if, again, the term was mostly in the background and part of a crowd, including meaning, involvement, concern, care and investment (e.g. Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). For Cresswell (2014: 12), in a rare example of attachment made central, what makes places *places* is that: “They are all spaces people are attached to in one way or another”. Attachment is what transforms space into “meaningful location” (ibid.), a claim lurking in the background to philosophies of place (e.g. Casey 2013; Malpas 2018)<sup>2</sup>. However with some exceptions, including an interdisciplinary literature on ‘place attachment’ that remains mostly separate from the relational turn (Diener and Hagan, 2022), attachment is almost wholly absent as a concept. Attachments proliferate, the term sometime invoked, but attachment is absent as a distinct relation, lost in the cacophony of talk of connections, associations, crossings, linkages, entanglements, and other seemingly interchangeable kinds of relations.

In this paper I ‘face up to’ attachment as a distinct kind of relation. To face up to attachment is, I argue, to ‘make room’, in Berlant’s (2011b) terms in the epigraph, for the strangeness of bonds or ties which might be ‘enigmatic’, ‘incoherent’ or ‘contradictory’ but give a life its significance and meaningfulness. Through attachments some objects come to matter and assume a heightened importance. I engage with recent queer theory and feminist reengagements with the concept and politics of attachment as a way of understanding *both* how attachments allow subjects to make and inhabit lives, *and* how power holds subjects through their attachments, principally the work of Lauren Berlant (2008; 2011a). The *both and* is important for the ambivalent relation this work establishes with attachment(s). For Berlant, attachment offers a way of understanding how some forms of power work affectively, but it also orientates inquiry to how attachments allow people to inhabit and make liveable worlds, especially in damaging conditions. Through engagement with their work on the politics of attachment in dialogue with recent actor-network theory inspired research, I argue for a cultural geography which attends to the (re/de) composition of people’s affective attachments by staying with *forms* and *scenes* of attachment. In doing so I respond to Rose’s (2006: 2021) important calls for

---

repetition of the action of binding and comes to take on a promissory value and affect/effect for whoever or whatever inhabits the relation of attachment.

<sup>2</sup> Attachment as distinctive relation and/or activity also disappears within work on the philosophy of place, despite being foundational. Casey (2013), for example, in his history of place only mentions attachment and attached a handful of times, each time implying they are central to place but not elaborating on either term as such. For example, he stresses that the capacity to give things a “local habitation” is what is specific to place and that “Such holding action proffers something ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*), something concretely palpable to which attachment can be made” (39 emphasis in original). Discussing Merleau Ponty, he later writes that “The lived body not only feels but *knows* the places to which it is so intimately attached” (277, emphasis in original). Malpas (2018), in his classic account of how “complex and unitary place” acts as medium and condition for action only mentions attachment once, in the phrase the “felt power of the human attachment to place” (7).

cultural geographers to listen to what he calls the “movement to (though not presence of) culture” (Rose, 2006: 543) or, as he puts it elsewhere, “how or why subjects come to be attached to the corporealities they embody” (Rose, 2021: 965). Departing from Rose, I argue that focusing on *forms* and *scenes* of attachment allows us to attune to those relations which matter to people, itself another definition of ‘attachment’. Attachments *differentiate*. Some objects of attachment come to matter over the others we are linked to or associated with, their loss harder to bear, their presence sustaining or enabling. Objects of attachment come to ‘feel necessary’ to a life, with ‘relations that feel necessary’ providing another definition of what distinguishes attachments. Other objects fade or disappear, no longer mattering or never mattering to begin with (no matter how functionally necessary they may be to something continuing). Attachments produce what matters to a life.

Staying close to attachment does not necessarily lead to an affirmative cultural geography focused only on relations which feel generative or sustaining. Although attachment is a seemingly straightforward term, the lines between the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ blur the longer we stay with it. It usually implies some kind of ‘bond’ or ‘tie’ between two things. It tends to have positive connotations, both from the frequent use, after Bowlby (1969), in the context of early care giver-child interactions, but also the wider sense of a relation to that which is cherished or revered or beloved in some way. Its positive connotations are amplified in the context of claims that a metaphysics of separation and autonomy lies at the heart of many contemporary ills (Bennett, 2001). Cultivating attachment per se is frequently heralded as a good in itself, a necessary but often forgotten counter to harms rooted in distance from one another and from non-human companions and worlds (e.g. Plumwood, 2002). Whilst some of these arguments are compelling, the queer and feminist work on attachment I draw inspiration from begin by unsettling these positive associations. Berlant’s provocative question – “why do people stay attached to lives that don’t work?” (Berlant and MacCabe, 2011: np) – captures the double-bind of so many attachments. We may be attached to things which harm us or things which simultaneously sustain and harm us, unsettling the line between sustaining/flourishing and harming/damaging. Our attachments might also harm others, even if allowing ourselves or loved ones to flourish. Collectively, we or others may be held in attachments which perpetuate collective harms or damage - to fossil fuel and car culture, to whiteness and racialised structures of oppression, to the pleasures of aspirational and other kinds of normativity. Berlant in particular unsettles the faith placed in being attached, whilst making our own and other attachments a little more unsettling. They also centre the political question of how to detach from ways of life which harm, as well as stress the many reasons why giving up and exiting attachments is so difficult, even in decompositional ‘impasses’ (Berlant 2011a) which rupture and unsettle attachments.

There is an ambivalence, then, to the idea of attachment once unsettled. Attachments may be that which holds up a world, to borrow a phrase of Berlant’s (2016), as they undermine our own, those we share, or others’ worlds. But this might not always be the case, not all attachments are a double-bind. From this starting point, one which is cautious before ascribing value to attachment per se or

reproducing a boundary between the positive and negative, the paper outlines how attachments function as a distinctive kind of relation. I offer an account of how relations with promissory objects are (de/re)composed, and how attachments are (dis)organised into forms and (re)made through scenes.

To 'face up to' attachments I stage an encounter across three sections between partially connected tendencies within the now multiple relational turn. Whilst I signal other tendencies, my primary focus is on relational work influenced by the 'new materialism' and partially connected, overlapping, but not equivalent queer theory work on relationality and the negative. In the first section I survey recent attempts to centre attachment as a particular kind of relation in the context of critiques of some new materialist relational approaches. From actor-network theory inspired work, I understand attachments as 'enduring ties which differentiate', whilst noting the frequent disappearance of attachment as it becomes equivalent to relation per se. The next section turns to a discussion of Berlant's (2011) work, partly in dialogue with Butler's (1997). Berlant's work allows us to better understand how attachments differentiate, by showing how at the heart of the tension that surrounds attachment is how they 'bring closer' a promissory object. A geography of attachments is a geography of promises. The following section describes how promises are (dis/re)organised. I offer two concepts - *forms of attachment* and *scenes of attachment* - as a way to orientate inquiry to how specific promissory objects are made available and patterns of attachment repeat. In conclusion I reflect on attachment and the prospect of a cultural geography of promises in the context of the problem of detachment.

### **Section One: 'Attachment' in New Materialist Relational Thinking**

In *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Bennett (2001) offers an 'onto-story' that revolves around a ontological and political-ethical claim about attachment. Although the terms are very different, it recalls Massey's call to 'face up to' attachment in the sense of the special status given to it as a kind of relation:

"There is, for most humans, a subdispositional attachment to the abundance of life that is deeply installed in their bodies. This attachment provides a positive energetics from which some try to cultivate a stance of presumptive generosity. But this attachment also can be absent or killed by abuse, disease, or terrible misfortune. And then ethical theories of any sort become deactivated or moot".  
(Bennett, 2001: 158)

Bennett's onto-story has been at the heart of the ethical-political arguments for a relational turn influenced by the 'new materialism' (see Harrison, 2015), even if it now sits uncomfortably with work from Black studies and queer theories which finds ethical energetics in the wake of broken or damaged relations (Sharpe 2016). As Bennett's (2001: 158) later use of the word 'tragic' implies, hers is far from a naive affirmation of the existing world. But, her onto-story is a wager that particular kinds of attachments are necessary to compose better future worlds. Similarly, Connolly

(2008: 63) values “positive attachment to the earth” or “attachment to the world” in the midst of ecological destruction and intensified capitalist extraction.

But attachment has a curious place in Bennett’s (and Connolly’s) work, a place replicated in the wider materialist relational turn. We hear much about the type of attachment – ‘enchantment’ or ‘joyful attachment’ – and the object of attachment – “to life” (Bennett, 2001: 150), “to being” (ibid. 169), to the “networked quality of existence” (ibid. 110) – but not what distinguishes attachment per se as a kind of relation. What, if anything, makes a joyful attachment different from a joyful connection or association? Why not cultivate connections ‘to life’, or associations? The answer might appear to be obvious, only because it rests on the ordinary meanings of attachment as summarised above. However, despite attachment being central to arguments for the ethical-political value of relational approaches, attachment has, until recently, been subsumed into other vocabularies. A cluster of terms – assembling (McFarlane, 2011), networking (Whatmore, 2002), translating (Latour, 2005), articulating (Featherstone, 2011) – orientate inquiry to the coming together of different kinds of things in some kind of open whole (given names like assemblages, ecologies, networks, infrastructures, rhizomes, and so on). Unlike attachment, which as we will see always involves a claim about the importance of the relation and object, these terms remain open to the what of relation and how a provisional, processual unity is achieved. Ahead of empirical analysis, the claim is a minimal one which attempts to bypass dualisms of structure and agency, active and passive, and ephemeral and enduring – that anything may be drawn into the durable forms through which relations and objects emerge and are organised.

Post the ‘new materialism’ cultural geographers have, in short, subsumed attachment into other more neutral vocabularies for understanding how formations happen, despite claims of the necessity of a kind of attachment to the world being at the heart of what Harrison (2015) critiques as the “double yes” of recent affirmative approaches. As well as not fitting with the commitment to a neutral vocabulary of becoming and composition, the disappearance of attachment as a concept is also related to the disjuncture between many recent understandings of culture and the incredible prominence and popularity of Bowlby’s (1969) ‘attachment theory’ as a way of understanding the human self via developmental psychology and infant attachment. Despite Bowlby’s emphasis on attachment as an irreducible movement of proximity that comes to feel necessary for survival and is founded in micro-social interactions (ibid. 25-27), perhaps ‘attachment’ retains too much of a sense that some relations are prioritised – early infant-caregiver interactions – in the formation of subjectivity, not to mention the continued emphasis on the human subject (although see Kraftl (2013)). Furthermore, attachment theory has been part of the reproduction of conservative models of gendered intimacy, in particular in relation to the role of female care givers in producing well-regulated citizens and repairing a fractured, damaged polis (Duschinsky, Greco and Solomon, 2015).

Attachment as a term is caught, then, between the “double yes” (Harrison 2015) of a ‘positive’ onto-story and the present status of ‘attachment theory’ as

ideology and technique of the self. When it appears, it is accompanied by strong ethical-political claims. At other times, attachment disappears, rendered equivalent to a host of other terms<sup>3</sup>. One key exception to the disappearance of attachment has been work at the intersection of aesthetics and actor-network theory (e.g. Felski, 2020; McFall et al, 2017; Hennion, 2017). This research opens space for consideration of the specificity of attachment as a kind of relation because it severs the too quick move to the ethical-political valorisation of a type of attachment or attachment per se. When a definition of attachment is offered, terms are used which distinguish attachments by the durability of the relation, most frequently 'bond', 'tie' or 'bind'. For example, in her compelling argument for an account of art in terms of attachment, Felski (2020) uses a variety of terms that all offer the sense of a lasting relation, including "ties" (15), "linked or tied" (1), "tie-making" (ix), "bonds" (27), "emotional ties" (28), and "affective ties" (28). She stresses that:

"Attachments are not only psychological but involve many kinds of joining, connecting, meeting. This mean zeroing in on differing kinds of ties. People can become attached in a quite literal sense: the dog-eared paperback that rides around town in a jacket pocket; the lyrics streaming through the headphones that are glued to a student's ears' the Matisse postcard that is propped up on a desk and carried from one sublet to the next. Attachments can be institutional (the novel that crops up every year on my syllabus), cognitive (the essay that gave me a new intellectual vocabulary), ethical or political (the core beliefs and commitments that shape how I react to a controversial film)".  
(Felski, 2020: 6)

If all relations are contingent, attachments are those relations which endure: the paperback that travels with you, the novel that is on the reading list every year, the "core beliefs" that shape response. Ahmed (2004) shares this emphasis on attachments as durable, intimate relations in her work on the politics of emotion. Drawing on the queer and feminist work discussed in Section 2, Ahmed frames attachments as a problem of "stickiness" (ibid. 12). For both attachments centre the problem of what is continued or what is maintained through contingency. The same emphasis on enduring relations is at the heart of Hennion's (2017) actor-network theory inspired sociology of attachments. For him attachments are like "... an obligation from the past that is brought to bear on the present." (ibid. 112).

Invoking attachment is, then, a way of orientating not to relations per se but to one kind of relation: ties/bonds that endure and affect the present. Hennion's use

---

<sup>3</sup> Although not the focus of this paper, the same dynamics of centrality and disappearance are at work in the interdisciplinary, environmental psychology influenced literature on 'place attachment'. Other than a minimal definition often highlighting 'bonding' as a mix of the cognitive and emotional, 'attachment' often disappears in favour of identifying the qualities of the attached-to object - place as environmental setting (e.g. Altman & Low 1992 - 4-7). Whilst important for understanding the complexity of bindings to place, this work also tends to narrow the type of attachments that are of interest to those that relate to a particular 'object'.

of the phrase “brought to bear” implies the *continuation* of something, a sense also in ‘tie’ or ‘bond’ with their sense of constitutive relations that are hard to end or exit. His sense of attachments as obligations that continue and affect the present-future (as well as how pasts become present), resonates with Butler’s (1997) definition of attachments as ‘trajectories’. In a note in *Psychic Power*, Butler defines attachments as a kind of directional movement. They are:

“... libidinal movements or trajectories which always take an object. There is no free-floating attachment which subsequently takes an object; rather, an attachment is always an attachment to an object, where that to which it is attached alters the attachment itself.”

(Butler, 1997: 208, note 22)

Drawing on psychoanalysis, Butler is writing in the context of the “passionate attachments” through which subjects are at once “formed and subordinated” (ibid. 6). I address her claims about the formation of subjects through “a passionate attachment to those by whom she or he is subordinated” (ibid. 7) below by way of a comparison with Berlant. For now, the idea of attachments as *trajectories* can be combined with Hennion on attachments as *obligations*. Both give a dynamism to the sometime static ideas of ‘tie’ or ‘bond’. Attachments are vectors that tether us, knitting together elsewhere and elsewhere, continuing pasts as they are brought into the present, creating already conditioned futures.

But does this emphasis on attachments as enduring trajectories do enough to distinguish attachment from relation per se? As Strathern (2020) shows, the meaning of the term ‘relation’ is intimate with changing vocabularies of kinship, so that it has tended to “[c]onnote connection and attachment before it also embraces disconnection or detachment, just as familial ties are normatively imbued with positive rather than negative affect” (12). In other words, the positive value given to ‘relation’ and ‘thinking relationally’ is partly because it borrows some connotations from attachment. It’s unsurprising then, given the ideological and affective weight of understandings of kinship, that attachment sometimes slips to become connection or relation or association in recent attempts to rehabilitate the term. Furthermore, some of the attempts to conceptualise attachment hold for relation per se. For example, Hennion (2017: 115) argues that “the language of attachment is “perpendicular to the active/passive axis ... They play outside of the linguistic dualism between active and passive and between subject and object, which is best expressed by words such as pleasure or passion”. Hennion’s work on drug users and musical amateurs is instructive for how it discloses attachments as at once both constraining and resources (see Gomart and Hennion, 1999), but the claim to transcend or sidestep various dualisms is one common to relational approaches per se. Indeed, it has been key to their legitimacy and promise, both ontologically and ethical-politically. Likewise, Hennion’s (and Butler’s) claims that attachment and object of attachment



emerge in concert with one another, is also a standard starting point for all forms of relational thinking.

Defining attachments as enduring trajectories offers us a beginning, but no more. Where I think attachment offers something different and important is by aligning this emphasis on durability with a second orientation – to those relations and objects that are differentiated from others and come to matter. We see this emphasis on differentiation in Felski's (2020: 6) quote cited above – core beliefs in distinction from other more flexible or marginal beliefs, the postcard that moves between sublets rather than all those postcards thrown away or never displayed, the novel that crops up on the reading list every year, even as other novels come and go. We may be connected to all manner of proximate and distant bits and pieces, and those connections may be necessary for the continuation of something, as all relational versions of culture insist. But it is our attachments that differentiate from within the tangle of relations. Some objects – whether they be another person or an event, a site or a song, or anything else – come to matter in the sense of being separated from others, standing apart, and offering or affording something which comes to feel necessary for a life and is positively valued. Attachments are, then, trajectories whereby some objects are detached from others and become significant and meaningful: Pet Shops Boys 'Being Boring', a loved friend, this mug I always drink from, the memory of a stupid joke with a friend, Karen, who died too young, Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* in the pile of books next to me. As Felski (2020: 35) puts it, attachments are inevitably and always selective, they are cuts as much as ties. They are constituted through detachments from other objects we may remain associated with or connected to but are indifferent to or care less for. As a consequence, objects of attachment come to matter for a life, whether we define 'mattering' in terms of purpose, meaningfulness, proximity to good life fantasies, a sense of continuity of world, the material for a valued identity, or indeed any other way.

## **Section Two: The Optimism of Attachment**

Attachments as enduring trajectories are distinguished from other kinds of relation through their effect of producing what matters to and is valued in a life. An interest in attachments therefore supplements the orientation to 'mediated experience' which I have argued is one of three partially connected versions of culture currently animating cultural geography (Anderson 2020). Remaining in the orbit of longstanding traditions of thinking culture as a 'whole way of life' (Williams 1961), this understanding of culture focuses on how present experience happens, after non-representational theories, but also traces how experience is always-already mediated, including by signifying systems and affective conditions. Consequently, attachments never come alone. As trajectories, they are always mediated by and require the many other kinds of relations which make up a 'way of life', to use Williams sense of a complex, open whole made of "[non]relationships between elements" (ibid. 57, my addition). Orientating to attachments supplements this

version of culture by centring how people are bound to or held by specific 'objects'. Attachments carry past space-times into the felt present, and condition and partially create future space-times as experience unfolds. At their core is differentiation: the process through which specific objects are separated from the other relations and objects which also compose experience. In this section, I focus on differentiation to better understand what an 'object' becomes through attachment and why attachments can be so powerful in composing significance or meaningfulness.

To amplify differentiation, I move from actor-network theory to work at the intersection of feminist and queer theory, particularly Berlant's writings in dialogue with Brown (1993) and Butler (1997). This work has long found in the vocabulary of attachment novel ways of understanding how specific forms of power operate affectively. The result is the cultivation of an ambivalent relation to actually existing attachments, with that ambivalence revolving around the question of what the object becomes, and what attachment does as a consequence. Butler (1997) directly addresses the problem of how subjects can be passionately attached to their own subordination. Noting that this has been a way to discredit the claims of the subordinated, they insist "[t]hat the attachment to subjection is produced through the workings of power, and that part of the operation of power is made clear in this psychic effect, one of the most insidious of its productions" (ibid. 6). Drawing on Foucault's account of subjection as involving both subordination and formation, but critiquing him for the lack of emphasis on attachment (see also Brown 1993), Butler roots subjection in the passionate attachments that emerge from a situation of primary dependency. This makes subordination central to the becoming of the subject, whilst also opening up the "pervasively exploitable desire" for "continued existence" or "'survival'" (Butler 1997: 7).

The difference in tone is striking when compared with the tentative hope that Bennett and Connolly's invest in a specific type and object of attachment. Butler is wary about attachment, noting how we can be "enthralled" with what is "impoverished or abusive" (Butler, 1997: 45). Our most cherished or beloved objects might harm us. Whilst there are issues with her rooting of attachments in a primacy dependency on the model of the child-care giver (see Duschinsky, Greco and Soloman, 2015)<sup>4</sup>, Butler introduces a problem at the heart of recent queer and feminist work: how attachments scramble any clean lines between what has recently been referred to as the 'positive' or 'affirmative' and 'negative' (see Bissell, Rose and Harrison, 2020; Dekeyser et al, 2021; Dekeyser and Jellis, 2020)<sup>5</sup>. First, and

---

<sup>4</sup> Duschinsky, Greco and Soloman (2015) argue that Butler treats a particular version of the infant-care giver relation as the paradigm for considering political subjugation. For them, and me, this holds too many presumptions about a pre-cultural desire for attachment, the forms that attachment takes, and whether and how all forms of power work through attachments.

<sup>5</sup> In this section I use the term 'negative' in two ways: a) to refer to damage, suffering, or loss to self, other and/or world and b) to refer to that which appears to withdraw from presence. Recent work on the negative or negativity in geography holds to multiple meanings of the term, but circles in particular around the negative as the "negation, the non, the not" which refuses or forecloses the kind of "clear delineation or form" I gave the negative in the first sentence of this footnote (Rose, Bissell and Harrison 2021: 4). Importantly, this means that the negative/negativity has different

straightforwardly, despite the positive connotations of the term, attachments may be 'negative' in that they harm the subject of attachment or harm others. Second, the objects of attachment might be 'negative' in the sense of 'absent' – lost, partial, problematic, fraying – and yet still affect the present and be held onto. This double blurring of the categories of the positive and negative is central, for example, to Brown's (1993) influential account of the 'wounded attachments' at play in the demands of politicised identity. She shows how troubled parts of the formation of marginalized identities are carried into identity based demands, with the result that "certain emancipatory aims of politicized identity are subverted not only by the constraints of the political discourses its operations transpire but by its own wounded attachments" (391). Brown's emphasis is partly on attachment as constraint and how we might be held in relation to lost, partial or broken objects, but like Butler she also demonstrates how even a wounded attachment is constitutive of the identity positively claimed (likewise see Munt (2008) on queer attachments).

This account of attachment as between the categories of the positive and negative is at the heart of Lauren Berlant's centring of detachment as a political problem and practical difficulty in *Cruel Optimism* (2011a) and earlier work on national sentimentality (Berlant 1997; 2008). As such, theirs is the most consistently worked through account of attachment in recent cultural theory. Unsurprisingly, it is via Berlant's work that attachment has begun to surface in cultural geography, as part of renewed interest in Rose's (2021: 965) questions of how and why people invest in "worlds they engender". Sometimes references to attachments are incidental. In her powerful meditation on the nature of critique, attachment to self and others surfaces occasionally as Zhang (2021: 93) explores the limits to affirmation by staging repeated returns to a "persistent scene of doubt". Sometimes it is more direct, most prominently in Cockrayne's (2016) work on affective attachments to entrepreneurial work, and Bissell's (2022) research on detachment from investments amongst Taxi drivers. Both Cockrayne and Bissell engage with Berlant (2011a) to stay with how attachments endure or are lost across situations where, in some way, the attachment is placed in question. Also learning from Berlant's orientation to the non-linear dynamics of attachment, Linz's (2021) work on displacement in Mexico city carefully follows how past attachments affect the present, present attachments are ruptured, and some attachments endure.

This Berlant inspired orientation to the ambivalence of attachment undoubtedly chimes with Butler and Brown's scrambling of lines between the positive and negative. However, Berlant's position is different in important ways, which go to the heart of what the concept might offer cultural geography. The novelty of their position can be found in a proposition which centres the question of differentiation and allows us to say more about what any object - from an event to a person, a non-human companion to a place - becomes through a relation of attachment: *a promise*. Berlant proposes that:

---

(non)relations with the 'positive', including radical alterity or absolute outside and ever-present companion which haunts or impinges (ibid 5). Here, I lean towards thinking the intimacy of the positive and negative, that is the life sustaining and life depleting or damaging effects of attachment.

“All attachment is optimistic, if we describe optimism as the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer *that satisfying something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene.”  
(Berlant, 2011a:1/2, emphasis added)

Berlant’s lovely description of optimism as a distinct kind of movement towards, qualifies how attachments operate as trajectories. The tone is immediately different to Butler’s (1997) warning about the ‘insidious’ workings of power through attachment and their suspicion of attachments. Attachments might be intimate with the workings of some forms of power, but they are also more than that. To propose that they are *optimistic* is to claim them as a special kind of relation with something that is outside the subject and simultaneously constitutive of that subject and their sense of the continuity of world, others and self. Attachments bring closer a “satisfying something”, a movement which transforms the object of attachment into a promise. By which I mean that an object becomes (materially, affectively) present as offering or affording the subject something better to come. The phrase ‘satisfying something’ allows an openness to what it is that the object of attachment – whether a landscape or a film, a national identity or favourite chair - promises.

On this understanding attachment is a *sensing of the promise of an object that (re)constitutes that object as promissory*. As with Butler (1997) and Hennion (2017), attachments for Berlant are a matter of trajectories that carry obligations, of the more or less obdurate, more or less intense, action of binding to something outside of the subject on which the subject depends. But Berlant’s carefully chosen phrase “bring closer” (ibid. 2) cautions us against presuming attachments are a matter of simple proximity, or that attachments are not very often also a matter of absences (also key to Brown’s (1993) ‘wounded attachments’). This might be in the relatively straightforward sense that objects of attachment are absent-presents, as in a lost love, a place moved away from, a fraying future. But “brings closer” implies that a distance always remains, and that attachment is best thought of as an activity - an ongoing movement of *bringing* closer that “satisfying something” the object promises. “Bringing closer” orientates us to the combination of absence and presence, distance and proximity, that is constitutive of attachment, the many ordinary ways in which a promissory object can be intensely felt and absent<sup>6</sup>.

Attachments are optimistic, then, because they involve becoming proximate to a promissory object in the midst of the mass of detachments and disconnections and separations which are the ever-present condition and shadow of attachment. It is because they are optimistic that attachments *differentiate* from within those affections and the set of (non)relations they express and constitute. From within a

---

<sup>6</sup> I am drawn more to work that centres the ordinariness of the ‘presence of absence’ and the ‘absence of presence’ and ties experiences of both to attachments (often used interchangeably with connections), rather than the Derridean vocabulary of hauntings and ghosts (see Frers, 2013).

changing and changeable relational field, some objects come to 'feel necessary' to a life because of the cluster of promises that gather around them and are sensed (other 'objects' are encountered through indifference, whilst others become 'threatening objects' which, in some way, might disrupt or end the promise). The repetition of the action of binding (re)constitutes the object as promissory. They become infused with potentiality, whether the object be an abstraction such as a nation, a personal or public event, an activity like a hobby, a politicised identity, or anything else. What characterises a promissory object is that it opens a valued future – whether of continuity from the present, or return to a lost past, or of something better – *and* enables the present to be better navigated and rendered more habitable. Attachment works to organise the present in itself and in relation to past and future in a way which offers something to the subject held in the attachment. Using the phrase 'promissory object' does not imply any ethical or political judgment about the object. Promissory objects are by no means inevitably morally and/or politically 'good' (or 'bad'). Again, any distinction between the positive (here as the good) and negative is blurred. Rather, what makes them different than other objects is that proximity to their presence holds out a promise. Not all objects promise, not all objects become repositories or catalysers of fantasies of the good life. For attachment to happen, other objects must be detached from. They might become threats, background supports, or nothing much at all.

Although the structure of attachments are optimistic in that they involve a relation of proximity to a promissory object, attachments might not feel and be experienced through optimism, hope, or other 'positive' feelings or emotions. Indeed, an optimistic attachment might feel like shame, for example, if the attachment is to an object that sits uneasily with normative forms (Probyn, 2005), might be felt in resentment or anger if the object is felt to be unfairly devalued, or in a mixture of paranoia and melancholia if the object appears to be threatened (Hitchen, 2021). They may also come to be present with different intensities depending on the centrality of attachment to a way of life. This problem of the binds of attachment, and the complicated relation between the optimistic structure of attachment and how attachments feel, can be found throughout Berlant's writings. It is exemplified by their orientation to situations of 'cruel optimism' in the post-Fordist present (on which see Raynor, 2021). 'Cruel optimism' is a double bind. It names a relation of attachment in which being in proximity to an object simultaneously harms whilst holding out the promise of flourishing, a promise that the subject remains attached to even in the midst of actual harm. The object of cruel optimism has become "significantly problematic" (Berlant, 2011a: 24). Berlant explains the structure of the relation here, noting the multiple cruelties of a cruelly optimistic relation:

"But, again, optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as

the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming” (Berlant, 2011a: 2)

Across examples including romantic love, upward mobility, and the desire for the political, Berlant stays with the ‘double bind’ of cruel optimism – inhabiting a space in-between the positive and negative, the critical and the affirmative, in order to track why and how people stay attached to promissory objects that harm. More than simply a stress on the incoherence or messiness of objects of attachment, important as that is, Berlant’s discussion of cruel optimism also stays close to the pleasures of being attached – that is what being held in a relation to a promissory object offers, even as the object attached to and the attachment itself harms.

It is here that we find another way in which the line between the negative and the positive breaks down, in addition to the blurred lines between absence and presence and proximity and distance. By stressing the intimacy between the negativity of a cruel relation and the positivity of world building enabled by the optimistic structure and energy of attachment, Berlant suspends any too quick or easy judgment of attachments (see also Ruez and Cockrayne (2021) on ambivalence). Berlant stresses the need to not see negativity as negative, or at least not fit the negativity of cruel optimism into the categories we use to name the negative:

“Even when it turns out to involve a cruel relation, it would be wrong to see optimism’s negativity as a symptom of an error, a perversion, damage, or a dark truth: optimism is, instead, a *scene of negotiated sustenance* that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently” (Berlant, 2011a: 14, emphasis added)

The contrast with Butler (1997) is telling. If on a model of the parent-child relation, for Butler attachment is a primary binding to punitive forms of power, Berlant’s phrase “scene of negotiated sustenance” emphasises the work attachments do for people, even those attachments which might be judged as negative in the sense of generating or continuing harm and damage (for the subject or for human or non-human others). ‘Sustenance’ coexists with other terms Berlant uses throughout her work – “flourishing” (Berlant 2011a: 105), “thriving” (ibid. 25), “vitalizing or animating potency” (ibid. 25) for example - to gesture towards how attachments organise the felt present into something habitable and potentially better, at least for the subject(s) held in the attachment. For Butler (1997) the obduracy of the passionate attachments that can accompany the work of power is because of how the founding dependency of the subject results in them folding power into subjectivity, whereas for Berlant the obduracy of attachment is *in part* because of the work they do in allowing the present to feel a certain way, irrespective of whether the object or lost or partial or, in their terms, “significantly problematic”.

Staying with cruel optimism in various impasses teaches us a lot about what Berlant (2011a: 14) calls “the complexity of being bound to a life”. But it is important to stress that even if all attachments are optimistic in structure, they are not necessarily *cruelly* optimistic in Berlant’s specific sense. Cruel optimism names one form of attachment, under “compromised conditions” of realisation where the object has become “significantly problematic” (ibid. 24). It does not stand in for all attachments, simply because not all conditions will be compromised or objects problematic (the same point holds for Brown’s (1993) work, not all attachments are wounded). Whilst Berlant is a little equivocal on this point, some attachments do not involve the same relation of sustaining-harming-sustaining, or induce harm at all (whether for the individual held in the attachment, or for others). The point here is to be open about the effects (to oneself, others, and world) of being bound to a world and held in specific relation to promises. Just as the parent-child relation cannot serve as the exemplary model of attachment, neither can cruel optimism, melancholia, or any other single, named structure of relationality.

### **Section Three: Forms and Scenes of Attachment**

To return to Massey’s words, what I love about Berlant’s work, the promise it offers me, is that they *face* attachments in all their ambivalence and contradiction. Their approach allows us to better understand the complex hold of attachments, even those attachments to partial, lost, problematic, or never-realised objects. The power of attachment is due to both how they constitute and hold us in relation to promissory objects, and how that relation to a promissory object enables the present to feel and be inhabited. But their work also opens up a problem which is the focus of this section: how are specific promissory objects made available to attach to so that they become organised as part of distinctive ways of life? (even as the activity of attaching partly (re)constitutes an object’s promise). How do attachments cluster so that, for example, we can speak of the attachments which constituted a specific social-spatial formation such as the post-war settlement or right-wing populism?

Whilst objects of attachment are potentially infinite, attachments are in practice (dis)assembled into recognisable forms intimate with fantasies of the good life. This returns us to the point that attachments are always mediated, they are part of the emergent or provisional forms that are ways of life. Attachments happen in the midst of ‘conditions of attachment’ – both the assembling of other relations which (de)compose attachments, and the cluster of expectations and anticipations which are part of ways of life and surround the prospect of realising the object of attachment. Gilroy’s (2004) influential analysis of ‘post-colonial melancholia’ provides one example of such conditions. It can be re-read as a diagnosis of how specific conditions of attachment enable the endurance of a particular attachment in the UK – to Empire, or to the promises of security and pre-eminence which memories of Empire offer some white UK subjects. Read alongside Berlant (2011a) on creaking Fordist good life fantasies or Brown’s (1993) on ‘wounded attachments’,

Gilroy's is an account of how attachments persist even as the object is partially lost. He details the numerous explicit and subtle ways in which 'postcolonial melancholia' is enacted and made available; through literature and film, via everyday media and politicians' claims, in acts of commemoration, and so on. Various conditions cohere to continue 'postcolonial melancholia' as an organisation of attachments, even as the 'object' of attachment is fragile, and other ways of organising attachments coexist and emerge e.g. cosmopolitanism.

The example of 'postcolonial melancholia' as a distinct formation takes us to the problem of how 'promissory objects' are arranged and brought closer. Why do some objects and promises rather than others come to have a hold and organise what counts as a good life? In the remainder of this section I offer 'forms of attachment' and 'scenes of attachment' as two concepts for understanding how the optimism of attachment is (dis)organised. Taken together, the two terms are ways of orientating cultural geography to how available attachments endure or, rather, how some promises repeat and circulate and are made available to subjects whilst others fade and end. Forms and scenes of attachment are, of course, also ways of understanding how the detachments which shadow and constitute all attachments are organised.

### **a) Forms of Attachment**

A form of attachment is an interlinked set of promissory objects which *together* offer a fantasy of the good life and are made available as a resource for subjects to organise living through. Multiple forms of attachment coexist, all of which magnetise people's aspirations and fit or not with their expectations: the couple or the family as ways of organising intimacy; nationalism and multiculturalism as ways of organising relations with and between others; a named sexual or politicised identity; and so on. Most simply, a form of attachment is an *arrangement of promissory objects*, an ordering of them that enables and constrains how the optimism that is at the heart of attachment comes to be (dis)orientated. My use of the phrase is adapted from a line in Stewart's (2008) *Ordinary Affects*, where she writes of the book as an attempt to discern "[p]ressure points and forms of attention and attachment ... " (5). Stewart does not elaborate on what is not quite even a phrase, although *Ordinary Affects* is full of forms of attachments surfacing viscerally in everyday life. For me, what is intriguing but requires elaboration is the sense that promissory objects become available in patterns<sup>7</sup>; the couple as a way of organising intimacy, career as a way of organising work, and so on. The prefix 'forms of' implies, first, variation within commonality and, second, a recognisable arrangements of elements (after Levine 2015). 'Forms' are also dynamic, existing as

---

<sup>7</sup> My conceptualisation of forms of attachment as patterns of promissory objects is designed to resonate with the emphasis on the configurational which is at the heart of versions of culture as mediated experience, developing from Williams sense in relation to 'ways of life' that "it is with the discovery of patterns of a characteristic kind that any useful cultural analysis begins" (Williams 1961: 63).



repeated patterns that cross any specific interaction or event which they (re)constitute as they constrain and enable. Forms of attachment are not simply arrangements of relations and objects, as per networks or assemblages, although the term also attempts to hold the structural and ephemeral in tension. Rather, forms of attachment are *arrangements of promises*. As such, they are always-already an organisation of detachment, a repository of cuts and separations.

A form of attachment is a durable arrangement of promissory objects which becomes recognised, named and felt as a way of organising living (with their always unstable boundaries formed in part through naming and felt recognition). They repeat across multiple spheres of life, being at once economic, political and cultural. How to understand this durability, beyond it being an effect of repetition or force? Drawing on recent actor-network theory inspired work, durability is partly an effect of the *density* of attachment devices which make available promissory objects. An 'attachment device' is a term developed by Hennion (2017) in his sociology of amateurs, and elaborated on by Felski (2020). In their work, an attachment device is anything which binds. Examples usually cross the human and non-human divide: Velcro on children's shoes, a lead connecting plug and laptop, etc. Slightly re-working this idea, I understand an attachment device as anything which *brings closer* a promissory object and holds it in proximity (this action reconstituting it as promissory). Take romantic love as a form of attachment. Attachment devices might include songs which hold out the promise of sustaining reciprocity even as they speak to the pain of love lost, or genres of film that heighten love's melodrama. There are, though, many attachment devices not associated with a recognised form of attachment. What distinguishes a form of attachment is that interrelated attachment devices saturate life. Without using these terms, Zhang's (2022: 59) account of how 'homepatriarchal love' is used by the Chinese state to attach people to neoliberalism demonstrates the density of devices that bring the promise of love closer. Love's promise is made present across reality TV dating shows, nationalist ceremonies, relations with property, and much more. Alongside a density of attachment devices, forms of attachment also endure because exiting comes with costs, primarily because of how forms are bound up with norms and the lure of normativity. As well as some norms working by allure and/or force to produce devalued, disavowed or denigrated subjects who detach from or are detached from normative promissory objects, forms of attachment also organise normativity as an affect. This is in Berlant's (2008: 266) sense of an aspiration that some people have for "an unshearable suturing to their social world" or, more simply, "the affect associated with the pleasure of binding or attachment itself". Forms of attachment are durable in part because they afford a sense of the ongoingness of things, and detaching from them can involve disruptions to that sense of normalcy<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> In the background to this section, is an account of norms and normativity that learns from the attention to the specific character and forms of norms and normativity in 'anti-antinormativity work' in queer theory (after Wiegman & Wilson 2015). I hold to potential differences between how a) different more or less (in)coherent norms operate through mixtures of allure and punitive or

Forms of attachment overlap. They have all kinds of harmonious and disharmonious relations with one another, sometimes undermining one another, at others times strengthening one another. An example of the coexistence of forms comes from work on how neoliberal ways of organising economic life around the figure of the entrepreneurial self, and thus a detachment from some types of collective life and an intensification of attachments to individualism, were bolstered by being articulated with two existing forms of attachment: the heteropatriarchal family (Cooper, 217) and the nation (Hall, 1988). Neoliberalising apparatuses cultivated an attachment to individualism, and there are now a dense set of attachment devices maintaining that attachment across neoliberalism's present legitimacy crises (e.g. Littler (2017) on the promise of meritocracy). But they also resonated with and intensified existing forms and their promissory objects (the heteronormative nuclear family as occasion for sustaining intimacy, or nation as scene for repeating feelings of pre-eminence and solidarity) as part of the response to the emerging detachment from Fordist forms of life in Western Europe and North-America beginning in the late 1960s.

Forms of attachment are not equal. We can envision a complex, moving field of dominant, residual, emergent and pre-emergent forms of attachment (with distinctions turning on density of attachment devices and relation with norms and felt normativity, and raising questions about how forms relate). The terms are Williams' (1977), and they are useful here for understanding the multiplicity of the field of attachment, without flattening differences (presuming all forms have equal force) or reproducing dualisms (presuming forms of attachment can be cleaved into the dominant and marginal). Elaborating upon Williams, we can consider differences between, say, a dominant and residual form of attachment in terms of presence and force. To return back to the example of neoliberalising apparatuses, forms of attachment organised around collective industrial life became residual in Williams (1977: 122) sense of an "effective element of the present" but formed in the past. They exist as the "residue" of once dominant forms of attachment, not archaic in the sense of being wholly of the past, but marginal in the context of the density of attachment devices which surround individualism. At the same time, emergent and pre-emergent forms of attachment are always beginning, some gaining consistency, others fading, some lingering on in the unsettling of norms and memories of other ways of living, others later becoming dominant. I think of Allen's (2022) meditation on the intensities of Black gay life through the long neoliberal 80s, or Hartman (2019) speculative reconstruction of young women's Black intimate life at the beginning of the twentieth century. Both invent new genres of academic work to sense

---

regulatory force to simultaneously gather, (re)territorialise and differentiate, and b) (anti)normativity as a felt affect, which organises people's sense of the ongoingness and rightness of their and other worlds and collective senses of the normal. For my purposes here, this approach leads to a curiosity about the recursive, generative relations entangling norms and forms of attachments and the hold and pleasures of normativities, rather than assuming that norms always operate by constriction and exclusion (although they very often do).

(pre)emergent forms. Insurgent forms outside of various gendered and raced norms of respectability as well as the dominant form of the family. Disruptive forms which made present other forms of intimacy and kinship and ways of living. Forms which barely took form but made intensely present new promises. But, as the denigration and disappearance that Allen and Hartman write against reminds us, (pre)emergent forms are often subject to efforts to sever attachments and induce detachments. (Pre)emergent forms are also not necessarily always to be welcomed, just as promissory objects are by no means necessarily ethically-politically 'good'. We might think, for example, of the damaging emergent forms of attachment happening at the intersection of white masculinity, algorithmic internet culture, and right-wing populism.

## **b) Scenes of Attachment**

Forms need scenes. A scene of attachment is any occasion in which an attachment crosses a threshold to become part of the foreground of life and thought, becoming central to how everyday life is felt and social action thereafter proceeds., For the most part, attachments act in the background, orientating and attuning people to promises which exist atmospherically or even below the threshold of interest and attention. Some attachments are spoken of, others remain unspoken, even to ourselves, let alone to others. Some are keenly felt, others registering in the faintest of atmospheric shifts. In this sense attachments can be habitual, although not all habits are attachments in the sense of trajectories that bring closer promises. In a scene of attachment both the relation and object of attachment are intensely felt. For a limited duration, they come to be foregrounded in a punctual space-time characterised by some form of heightened feeling; a yearly event commemorating a valued national past; a moment of joy when dancing to beloved music in a basement; relief as Brexit happens. Such scenes of attachment stand apart from the ongoing flow of action that gives everyday life its *everyday* character. Irrespective of how (dis)organised everyday life is or feels, how blurred or not the lines might be between emergency or crisis and the everyday, for a limited time life comes to feel more intense.

Scenes of attachment resonate with a cluster of terms used to disclose the momentarily reconfiguration of the feel of everyday space-time in intense experiences: 'pressure points' (Stewart, 2008), 'moments' (Lefebvre, 2006), the 'extraordinary' (Metcalf and Game, 2002), to name but a few. Scenes of attachment are not simply heightened experiences, nor are they wholly spontaneous (even if they may feel as such). They are conditioned by forms of attachment, with some scenes orchestrated as part of efforts to govern by cultivating and inducing attachments. Whatever affect the promissory object is felt and apprehended through, what matters is that the scene comes to be (de/re)composed around the promissory object's intensified presence. The nation as felt pre-eminence or occasion of belonging might be sensed in a sporting celebration, or the promise of intimacy felt

when dancing with others in a club where same-sex desire can be expressed, to give two simple examples. If attachment is the action of constantly 'bringing closer' the promissory object, a scene of attachment happens when the promissory object is made affectively, materially and representationally present so they it may be felt and wondered about. An example is again provided by Zhang's (2022) work on love and neoliberal China. In the midst of the deferrals and disappointments of love and the slow and fast deaths of workers, the promise of love has to be continually restaged in occasions of heightened feeling, sometimes in state orchestrated events, other times through fan-fiction or popular TV programmes. In these and other scenes of attachment, the promissory object magnetises attention and action, orientating the ongoing action of a scene around it. For Zhang's interviewees, love's 'homepatriarchal' promise become intensely felt, disappointments deferred. Brought ever closer, the promissory object and relation of attachment become obligatory to how the scene happens and lives on. Scenes of attachment are often therefore felt through the vehement passions or intense affects, occasions of exuberance for those who attach, rather than disaffection. This may, for example, be in the joy becoming anger at a rally for a populist politician, or it might be a carefully observed minutes silence that makes continuity through the past via sacrificial logic. Scenes of attachment might also form when the promissory object of attachment is felt to be under threat, or subject to some kind of disruption. The crowd at a Donald J Trump rally that chants USA, USA, USA, for example, performing a backlash to demands for racial justice as it reasserts the felt promise of whiteness.

Scenes of attachment (re)confirm that certain objects within 'ways of life' carry more weight and meaning than others. Every scene of attachment is always therefore also a scene of (un)articulated and/or felt detachments. There is always an outside. In the example of love and Chinese neoliberalism, the outside might be other forms and practices of intimacy not based on the heteropatriarchal couple form, or forms of heteropatriarchal love separate from Chinese neoliberalism. As such, forms of attachment need occasional scenes of attachment, whether those forms are dominant, residual, or (pre)emergent. They are occasions when the action of attaching is heightened and given an affective push, the arrangement of promises solidified, the trajectory that is attachment given momentum, the detachments which always accompany attachment (re)consolidated. In this sense, scenes of attachment are utopian, they make present the 'satisfying something' of attachment so a not-yet future becomes part of people's everyday life (even if the promissory object is in some way under threat). Scenes of attachment therefore have an after-life, they live on as people become attached to them. They may also be occasions of rebinding as people are reattached or attached more intensely to objects they had begun to detach from. But scenes of attachment may also be occasions when detachment begins to surface in relation to the promissory object. Boredom and other affects of detachment might change the scene. People might be misaligned to or disorientated by a scene. A scene of attachment might become a scene of detachment.

## Concluding Comments: Staying Close to the Promise

Hinting at the possibility of affects of detachments from within scenes of attachment feels like an appropriate place to end, even if a more sustained engagement with detachment as relation, condition and event is for elsewhere. It reminds us that 'facing up to' attachment, to return to Massey's (1994) phrase, is always a way of facing up to detachment, as I've gestured at various points. Detachments are the ever present condition for all attachments, and attachments can be detached from as they are interrupted, disrupted, fray and end. Indeed, Massey's essay can be read as an attempt to cultivate partial detachments, to cut the ties that bind to both the default dismissal of the local and conservative versions. From within those detachments, an attachment to a 'progressive sense of place' becomes possible, one that works from the attachment to attachment she identifies. Massey's essay also reminds us of the often ambivalent politics of detachment. The cut it attempts to induce is from a particular version of place rather than place per se.

Nevertheless, I've become attached to attachment. I've given it more attention because of my conviction, learning from Rose (2021), that there needs to be more consideration in contemporary cultural geography of how meaningfulness and significance are composed. The paper is therefore an effort to interrupt the now habitual gesture whereby connection or association or attachment merge and blur as the claim that everything is relational becomes the habitual starting point and unsurprising end point of analysis. Amplifying attachment as a distinct kind of relation orientates inquiry to how some objects within a way of life accrue a promissory value and come to be differentiated from others. Attachments are selective. They offer or afford those held in the attachment the expectation of realising a "satisfying something" (Berlant, 2011a). Whether a landscape or an event, another person or an abstraction, an institution or a sexual practice, their presence comes to feel necessary to the ongoingness of a life. My wager is that giving attention to the concept of attachment helps us better understand the difficulty of detachment at a time when inducing detachments feels so necessary, whether that be from white supremacy or fossil fuels, from hyper capitalism or gendered norms. Centering attachment is not the only answer, given now extensive work on various forms of power (disciplinary, biopower etc) and how they operate affectively. Nevertheless, the concept helps us understand how people stay in relation and how individual or collective detachments are so often "awkward" or "threatening" (Berlant, 2011a: 263). I have argued that attachments are trajectories which *bring closer* a promissory object, closer but rarely fully present. It is through the repetition of the action of binding that the promissory object comes to affect and achieve some kind of hold. Detaching can be hard, therefore, because it involves withdrawing from a promise that once sustained, and the tangle of obligations and trajectories that attachments are and carry into ways of life.

Centering attachments inaugurates a cultural geography of promises. What promises and for whom? How do some promises stick to some objects, circulate and

come to take on a force whilst others fade or are lost? What are the consequences of keeping some promises close and others distant? I offered the vocabulary of forms of attachment and scenes of attachment as part of a cultural geography that attunes to and understands the dynamics through which attachments (de/re)form. Rather than rooting attachment in the child-care giver model of relation, or suspecting them as signs of the insidious workings of power, the vocabulary orientates inquiry to the conditions of emergence for attachments and the complexity of what attachments do. Attachments intensify in *scenes of attachment*, in which the promissory object takes on a heightened presence, and forms are given an affective push. Scenes are punctual space-times in which everyday life comes to feel different. They are utopian, in the sense that the not-yet promise is brought ever closer. Scenes happen in the context of *forms of attachment* which organise the optimism of attachment. Dominant, residual, emergent and pre-emergent arrangements of promises coexist with one another and are assembled with economic, political and other conditions. Staying close to scenes and forms might be uncomfortable. Even if attachments sustain, even as they offer subjects ways to live well, attachments and their objects can damage and endanger. A cultural geography of promises is therefore both positive and negative, affirmative and critical, as it learns to stay with and be affected by attachments, perhaps especially those that are “enigmatic, chaotic, incoherent, and structurally contradictory ... ” (Berlant, 2011b: 685).

## References

- Ahmed S (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. London: Routledge
- Allen J (2022) *There's a Disco Ball Between Us: A Theory of Black Gay Life*. London: Duke University Press.
- Altman I & Low S (1992) *Place Attachment* London: Plenum Press.

Anderson B (2020) Cultural geography III: The concept of 'culture' *Progress in Human Geography* 44(3): 608-617.

Bennett J (2001) *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Berlant L (1997) *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. London: Duke University Press.

Berlant L (2008) *The Female Complaint*. London: Duke University Press.

Berlant L (2011a) *Cruel Optimism*. London: Duke University Press.

Berlant L (2011b) A properly political concept of love: Three approaches in ten pages. *Cultural Anthropology*: 10(4): 283-291.

Berlant L and McCabe E (2011) Depressive Realism: An Interview with Lauren Berlant. [Depressive Realism: An Interview with Lauren Berlant | Earl McCabe | The Hypocrite Reader](#)

Berlant L and Warner M (1998) Sex in public. *Critical Inquiry*. 24(2): 547-566.

Berlant L (2016) The commons: Infrastructures for troubling times *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34(3): 393-419

Butler J (1997) *The Psychic Life of Power*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bissell D (2022) Affective life of financial loss: Detaching from lost investments in the wake of the gig economy. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* (online early)

Bissell D, Rose M, and Harrison P (eds) (2021) *Negative Geographies: Exploring the Politics of Limits*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Bowlby J (1969) *Attachment and loss: Vol 1*. London: Hogarth.

Brown W (1993) Wounded attachments *Political Theory* 21(3): 390-410.

Casey, E. (2013) *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*. California: University of California

Cockayne D (2016) Entrepreneurial affect: Attachment to work practice in San Francisco's Digital media sector. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34(3): 456-473.

Cooper M (2017) *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*. London: Zone Books.

Connolly W (1999) Brain waves, transcendental fields, and techniques of thought *Radical Philosophy*. March/April: 19-28

- Connolly W (2008) *Capitalism and Christianity: American Style*. London: Duke University Press.
- Cresswell T (2014) *Place: An Introduction (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Dekeyser T and Jellis T (2021) Besides affirmationism? On geography and negativity *Area* 53(2): 318–25.
- Dekeyser T, Secor A, Rose M, Bissell D, Zhang V and Romanillos J (2021) Negativity: space, politics and affects. *Cultural Geographies* 29(1): 5-21.
- Diener A & Hagan, A. (2022) Geographies of place attachment: A place-based model of materiality, performance, and narration *Geographical Review* 112(1) 171-186
- Duschinsky R, Greco M, & Solomon J (2015) Wait up! Attachment and sovereign power. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28, 223-242
- Featherstone D (2011) On assemblage and articulation *Area* 43(2): 139-142.
- Frers L (2013) The matter of absence. *Cultural Geographies*. 20(4): 431-455.
- Gilroy P (2004) *Postcolonial Melancholia*. London: Columbia University Press
- Gomart E and Hennion A (1999) A sociology of attachment: Music amateurs, drug users. *Sociological Review* 47: 220–247.
- Hall S (1988) The great moving right show In Hall, S. *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*. London: Verso, 39-56.
- Harrison P (2007) 'How shall I say it ... ?' Relating the nonrelational. *Environment and Planning A* 39: 590-608
- Harrison P (2015) After affirmation, or, being a loser: on vitalism, sacrifice, and cinders. *Geohumanities* 1(2): 285-306.
- Hartman S (2019) *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. London: W.W. Norton.
- Hennion A (2017) Attachments, you say? ... How a concept collectively emerges in one research group. *Journal of Cultural Economy*. 10(1): 112-121.
- Hitchen E (2021) The affective life of austerity: uncanny atmospheres and paranoid temporalities. *Social and Cultural Geography* 22(3): 295-318.
- Kraftl P (2013) Beyond 'voice', beyond 'agency', beyond 'politics'? Hybrid childhoods and some critical reflections on children's emotional geographies. *Emotion, Space and Society*. 9: 13-23.
- Latour B (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



- Lefebvre H (2006) *Critique of Everyday Life: Vol 2*. London: Verso
- Levine C (2005) *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Linz J (2021) Where crises converge: The affective register of displacement in Mexico City's post-earthquake gentrification *Cultural Geographies* 28(2): 285-300.
- Littler J (2017) *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*. London: Routledge.
- Malpas, J. (2018) *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*. London: Taylor and Francis
- Massey D (1991) A global sense of place *Marxism Today* 24-29
- Massey D (1992) A place called home? *New Formations* 17: 3-15.
- McFarlane C (2011) Assemblage and critical urbanism. *City* 15(2): 204-224.
- Mee K and Wright S (2009) Geographies of belonging. *Environment and Planning A* 41, 772-779
- Metcalfe A and Game A (2002) *The Mystery of Everyday Life*. Sydney: Federation Press.
- Munt S (2012) *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame*. London: Ashgate
- Plumwood V (2002) *Environmental Reason: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. London: Routledge:
- Raynor R (2021) Hopes multiplied amidst decline: Understanding gendered precarity in times of austerity. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 39(3): 553-570.
- Relph E (1976) *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion
- Rose M (2006) Gathering 'dreams of presence': A project for the cultural landscape. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24: 537-554.
- Rose M (2021) The question of culture in cultural geography: Latent legacies and potential futures. *Progress in Human Geography*. 45(5): 951-971.
- Rose M, Bissell D and Harrison P (2021) Negative Geographies In Bissell D, Rose M, and Harrison P (eds) *Negative Geographies: Exploring the Politics of Limits*. University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 1-38
- Ruez D and Cockrayne D (2021) Feeling otherwise: Ambivalent affects and the politics of critique in geography. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 11(1): 88-107.
- Sharpe C (2016) *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. London: Duke University Press

- Strathern M (2020) *Relations*. London: Duke University Press
- Stewart K (2007) *Ordinary Affects*. London: Duke University Press
- Tuan YF (1977) *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Whatmore S (2002) *Hybrid Geographies*. London: Sage.
- Williams R (1961) *The long Revolution*. London: Broadview Press.
- Williams R (1977) *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wilkinson E (2014) Single people's geographies of home: intimacy and friendship beyond 'the family' *Environment and Planning A* 46: 2452-2468.
- Zhang V (2021) Ethics for the unaffirmable: The hesitant love for a cultural translator. In Bissell, D. Rose, M. and Harrison, P. *Negative Geographies: Exploring the Politics of Limits*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 92-118
- Zhang C (2022) *Dreadful Desires: The Uses of Love in Neoliberal China* Durham: Duke University Press.