

# Unsettling relationality: Attachment after the 'relational turn'

**Ben Anderson**   
Durham University, UK

Dialogues in Human Geography  
1–5

© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/20438206231195672

[journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg)



## Abstract

In this response, I place the concept of attachment in the context of debates about the ontological commitments and political-ethical value of relational thinking today. Reading the four commentaries in this forum as emerging from and enacting a fraying of the promise and hold of relational thinking, I explore how, together, they pose a series of questions to my account of attachments as trajectories that 'bring closer' a promissory 'object': how do some objects become promissory, what, if anything, is the outside of attachment, and what accompanies attachments? The terms through which the commentaries pose these questions and complement the concept of attachment – *economies*, *desire*, *problem*, *detachment* – revise and supplement my vocabulary and research agenda for a cultural geography of attachment. Simultaneously, they question and challenge relational thinking more broadly.

## Keywords

Attachment, desire, detachment, forms, negativity, relations

## Section I: A dictionary of attachment?

How might we account for the peculiar and insistent hold of the many and varied 'objects' that people find themselves attached to; the bustle of a street, the glance of another person, the couple form, Brexit, my gran's collection of wooden turtles, white supremacy, and so much more? Recently, I've become attached to the concept of attachment as an answer to the problem of qualitative differentiation between the 'objects' involved in relational configurations. As all four responses note, my attachment to attachment performs a fidelity to the insights of the 'relational turn', best expressed for me in Latour's proposition:

The world is not a solid continent of facts sprinkled by a few lakes of uncertainties, but a vast ocean of uncertainties speckled by a few islands of calibrated and stabilized forms (Latour, 2005: 245).

A theory of attachment, at least as I understand it, doubles down on the claim that relations matter by centering those relations that *really* matter for not only producing 'a few islands of calibrated and stabilized forms', to borrow Latour's terms, but for

---

### Corresponding author:

Ben Anderson, Department of Geography, Durham University, Science Site, Durham DH1 3LE, UK.

Email: [ben.anderson@durham.ac.uk](mailto:ben.anderson@durham.ac.uk)

producing ‘islands’ imbued with meaning, purpose, and value.

I’m newly attached to attachment at a moment when the taken-for-grantedness of the ‘relational turn’ is becoming just a little unsettled. I hear the four responses as asking questions in the midst of this unsettling. What, if anything, is the outside of relations? How to understand the dynamics of ordering–disordering that form relational configurations? What, today, are the politics–ethics of relationality, amid a growing awareness that political–ethical action does not necessarily follow from an ontological claim and commitment?

I’ve learnt much from their responses, and thank Beckie, Vickie, Mitch, Daniel, and Derek for the spirit of critical generosity that animates their engagements. They all amplify something that expands on the paper’s starting proposition that attachments constitute a special kind of relation. In my own response, I consider the relation between attachment and the terms each response centres – *economies*, *desire*, *problem*, and *detachment* – as a way into debates about relationality. I hope to add something to their responses, in the spirit of an affirmative ‘yes, and’, rather than defensively defending a static position. Together, the cloud of terms rework and supplement what Zhang (2023) calls a ‘dictionary of attachment’.

## Section 2: Economies and forms, or, how objects become promissory?

The claim that attachments differentiate is at the heart of the promise I find in the concept and central to Coleman’s (2023) important reminder of both the intense and humdrum everyday presences of promissory objects and their temporalities. I used the term ‘promissory’, after Berlant (2011), to highlight that the trajectory that is attachment involves ‘bringing closer’ and making affectively present something the subject values, as well as providing a sense of continuity. Developing from Coleman’s emphasis on non-linear temporalities, I’d stress the importance of remaining open about the temporality of this movement of ‘bringing closer’. Sometimes those ‘objects’ might be a

future that (re)orders the present and its felt sense. But they might also be pasts that could become a future, or a present to be continued. Whether the object is of the present, past, or future and the temporality is linear, cyclical, or any other shape, an attachment is optimistic because being in the relation of attachment makes a difference to the present. Which subjects are made through which particular attachments, and what kind of difference the presence of specific ‘objects’ make to everyday lives, follow as empirical questions.

What matters is that the promissory object is valued by the participants in a relation, even if attachment can be intimate with ambivalence and ‘objects’ are often constituted by a motion of attaching and detaching, as Cockayne and Ruez (2023) remind me. Which brings me to the concept of ‘affective economies’ that Coleman proposes, after Ahmed (2004), to help answer the question of why some objects become promissory and attract or magnetise. Economies are always unequal. In Ahmed’s (2004) examples shame sticks to some racialised bodies, hate to others. As a concept, it sensitises to the ongoing unequal differentiation and distribution of value. This would add a further answer to the riddle of the lure of specific promissory objects. Some objects become promissory through the operation of affective economies, as they are imbricated with other political and cultural economies. Affective economies would, though, be just one component, alongside others such as ideologies or sedimented habits, that compose distributed forms of attachment.

Often, in attachment the normative becomes intimately felt, one reason for Berlant’s (2011: 53) proposition that ‘affect theory is another phase in the history of ideology theory’. But I would caution against any assumption that promissory objects are but the effects of an apriori structuring system. They often reproduce, enact, or are in the shadow of the normative, and Coleman is right that I could expand this argument to aspirational normativity. But we might also think of how some objects offer marginalised subjects resources for disrupting, suspending, or exiting norms, as well as how the normative can be both aspiration and weight for some subjects. This openness raises a

further set of research questions: how are forms of attachment inhabited and related to by different subjects? How does the promissory status of an ‘object’ endure, shift, fray, end, and return through everyday life?

## Section 2: Desire and problems, or, what, if anything, is the outside of attachment?

As my framing of the above questions implies, I’m interested in the ongoing (re)organisation of the ‘objects’ of attachment. Zhang (2023) notices this orientation, observing, rightly, that I stay longer with temporarily stabilised forms. She wonders if the emphasis on organisation might leave little room for either the *dis*organisation or the composition of new attachments. Consequently, Zhang offers the concept of ‘desire’ as a supplement to my vocabulary. Alongside attachment desire, or as Zhang puts it: ‘[b]efore the object is recognised as an object of attachment, it must come to be recognisable through an encounter with desire’.

Zhang is right that my focus is on the structurally contradictory but still ordered, rather than the outside that undoes or undermines. Perhaps that is why I love Berlant’s work – incoherence and coherence are quite close together. Although, as Cockayne and Ruez (2023) also imply, I could make more room for the ambivalent relations some people have with their objects. I love how Zhang’s vocabulary senses the ‘[c]all from the outside, tugging at the edges and excesses of attachment’s seemingly ordered life’. I also like that desire is the same kind of term as attachment. ‘Desire’ is not a mysterious outside that acts as a consoling guarantor of change; rather, it just has different modes to attachment – misrecognition, resonance, and substitution.

My questions are about the difference between desire as ‘ambient energy’ and attachment as the bringing closer of a promise, their interface, and what each offers. I am not sure that the difference is one of the affirmable and non-affirmable, or more difficult to affirm. Neither the effects or objects of attachment are necessarily straightforwardly positive or negative, as I stress and Rose (2023) notes. I think it is the same with desire.

Neither do I think that desire is sufficient to understand changes in attachment. For me, change is also a matter of new or changing needs or problems, shifts in the forms of attachment available at any given time, and events, practices, processes, and styles of detaching, as I discuss below. Where I do think the concept of desire supplements, and here it might blur with some understandings of affect, is in the sense of an ambient energy that is organised through objects of attachments but is irreducible to them. We might say, for example, that in ‘scenes of attachment’ desire is at its most organised (even if the risk of detachment persists), at other times the ambient energy, which is never simply free floating but always emerging in and out of order, may move rapidly between almost-promissory objects.

Rose is also concerned with the outside to attachment, but in terms different to Zhang’s, albeit with resonances given their shared orientation to the non-relational. As he generously acknowledges, Rose starts from a different series of ontological commitments to mine, phrased by him as a ‘primordial negativity; a primordial existential situation that works to undermine every force which it simultaneously instigates’ (Rose, 2023). Rose then asks me a question of ‘why’ that I confess I have struggled to answer *in his terms*: ‘If subjectivity is perpetually unfolding and becoming, if it is only ever an expression of its relations, than why is attachment necessary? From where does a need for attachment emerge?’ (Rose, 2023). I admire the consistency of Rose’s care for this question, and how it threads through his extraordinary effort to develop a theory of culture. In wondering how to respond, I realised that I am also interested in the *why* of attachment. But I am interested at a different level of abstraction to Rose. Not why the need for attachment *as such*, but why these *particular* attachments and these *specific* forms of attachment in this or that conjuncture. In other words, I am interested in why attachments serve as responses to geo-historically specific clusters of problems, imperatives, and needs.

Take attachments to ‘Brexit’ by leave voters in the UK (after Anderson et al., 2020). Our empirical work showed how Brexit channelled different forms of negative and national optimism in the context of a series of interlocking felt problems that the at once empty and too full object ‘Brexit’ promised to solve.

Any list is always incomplete, but they included: a felt absence of control amid a crisis of agency; the need to explain a generalised discontent; the loss of pre-eminence felt by some white subjects that intensified insecurity, and so on. Into this tangle of problems, Brexit became an object of attachment. My use of ‘problem’ here is less existential than Rose’s, although clearly there are resonances with the list he offers. Instead, I root problems in the specific contradictions and antagonisms of distinct conjunctures. I don’t know what those problems are and how they are differentially felt in advance of work that begins from the situations and crises that compose conjunctures. This opens up a further empirical question. What are the problems, needs, or imperatives that specific forms and objects of attachment are a response to?

### Section 3: Detachment, or, what accompanies attachments?

There are no attachments without detachments. But, just like attachment is not equivalent to relation *per se*, so detachment is not the same as disconnection, dissociation, disassembly, disintegration, severance, or other names for that which does not sit easily in the categories of either relation or non-relation. Cockayne and Ruez (2023) are right to note the importance of detachment to my paper, and that it remains to be worked through. I began writing the attachment paper in the context of a project on boredom as a form and style of detachment (Anderson, 2021, 2023). Saying more about detachment is really for that project, but I want to elaborate on Cockayne and Ruez’s vital and provocative notes on detachment in two ways.

First, like them, I see detachment as the condition for the very possibility of attachment. However, I’d like to develop a maximalist conceptualisation of detachment. Detachment as condition, but also, sometimes, an ongoing *process* that reverses something, an *event* of undoing, a willed *practice* of separation, an *aesthetic style*. I wouldn’t want to rule anything else. Detaching subjects is also a *way of governing* that bleeds into indifference and the suspension or absence or withdrawal of care. Second, and to loop back to Coleman’s point about the blurring of the

punctual and dispersed, detachment comes in many intensities and rhythms and (de)composes worlds in a multitude of ways. Sometimes, personal or structural detachments are violent, interrupting and undoing and ending a world. At other times, gaps open up slowly over prolonged durations. In our everyday lives, detaching can be a cruelty, survival tactic, act of love, a long-learned habit, a new beginning.

All of which is to say that detachment is not simply the inverse of attachment. However, for me what distinguishes detachment is that it involve the absence of promise, obligation, and proposal from the relation with an ‘object’. Insisting that detachment is so many kinds of things – style, event, process, practice, and so on – is to avoid equating it with a primordial negativity.

In this context, I’m intrigued by Cockayne and Ruez’s repurposing of the term ‘form of attachment’ to ‘form of detachment’. Forms of detachment would not only be utopian-practical political projects, like family or prison abolition, but also be a name for the patterns of detachments that accompany objects of attachment. Forms of detachment would be composed of all manner of events of detachment, multi-scalar processes of detaching, learnt and repeated practices of detaching, and so on. Perhaps my term ‘scene of attachment’ can be similarly repurposed. A ‘scene of detachment’ would be that rare occurrence where the absence of the promise of the object is intensely present. They would be punctual occasions of felt separation from an ‘object’; a return to a place from childhood where nothing is felt, boredom greeting ever more urgent claims of climate emergency, a demand not met. Scenes of detachment are occasions of intensified indifference.

### Concluding comments: A hope

I haven’t covered all that was raised by the four wonderful responses. This is not a lament for how brief this piece has to be, or an apology, but an affirmation that thought in conversation shouldn’t aspire to be exhaustive. Instead of issuing a defence or clarification, I hope to have sustained a conversation about the concept of attachment amid an unsettling of the taken-for-grantedness of ‘thinking relationally’. A

conversation that I hope will continue and perhaps opens up a research agenda for a cultural geography of attachment, at a time when cultivating detachments to damaging worlds and proliferating new objects of attachment feels intensely urgent.


### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### ORCID iD

Ben Anderson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9541-6142>

### References

- Ahmed S (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. London: Routledge.
- Anderson B (2021) Affect and critique: A politics of boredom. *Environment and Society D: Society and Space* 39(2): 197–217.
- Anderson B (2023) Boredom and the politics of climate change. *Scottish Geographical Journal*.
- Anderson B, et al. (2020) Brexit: Modes of uncertainty and futures in an impasse. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 45(2): 256–269.
- Berlant L (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. London: Duke University Press.
- Cockayne D and Ruez D (2023) Inconvenience, ambivalence, and abolition: A politics of attachment and detachment in geography. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, this issue.
- Coleman R (2023) Economies of attachment: Promissory objects, differentiation, and other futures? *Dialogues in Human Geography*, this issue.
- Latour B (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rose M (2023) Attachment: A question of how and a question of why? *Dialogues in Human Geography*, this issue.
- Zhang V (2023) Desire's misrecognitions, or the promise of mutable attachments. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, this issue.