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**Affective value and the significance of understanding disabled youth's intensification of affects**

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to bring to the forefront the mutual affective negotiations one young man with autism makes when navigating various social contexts having previously attended public school in Nova Scotia, Canada. In particular, I make use of Sara Ahmed's specificities of affect (i.e. hate, fear, shame, disgust and happiness) as her work lends to accessing his sentient and emotive becomings. This is important as there is unfamiliarity on disabled youth's emergent, affective exchanges with others. I argue that paying attention to bodily affects and how they materialise on the surface of the skin offers a productive space to understand better disability narratives. It is the intensification of affects that ensue for disabled youth that profoundly inform their discursive thought and future life trajectories.

**Key words**

affect, youth, disability, education

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**Introduction**

Our mutual affective encounters with others, with places, with things are our stories. Our bodies feel, sense, and are never fully complete. Bodies are always in the process of becoming and situated in time. When we *perform*, when we *feel*, when we *respond* it is the mutual interdependences between bodies that inform our future actions, to move towards or away from a relation (Braidotti, 2005; Goodley, Liddiard, & Runswick-Cole, 2018). It is the instantaneous affects between bodies that build on the surface of our skin, that seep in slowly over time, mercifully and at times unforgivingly. In this paper, I bring to the forefront the mutual affective negotiations that happened for one young man with autism having attended public school in Nova Scotia, Canada. Frank was 34 years old at the time of our interview and spoke extremely candidly about his social encounters with peers. Here, I aim to draw readers' attention to Frank's visceral, sentient and situated moments as there is an unfamiliarity on disabled youth's affective exchanges with others. "Bodies and subjects are socially created in the affirmative actualisation of the encounter between subjects" and therefore, it is important to prioritize and illuminate the mutual interdependence that can give rise to new processes of becoming (Braidotti, 2005; Roets & Braidotti, 2012, p. 166). Explicitly, I want readers to feel the creative becomings that happen for Frank when entering into relations with his peers at school.

However, I make a disclaimer upfront that it is challenging to write about the situated, felt dimensions of one's affective embodiment. I recognize the impossibilities in relaying

another's mediated productions. I am merely on the boundaries of Frank's story. I am confined to text, to syntax and that makes this writing fraught with tension. My fear is that I will disembody Frank's story in the language I use. I know I cannot possibly give full justice to Frank's story, but I must try. As Runswick-Cole (2016) indicates, "this *thing* called autism is everywhere" and it is the "contemporary cultural autism story told about people with the label that drowns out all other stories" (pg. 25-26, emphasis in original). Therefore, we must push on and immerse ourselves in bodily thought. We must prioritize the productive situated lives that disabled<sup>1</sup> people experience and share their narratives. Stories that account for their embodied lives rather than a body constrained in medical discourse.

This paper begins with the recognition of bodily difference and invariably recognition that the affective body comes into existence in moments. Affect, as Massumi (2002) writes is "irreducibly bodily and autonomic", an "already felt" state at "the surface of the body" (p. 25, p. 28). In particular, I acknowledge when telling Frank's story that his body is filled with a magnitude of complex forces and intensities and as such, his story is more than a history of medicine, of political activism, and of social regulation. A person's embodiment is located by the connections one makes to both human and non-human things and filled with a multiplicity of affectivities [i.e. hate, fear, happiness, shame, awkwardness] ((Reddington & Price, 2016; Reddington, 2017; Reddington & Price, 2018). I also recognize from the onset that attempting to unfold one young man with autism situated embodiment is constrained from the start. It is

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<sup>1</sup> As a critical disability scholar, I intentionally apply the phrase *disabled person* as a way to reclaim disability as not something "added on" or "separate", but a significant part of one's identity and act as a political statement to reclaim power and agency.

previous theorizations "on" the autistic body; the pathologized body, the socially regulated body, the performative body, the gendered body that deeply impress upon the emotional body and leave a trace on the surface of the skin that restricts 'what a body can do' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 21). As Crowley (2010) explains being and becoming disabled is always held in tension; the insolubility of disability – the impossibility of the label to ever be without trace – its utterance reverberates like white noise (p.552). Here, as I attempt to open up Frank's story, you will witness the moments he is held in tension; his body inevitably tied to power, to discourse and to medical criteria. Yet, you will also see how Frank's embodiment is constituted through movement and mutual affective connections with both human and non-human things. This dimension of Frank's story is made visible by prioritizing his feelings, senses and bodily acts where we get to see up close his composition of forces, intensities and intersections as he traverses across the educational landscape. As Gatens (2000) reminds us the body can never be viewed as final or a finished product as it is always in composition with other things. In order to prioritize the unfolding of Frank's situated becomings, I make use of Sara Ahmed's (2004a, 2004b) specificities of affect (i.e. hate, fear, shame, disgust and happiness) as her work lends to showing up close his sentient and emotive becomings. That is, through my readings of Ahmed, I can better illustrate the flux of intensities that spill and seep across Frank's body when making connections to others.

Ahmed (2004a) not making distinctions between affect and emotion explains how affect is bound between bodies where multiplicity of affects 'stick' to the surface of the skin. "Bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others" (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 1). That is, affects circulate between subjects and objects, and assign what she calls "affective value"

where feelings become '*stuck*' to particular subjects, objects or spaces. This saturation of affect that assigns affective value is prioritized through her question of "What sticks?" (p. 11).

Ahmed's agenda to pose the question, "What sticks?" is useful here as it offers a productive way to connect to Frank's social processes at an ontological level. It is with this question that Ahmed productively articulates how affects leave a trace or a mark on the body and how this accumulative affect informs future bodily movements. She similarly reminds us that affect is also shaped by our own historicity.

Some words stick because they become attached *through* particular affects. So, for example, someone will hurl racial insults ... precisely because they are affective, although it is not always guaranteed that the other will be 'impressed upon' or hurt in a way that follows from the history of insults. It is the affective nature of hate speech that allows us to understand that whether such speech works or fails to work is not really the important question. Rather, the important question is: *What effects do such encounters have on the bodies of others who become transformed into objects of hate?* (Ahmed, 2004a, p.60)

Mutual affectual interdependence is the thread of human experience and through my readings of Ahmed's specificities on affect I aim to unpack momentarily Frank's joys, pains, fears and visceral sensations. In thinking through affect, I want readers to feel the emotional labour Frank endures when positioned as a certain kind of subject in school and to bring to the surface the actual 'doing' agents *on* his body (i.e. school structures and rules, dominant peer forces). "The surfaces and boundaries of the global body materialize through processes of intensification in where the bodies of others are both felt and read *like me or not like me*" (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 38, emphasis added). Affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves" (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 1, emphasis in original). It is embodied writings that can bring us closer to the experiences of individual lives.

"How we come to feel or emote is the consequence of our relationship with others. We affect others and they affect us" (Goodley, Liddiard, & Runswick-Cole, 2018. p. 200).

As Hemming (2005) asserts affect can deepen our vision of the terrain we are studying by prioritizing its texture. "Textual affects have the capacity to instigate corporeal affects, to teach new milieus of difference, or imbue new fragments of experience upon the bodies that behold them" (Hickey-Moody, 2006, p. 193). That is, re-conceptualizing Frank's schooling through a multitude of affects gets us closer to how he has become rendered intelligible or unintelligible within school contexts. As Grosz (1994) argues "the body has remained a conceptual blind spot in both Western philosophical thought and contemporary feminist theory" (p. 3). We need to bring bodies back into discussion to move the focus away from bodies as products of discourse to bodies as fleshy, felt existences. Part of this understanding is recognition of the body still in becoming and the daily reality of navigating a multiplicity of social contexts as a disabled young man attending a public school in Canada. In particular, by prioritizing one disabled youth's intensification of affects the intent is to find out if thinking through affect might be an effective future conceptual tool for understanding disabled youth experiences in school. I hope the language I put forward in my analysis can do some justice to the richness of Frank's life. I turn now to share his experiences through Ahmed's specificities of affect. The analysis is largely focused on Frank's relationships with his peers and his affective movements with others from elementary school through to his high school years.

**Frank:**

Early on in the first interview, Frank recalled how he followed one boy named Ted during his elementary school years as he recognized Ted as the most 'accommodating' of his schoolmates. Frank's relationship with Ted, however, ended in upper elementary. Ted located what Frank called, 'more popular peers to spend time with' and therefore, actively chose to ignore Frank. Frank expressed his frustration when recalling his time with Ted and his desire to preserve the friendship. Frank then spoke further of his affective relations with peers in elementary school.

Frank: I would hang around people and try to engage and associate myself with them and how receptive various boys and girls were to that varied. I was a target of bullies and the shape of bullying came into effect more so in junior high than elementary.

Sarah: When you say a target of bullies what do you mean by that?

Frank: Um ... getting made fun of ... getting physically attacked at times.

Sarah: Do you remember what kind of things they did?

Frank: Very little good. I can't remember the exact terminology now. Nerd was a big one; this is elementary now. Um ... jerk, dork, brainy also scaredeecat these kinds of things.

Sarah: Do you remember what you did when they said these names?

Frank: I would lash out somehow. I didn't really use my words that much. I would throw rocks. I would try to punch back. And I got to admit I was pretty big on using the physical stuff myself. I remember hitting someone over the head with a lunchbox. I also got enough gumption to say a few times, 'Fuck you' and that's when they got physical, and I remember in grade six a boy looking around and then 'pow' right in the gut!

A series of intensities circulated between Frank and his peers when navigating the collective social dimensions of the playground. It is the affectual intensities of hurt that initially slide across Frank's body when he is rejected by his elementary peers. This hurt ignites his resistance where he instantaneously throws rocks, applies force and shouts profanities. Frank's fleeing, lashing out and even getting up enough gumption to say, 'fuck you' makes vivid his desires to rupture his



peripheral status. As much as he desires new social trajectories, what sticks to the surface of Frank's skin are continual affects of hurt. "If we feel another hurts us, then we may attribute that feeling to the other, such that the other is read as the impression of the negative. In other words, the 'It hurts' becomes, 'You hurt me'" (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 30). Soon after, Frank shifted to identify the boys he aspired to be with.

Frank: The cool boys were athletic, popular, bold, well liked; some were rough around the edges; the big things were athletic. Some were smarter than others, and it is hard to put a finger on it, but I remember the boys who were the most popular were those traits I just reamed off.

Sarah: When you say bold what do you mean?

Frank: [big loud voice ] THEY MAKE A LOT OF JOKES, AND THEY WOULD BE REALLY ANIMATED, REMEMBER THAT ON DUKES OF HAZARD REMEMBER THAT! They were confident! They were loud, but they were in on the jokes.

Sarah: How would you describe yourself?

Frank: Unbold [laughs], the opposite of that. I have always had a hard time having that free and easy conversation getting away from awkwardness. I would be stunted. I couldn't go in some locker room with a funny rant of something I saw on the A Team or something I was just not that kind of person. It would sound stunted and just really dumb.

Athleticism, boldness, and confidence signified to Frank what was required to be a successful boy in school. Frank in this way positioned his own body outside the boundary of acceptability and accumulates affects of shame when unable to perform in hegemonic masculine ways. Ahmed (2004a) explains how shame is an "intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body" (p. 103). She explains that affects of shame produce this notion of the "body against itself" (p. 103) and this is seen when Frank describes his feelings of awkwardness and sounding 'stunted' when negotiating peer relations with dominant boys and this continued as he entered junior high.

Frank: The influx of people from other elementary schools when entering junior high was

something that I was not ready for. I did not know these people from Adam or Eve, and I had to find a way to relate to these people and I just couldn't. I felt really awkward around them. I felt very closed around them, and girls were something I couldn't even conceive of, and I got picked on because I couldn't advance towards them in any real, shape or form. I got called faggot a lot that became a very popular word and there was one guy, in particular, in grade eight who every single day when we crossed paths, he would take it upon himself to make sure no one was watching, and then he would SMASH me in my shoulder as hard as he could [raises his voice] along with calling me a faggot! I had a weight problem. I had an acne problem, and hygiene was not where it needed to be, and I didn't understand what this whole puberty bullshit was, and they knew it... That was the transition to junior high it suuckkked!!

Frank spoke candidly about his social relations to others upon entry to junior high. He was marginalized once again through acts of violence and homophobic labelling. Pascoe (2007) explains how dominant boys adopt a fag discourse not to signify feminine qualities to another, but to assert power over others. This is evidenced when Frank was punched in the shoulder and called a faggot; his body constrained within the institutional gender order. The peripheral social status combined with having to navigate daily physical penetrations and verbal violence generates intense unwelcoming affects for Frank. It is the threat posed by the bodies of others that registers on his skin and *sticks* (Ahmed, 2004a). "Bodies are disorganized and reorganized as they face others who are already recognized as hated or loved, as giving pain or pleasure" (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 33).

Frank then told me of how he attempted to reorganize himself in relation to others. He expressed how he wanted something different and made a strategic move to locate peers who were what he referred to as the more 'passive and tolerant' to sit with between classes. Malins (2004) expresses how "bodies tend to desire their own order and organisation" where individuals will "make their own movements towards stratification and limitation, and toward the reassuring constancy it provides" (p.87). However, it was Frank's earlier altercations with dominant bodies, being pounded in the shoulder every single day, that left a trace on his body and left a continual

residual of fear and pain. Ahmed writes (2004a)

...we fear an object that approaches us. Fear, like pain, is felt as an unpleasant form of intensity. But while the lived experience of fear may be unpleasant in the present, the unpleasantness of fear also relates to the future. Fear involves an *anticipation* of hurt or injury. Fear projects us from the present into a future. But the feeling of fear presses us into that future as an intense bodily experience in the present. One sweats, one's heart races, one's whole body becomes an unpleasant intensity, an impression that overwhelms us and pushes us back with the force of its negation, which may sometimes involve taking flight, and other times may involve paralysis. So, the object that we fear is not simply before us, or in front of us, but impresses upon us in the present, as an anticipated pain in the future (p.65, emphasis in original).

Frank's body is filled with a historicity of fear, pain and anger and this is expressed when he tells of confronting his school bully twenty years later.

Frank: The gentleman, I use that word loosely gentleman, who hit me on the shoulder on a daily basis why he felt he needed to do it I don't know. I never did anything to him. I actually contacted him to ask him what his fucking problem was. And I was able to track him down. I looked up his last name and managed to get him on the phone and said, 'Yeah this is Frank \_\_\_\_\_ do you remember me and the nickname spud head and do you remember smashing me in my shoulder on a daily basis?' Bully: 'Yeah I think I do' Frank: 'Why the hell did you do that you son of a bitch?' This was basically my theme, and he was taken back by it and rightfully so as I am calling him out for a duel. Bully: 'I don't know what to tell ya, I am sorry. I was stupid back then. I am sorry. But, if you want to take a swing at me pal you better be ready to fucking put me to sleep'. He could beat the shit out of me back then and I can't see why he couldn't now. But the point is here I was a grown man making a call to a guy essentially challenging him to a fist fight. 'Name the time, name the place you mother fucker, I will take you down' and those three responses, he kind of hummed and hawed about it. The most lucid thing I came up with during the call was, 'If I told you, I have been scarred for life from the shit you put me through and all your brood back in grade eight would that mean anything to you, does that have any kind of significance for you?' and it didn't really all the bully could do was hum and haw. Obviously, we had no contact. I didn't put him fucking to sleep. I couldn't find him and I probably wouldn't know him even if he was in this room right now.

Frank's encounter with his former bully produced a series of intensities. It is affects of hurt, anger and fear that circulates between Frank and his bully, and once again, *sticks* to the surface of his skin. Ahmed (2004a) describes how series of affects are connected (i.e. pain, fear, hate) and how together they produce an "unpleasant form of intensity" (p. 65). Hate "involves a

feeling of *againstness* that is always, in the phenomenological sense, intentional" and this is what Frank embodies when encountering his bully (Ahmed 2004a, p. 49, emphasis added). From his bully exchange, we see how engagements with others leave a lasting impression on his body and not a welcoming one. It is affects of hate, pain and anger that later inform other intersubjective experiences Frank embodies when connecting to various school social processes. This is seen when he describes an exchange with his parents over attending an awards event at school.

Frank: I do remember winning an award or being told that I was going to win one, third-best achievement in science. There was actually an awards ceremony to receive the award and I didn't want to go. I can't remember how my parents found out about it, but they did and they said, 'Frank you won an award, and you don't want to go to school to get it, why not?' Frank: 'I just don't want to' Parents: 'Why not?' Frank: 'Because I am embarrassed by it'. It was for being brainy for something, and I honestly believed at that point it didn't matter if you were smart, what mattered was could you score a hat trick every time you played and could you bang a chick. These were things that existed even when you were fourteen or fifteen. Or could you play smoke and water all those things were cool things, a nerd in school or academic award winner was not a cool thing to be so rather than pouring gas onto the fire that was already burning I just chose not to go and accept this award. I got talked out of it and ended up going to the show and my parents said, 'You have to go to it'. I went and got my little fucking award and hung it up on a little thumbtack in my room, and there it was— happy now! That sort of thing, given the choice to do it again, I would not accept it.

Frank recognized social prowess in school included embodying a macho masculine bravado with acts of 'banging a chick' and 'scoring goals'. Ahmed (2004a) explains how affects can consume the subject and burn on the surface of the body. She uses the example of the child and the bear to explain how bodies produce images informing how one then chooses to move.

The child sees the bear and is afraid. Now, the Dumb View, would be that the bear makes the child afraid, and that the bodily symptoms of fear are automatic (pulse rate, sweating, and so on). Functionalist models of emotion, which draw on evolutionary theory, might say that the fear has a function: to protect the child from danger, to allow survival...But the story, even in its 'bear bones' is not so simple. Why is the child afraid of the bear? The child must 'already know' the bear is fearsome. The decision is not made necessarily by her, and it might not even be dependent on past experiences. This could be a first time 'encounter', and the child still runs for it. But what is she running from? What does she see when she sees the bear? We have an image of the bear as an animal *to be feared*, as

an image that is shaped by cultural histories and memories. When we encounter the bear we already have an impression of the risks of the encounter, as an impression that is felt on the surface of the skin (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 7, emphasis in original).

Ahmed's analogy of the bear and child is helpful when actualizing Frank's situated encounters with various social processes and shows how he deeply desired acceptance; yet his body remained *stuck*. It is his previous encounters, the historicity of rejection, that leaves a mark. "To be affected by something is to evaluate that thing. Evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn towards things. To give value to things is to shape what is near us" (Ahmed, 2010, p.31). Frank's historicity of rejection informs his angst and uneasiness when entering high school. It is heightened even further when his father encourages him to play varsity football upon entry to high school.

Frank: I went to the tryouts and no one ever said you were cut so I just stuck around and played. In grade eleven, I was given the nickname *thunderbolt*. It was not a term of endearment. It was a term of insult! [raises his voice]. But, there was nothing I could do about it. Me running as fast as I can and still being comparatively slow... 'yeah *thunderbolt* scores [Frank then echoed ...rarely scored], '*thunderbolt* catches' [rarely caught], '*thunderbolt* blocks' [rarely blocked]. But, it wasn't encouraging it was sarcasm at its finest. But, if you don't want to be called *thunderbolt* or be made fun of or be belittled than fucking play better is the message. I couldn't.

Frank's entry into football is filled with intensity. His marginalized status was compounded when his teammates ostracized his lack of skill and called him, *thunderbolt*. It was the pressure to keep up and navigate "the 'demands' of the cock group" that produced affects of anger for Frank (Salisbury & Jackson, 1996, p.194). Frank was cognizant of why he was not accepted by his football mates and in his final year of school took measures to change this by going to the gym. Having joined the gym Frank returned with bigger muscles and a faster body.

The physical sense of maleness is not a simple thing. It involves size and shape, habits of posture and movement, particularly physical skills, and the lack of others, the image of one's own body, the way it is presented to other people and the ways they respond to it [and] the way it operates at work and in sexual relations (Connell, 1987, p. 84).

With heightened physique Frank inserted again and tried to gain a more welcoming experience with his football mates.

Frank: In grade twelve I got some playing time and it got gradually more fun, and I was gradually more respected because I could do more things. I joined the gym. I wasn't as fat as I was. I had some God given talents, but they didn't come from God, they came from me doing push ups seven weeks straight in the gym. And in my grade twelve year, I was just happy to walk around in my purple jacket and purple jersey and 'woo... you won yesterday' (people saying things to him in the hallways) and at that point I felt part of the team.

Sarah: What did you like about the jacket?

Frank: It was a leather football jacket from the varsity team and YAY! [raises his voice]. It showed that I am on the team! I wouldn't wear it if I wasn't on the team so yay I am gonna wear this, and I am proud of it!

Frank's adornment of the purple jacket involved an orientation to something good, producing a series of happy affects. As Ahmed (2010) acknowledges

...we are moved by things. And in being moved, we make things. An object can be affective by virtue of its location (the object might be *here*, which is *where* I experience this or that affect) and the time of its appearance (the object might be *now*, which is *when* I experience this or that affect). To experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object, but to 'whatever' is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival (p. 33)

It is this connection to the object, the football jacket, that *sticks* with Frank and his association to the object becomes a shared happy social connection with his peers during his final year of school.

### **Conclusion:**

In this paper, we see the mutual affective negotiations that give rise to a series of productive movements and creative becomings for one young man named Frank having attended public school in Nova Scotia, Canada. Here, it is Frank's story that reminds us of the relevance of

thinking about young bodies as emergent and always in the process of becoming. In particular, his story brings forth questions about *how one might live, who we are* and *what a body is capable of* when we prioritize the situated affectual happenings of individual experience. It is Ahmed's specificities of affect (i.e. hate, pain, fear, shame) that enabled a space for readers to access Frank's situated embodiment. Through my readings of Ahmed's affect, I could capture the moments Frank "escape[d] forms of subjection" and "transform[d] relations of domination" when navigating multiple social forces (Ahmed, 2000, p. 9). For example, thinking through affects of pain allowed us to access the complex and intensive forces that oozed across the surface of Frank's skin when he failed to connect with dominant boys in the playground in his early years. This led to the intensification of anger as evidenced when he lashed out by throwing rocks and shouting profanities. As we moved across Frank's schooling, the affects of pain, anger and fear similarly built on the surface of his body; leaving a mark. Here, I argue the relevance and importance of mapping disabled youth's intensification of affects in connection to social processes as it foregrounds an argument for understanding disabled youth at an ontological level. That is, there is value in exploring the affectivities of disabled youth as it generates new ways of knowing and similarly identifies a space to identify the social inequalities that permeate for disabled youth.

I suggest mapping the intensification of affects offers a space for listening, exploration and openness. It similarly can challenge unjust normative structures and potentially show what is at stake for disabled youth when navigating multiple social processes (Cifor, 2016; Youdell, 2011). As Gregg and Seigworth (2010) suggest affect theory is central to social justice work as it "exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm" (p. 7). That is, through affect we can put forth a refusal of the binary, normative/subjugated and open up new possibilities for

understanding disabled youth's multiple subjectivities (Youdell, 2011). This includes the relevance of mapping the affects of anger, hate and fear to identify where the social inequalities exist and to revamp the traditional ways we think about disabled youth. As Cifor (2016) social inequalities can be "fleshed out and confronted" through affect (p. 7). "Struggling against injustice in part is about how affects move us into a different relation to the social norms that we wish to contest or the injury we wish to heal" (Cifor, 2016, p.8). As hooks (2009) reminds us, "education should be liberatory" and calls for recognition of the affective body (p. 19). This involves focusing on the affects that emerge between bodies, the process; rather, than positioning of subjects (Olsson, 2009). My hope is that this engagement with affect will open up new pedagogies to advance paying attention to body's situated potentialities and in the process enact more socially just practices for all children and youth.



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