

Networked Affect

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The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

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This book was set in Stone by the MIT Press. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Networked affect / edited by Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-02864-6 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Affect (Psychology)—Social aspects. 2. Emotions. 3. Social networks. 4. Internet—Social aspects. I. Hillis, Ken. II. Paasonen, Susanna, 1975– III. Petit, Michael.

BF531.N48 2015

302.23'1—dc23

2014025224

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

3 Queer Reverb: Tumblr, Affect, Time

Alexander Cho

Field Notes, March 13, 2011:

There is a picture of a young man, dark-haired, extreme close-up. A smooth young face that is on its way to premature age—you can see it around his eyes, in the smallest wrinkles. It is an old black-and-white photo, so old that the emulsion is deteriorating and his cheek fades into an indeterminate grayness. All I can really see are his sharp cheekbones, dark brow, and eyes, looking off to the side.

Queerlife¹ has been posting a lot of these vintage images recently. They go without comment, without clear historical referent. It is image upon image, times overlapping and redoubling. I can't help but feel that there is something erotic in voyeurism across time. Looking into the past of young men.

Like many people I know, I stumbled into Tumblr through porn. In early 2009, a friend of mine in Austin told me about a new “blog” some art-queer friends of his started that did nothing but post pictures, usually arty porn you'd never see anywhere else. I visited the site. I didn't realize I would step into a universe of porn portraiture, of images cascading upon images upon images, an endless saturation. But it wasn't just porn. Tumblr as a whole is a massive churning machine of evocative photos, image aggregation on steroids, 37.5 million posts *per day*.² It was disorienting, no one explained very much with words, there were no “profiles” like Facebook, there were no “friends,” there were no clear ways to traverse or search the network—just post after post of explanationless images, traded from one anonymous Tumblr user to another. A gorgeous landscape photo of a tropical beach after a photo of a genderqueer boy wearing a three-piece suit after a galactic vision constellated with Lady Gaga in Alexander McQueen heels.

I realized very quickly that there is a huge queer ecosystem on Tumblr.³ Queer Tumblr users circulate porn, flirt, provide support to deal with homophobia as well as advice on coming out, disseminate news pertinent to LGBT communities, organize real-life meet-ups, post pictures of themselves, “reblog” pictures of others, “like” pictures of sexy men and women, post seemingly unqueer pictures of art, design, architecture, landscape photography, and alter the HTML and CSS code of their Tumblrs in order to express their individuality. This was not surprising; historically, queer people have had

a significant relationship with internet technologies, due to our precarious position as a sexual minority that must slip so-called private behavior in and out of public space. The internet, with its ability to link people across geography and under the cloak of anonymity, has historically afforded queer people the chance to express themselves in a way that may be awkward, uncomfortable, or unsafe in public (Alexander 2002a, 2002b; Egan, 2000; Campbell, 2004; Gross 2003, 2004; Hillis 2009).

However, Tumblr felt different from 1990s-era Web 1.0 blogs full of pages of long-form, cathartic HTML text. Instead of literal testimonial and narrative storytelling, it appeared that Tumblr users favored communication through image, mostly without attribution or caption; they relied less on text and more on the felt register of suggestive imagery, one of intimation, assemblage, intensity, and aesthetic. Tumblr seemed like a terrain of affinities speaking at a thousand miles a minute, one that regarded written language as a simple, runty cousin. My feeling of disorientation upon first entering the space was like being immersed in language that didn't quite make sense—all there was was the gist. I sensed that there was *something else* being circulated here, something that resisted definition and classic semiotic formulas. It seemed, from the first moments I was in the space, that Tumblr traded in affect.

I had the sense that to understand Tumblr, I needed to fully immerse myself in it. It is not a space that rewards piecemeal interloping. I decided to make my own Tumblr in the fall of 2009. I have made friends, flirted, posted a ton of pictures and videos, ranted, and gotten off. This chapter draws on three years of immersive participant observation in LGBTQ Tumblr communities to examine the affective dynamics of a subset of practices of queer users. These practices call attention to cyclicity, repetition, and refrain as crucial in understanding the flow of affect, and I suggest that the dynamics I outline here are useful in understanding the properties of the traffic of affect on Tumblr more generally and possibly across social media writ large. My discussion of these practices also traces the contours of a possible resistant queer politics rooted in the interplay of cyclical, erotic, and melancholic queer temporalities that linger in a stubborn persistence of the past. I also offer the metaphor of “reverb” as part of the effort to develop a vocabulary to describe how affect channels and circulates in social media environments.

The Shape of Affect

Affect is generally conceived as a force or intensity that exists somewhere in between an embodied, sensorial experience and the naming of an emotion. In other words, affect is a moment of suspense, a shift, an attunement between entities. As Gregg and Seigworth (2010, 1) explain, “Affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body ... in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds ... visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious

knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion.” Contemporary affect theorists understand that beings are always in the process of becoming, entwined in a map of forces that ebb and flow, one with profound real, embodied consequences. In other words, an analysis vis-à-vis affect adopts a resistance to the neatness of the “subject” as the primary nodal point of reference in favor of an understanding of interlocking forces and fields of intensity. Massumi (1995, 2002) equates affect with intensity and emergence, a plane of the virtual, the generative potential of the event not yet determined. In contrast, “emotion” such as “anger” or “happiness” is the precipitate, the concretized fallout after a subtractive logic of cognition. Or as Thrift states, quoting Steven D. Brown and Paul Stenner, “Emotions we experience are merely the names given to differently assembled euphoric or dysphoric relationships, akin to chords” (Thrift 2004, 62).

A key concept for understanding this understanding of affect, inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), is the idea of the assemblage, a way of thinking about interconnection as messy, overlapping, and inseparable. Where classical modernists saw discrete entities (such as a clean “subject”), and where structuralists envisioned a rigid schema of relations (such as in linguistics or kinship), the assemblage supposes constant multiplicities: “A multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 8). As queer theorist Jasbir Puar (2007, 212) explains, the idea of assemblage “is attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency.” Nonlinear, incoherent, and impermanent are all very good ways to describe an initial encounter with Tumblr. You are the sum of your posts, which are a visualization of your connections to others—a porous, living assemblage.

An attention to affect recognizes the necessity but also the limits of a linguistic model of semiotic meaning. The two concepts should not be thought of as opposite, but rather as interrelated: affect is the condition of surplus and intensity; representational language is a system of codes and containment.⁴ Rather than understand meaning strictly as a formula of signifier and signified, an attention to affect is a focus on excess, that which overfills or cannot be captured in language. As Jack Katz states, there is a whole register of “ways of expressing something going on that talk cannot grasp” (cited in Thrift 2004, 60). For this reason, unlike other social media, Tumblr offers a unique opportunity to trace the lines of intensity and affinity that connect people through affect. It is as if Tumblr’s operational logic is the old saying, “A picture is worth a thousand words.”⁵

In contrast to image-based networks such as Flickr or Instagram that emphasize amateur photography, the vast majority of images on any given Tumblr are reblogged from others in a stream, which were reblogged from others, and so on. Tumblr’s structure and its users deemphasize the question of origin or authorship at the level of the image—often, the original poster of an image will have pirated that image from

elsewhere on the net, posting it with no credit, leaving the question of origin unanswerable. In this way, the locus of authorship on Tumblr is less focused on the creation or capture of an original image and located instead around the personalized stream as a whole, a dynamic of constant movement and active selection. The authorial locus on Tumblr is not the act of creation; it is the act of *curation*. The experience of Tumblr is less like reading a LiveJournal blog and more like walking through a million different constantly shifting galleries—both may contain serious emotional heft and personal investment, but the latter relies much more on aesthetics, intimation, sensibility, and movement—in short, affect.

Field Notes: July 7, 2010:

Yesterday I had to wake up very early to take my friend Julie to the airport. I stood in front of my bathroom mirror with tousled bedhead, grey T-shirt, and squinty eyes. Sounds unsexy, but at that moment, at 5 a.m., it seemed cute. *I would want to wake up next to me*, I thought. I took a picture in the mirror. I posted it to Tumblr. It wasn't even GPOYW (gratuitous picture of yourself Wednesday). When I arrived back home I decided to go back to sleep. A few hours later, I woke up and checked Tumblr. Ursa had liked my photo. MathewMack reblogged it. Springeve liked it. And Claggwagg did too. It's bounced around the Tumblr sphere six times, as far as I can tell. I was surprised. I joined, for a brief blip, the Tumblr cute guy club. Technovalidation.

Queer Analytics

My use of “queer” as an analytic category is multivalent and slippery. I mean, on one level, that I train my attention toward the circulation of images and other posts among a highly visible group of Tumblr users that identify as LGBTQ, or any nonheteronormative permutation thereof. This is in step with a history of queer people using the internet from its earliest iterations to express identity and articulate connection in a way that spans real and virtual geographies as well as tempers the risk of expressing sexuality in a traditional public sphere.

In a broader sense, drawing inspiration from Cathy Cohen, I invoke “queer” as an agenda that is widely encompassing in the experience of alterity—a relational stance that trains its eye on a “shared marginal relationship to dominant power” (Cohen 2005, 43). I identify this stance less as a deliberately inclusive political movement and more as a palpable, subterranean rhythm of bad queer feeling⁶ that runs through much of the Tumblr landscape I have observed, regardless of any one person's overt claim to static sexual orientation. It is the dark optimism of a hovering possibility for community, the release of self-expression in the midst of a system that you perceive to be tilted against you, and the potential for kinship and intimacy outside of heteronormative family and relationship structures. In a related vein, I am inspired by Sara Ahmed's “queer phenomenology” (2006) as a way of thinking about the sorts of objects that

orient us toward a sensibility or disposition that traverses strict categories of identity. The Tumblr I have observed, in other words, is full of a lot of snark, vaguely antistatist politics, and frustrated sexual yearning.

The third use of “queer” in this essay draws on its older meaning—peculiar, unsettling, weird. Rather than apply it to a person or user, I invoke it to describe an overwhelming sensation of strangeness upon encountering and trying to “figure out” Tumblr. It is a feeling of eerie dislocation, it is elusive, a shock of dumbness, the sense that you may not be able to understand the (primarily visual) vocabulary being used around you, an alien architecture of affinity and attunement that at first glance evades literal understanding. In the following section, I explore this queer feeling as a function of image moving along the vector of time, a trajectory that is warped, coiled, broken, and multiple, or at the very least, *not straight*.

I want to be clear in that I am not attributing these specific affective dynamics as they manifest on Tumblr only to queer users. Instead, I am focusing on a very small subset of the practices of queer users because I believe they demonstrate well the underpinnings of affective dynamics that characterize user interaction on Tumblr generally. Because queer people have had a historically fraught relationship with expressing sexuality in public, they have long relied on underground economies of expression and relation that traffic in code, affinity, and intuition rather than the literal (Muñoz 1999; Warner 2005). In the words of Ann Cvetkovich (2003), queer people have long relied on an “archive of feelings”—ephemeral, unofficial, evasive—as opposed to literal institutionalized records in order to build community and share history. Queer users of Tumblr continue this tradition, and attention to their practices can highlight the felt dynamics of this social media platform, though they are in no way the only people who use Tumblr in this manner.

Ultimately, however, this argument is not simply about how queer people use Tumblr. Rather, it pays attention to a small subset of the practices of a group of queer people to demonstrate that there is a dynamic of connection and interaction on Tumblr based on a nonlinear, atemporal rhizomal exchange of affect and sensation, a “queer reverb” of repeat and repeat; and there may be a possibility for this sort of transmission to buoy an antinormative or resistant politics.

The following argument regarding the character of time and queer Tumblr users is in two parts. First, among the many practices of such users I focus on the circulation of images that invoke past times as a kind of affective archive, one that purposefully highlights silences and gaps in queer history with floating “recollection-images.” Second, I consider the ways that *intensity* builds on Tumblr through user practices of repetition in various forms. I combine these to suggest the notion of “reverb” as a way of understanding how affect circulates in this social media environment.

Field Notes: October 12, 2010:

There was a very sexy picture of a young man in my Tumblr feed. I traced it back to the original poster, and to my surprise, it's a self-portrait. I sent him a message. We've been e-mailing pictures of ourselves back and forth, some NSFW. He, as far as I can tell, is about 25. Lives in Minneapolis. His room is painted dark green. Lit dimly with large table lamps with old yellow fabric lampshades, fringe and tassel. Short pile carpet. He traffics in prairie arcana. Old west curlicues. Here is a photo of him over his left shoulder, sitting on a large rock, at sunset. He is just inhaling a puff from a cigarette. Wavy hair, the suggestion of curls, suggestion of interiority. We trade compliments. He is flirty. Erotics reaching across space and time.

Archive and the Recollection-Image

Queer people have a troubled relationship with archives and “official” historical narrative. Queerness is systematically erased from the public record as a “private” thing and is difficult to pinpoint in artifacts that endure in institutional memory banks. A reading of queerness and history is a reading between the lines, whether in a coded dedication or an obvious erasure.⁷ Often, queer history can only manifest in what we usually consider secret, ephemeral, or even intuited or felt (Cvetkovich 2003; Arondekar 2005; Dinshaw 2008). Recent efforts in queer studies have attempted to more clearly articulate queer people's relationship to time, or “queer temporality.”⁸ Queer temporality is a way of apprehending being-in-the-world that, in the words of Carolyn Dinshaw (Freeman et al. 2007, 178), insists on a “refusal of linear historicism.” It is one that looks to moments of belatedness, stunted progress, omission from official records, histories of embodied feeling, asynchronicity and repetition as productive places of inquiry, recognizing that queer people, or rather *queerness*, has been relegated as adjacent to or incompatible with Western heteronormative historical narratives.

According to Walter Benjamin (1940), one of the hallmarks of the modern era is a constant movement through “homogenous, empty time,” as opposed to the hauntings and co-occurrences of premodern civilizations and religious time. Attention to queer temporality explodes the idea of such homogenous and empty time, indicting the public face of white, heterosexual Western normativity as its vanguard. Of particular significance to queer people is Freud's application of the famous assertion that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny to the psychic self, so that the location of the “primitive,” temporally, is equivalent to the infant, a location that, by assumed Western heteronormative extension, always places the adult straight white man at the endpoint of psychic maturity (Brickman 2003). In Freud's scheme the illogical and debilitating cyclical reliving of trauma or sadness is diagnosed as melancholy, usually a woman's affliction; proper mourning involves moving past and moving on. Likewise, non-Western “primitive” people are stuck in an infantile holding pattern of psychic development, and “inverts”—gay men and lesbians—have failed to progress to the logical endpoint

of sexual development, are stuck in a sexual vector bending back on itself, an immature phase marked by same-sex attraction. According to this Western heteronormative temporal narrative, those who fail to line up in time's straight-and-narrow, those who are hopelessly primitive, melancholic and hysterical, queer, brown, or black, or some combination thereof, are unfortunately out of time.

How can we recuperate time that is not straight, according to this conception? Elizabeth Freeman suggests that we expand our heuristic to account for embodied experience: "something felt on, with, or as a body, something experienced as a mode of erotic difference or even as a means to express or enact ways of being and connecting that have not yet arrived or never will" (2007, 158); elsewhere she explains that "the stubborn lingering of pastness ... is a hallmark of *queer affect*: a 'revolution' in the old sense of the word, as a turning back" (2010, 8; emphasis added). Embodied experience of the stubborn past: dwelling, melancholia, nostalgia, and camp are a few queer examples, usually marked by deviance—precisely for this reason. So a "queer affect," in relationship to temporality, is one that lingers in a stubborn past, one that dwells in cycles and refuses the tidiness of progress, one that skirts through the archive in ephemeral or evasive ways.

One way the interplay of cyclical, erotic, stubborn, melancholic queer temporality manifests on Tumblr is in its massive traffic in vintage erotica, both male and female. One Tumblr I follow, Encyclopediaofcock, is an assemblage of retro gay porn, retro erotica that is less explicit, such as vintage photos of male sunbathers and pulp fiction covers, and present-day comic book geekery and self-portraits of the Tumblr owner. In one post, he states outright that he refuses to post any sort of contemporary porn. At fifteen to twenty posts a day, all sourced from other Tumblrs, Encyclopediaofcock is just one node in a large ecosystem of retro erotica available to queer affect.

About two weeks into my time on Tumblr, in 2009, I posted a close-up photo of two young men kissing taken by Wolfgang Tillmans, a famous gay male German photographer. There is something visceral about this photo—it looks like it was taken in a hot, sweaty gay club, at the height of the night's excitement. For these two young men it appears that nothing in the world is more important at that moment than their kiss. There is a whiff of something late 1980s, early 1990s about it, in the floppy hairstyles and the track suits that the young men wear—hearkening to a time just before our current tilt to neoliberal gay inclusion, which usually excises carnal display from mainstream depictions of homosexuality. These two young men are so unconcerned with the camera that I remember feeling slightly unsettled the first time I saw this photo, perhaps tapping into my own internalized fears regarding homophobic violence. Perhaps that is why I posted it. I captioned the photo with a link to Tillmans's official gallery homepage, providing no title and no other words.

Watching what happened to this post over the next few weeks was fascinating. It was the first time anything I had posted was reblogged. The long-format version of the post allows me to trace chronologically how this image shot around the Tumblr

landscape. As of this writing, it has thirty-two “notes”—notes get added to a Tumblr post whenever anyone “likes” it by pressing the heart icon on the top of the post page or reblogs it on their own Tumblr—eighteen “likes” and fourteen “reblogs.” To follow one thread: blueboy reblogged it from me, wolf90 reblogged it from blueboy, and con-nialba reblogged it from wolf90. Two Tumblrs that have a large following, springeve and manphile, both of whom specialize in gay male sexy/erotic pictures, reblogged this photo, which further generated a number of reblogs from their followers.

We don’t really know the stories behind these vintage posts. Without any sort of caption or credit viewers are simply left to fill in the blanks with their own assumptions of who these people are. On some level they are empty of narrative, while at the same time they hint at a subterranean queer history. In her work on intercultural cinema, Laura U. Marks (2000) also tackles the idea of history without specific referent. Writing about Marlon Fuentes’s *Bontoc Eulogy* (1996), a film that tells a fictionalized story of a group of Filipino tribespeople who were exhibited at the St. Louis World’s Fair of 1904, by using archival footage of the fair as well as ethnographic footage of anonymous women in the Philippines in moments of grief and despair, Marks employs Deleuze’s idea of the “recollection-image” as a way to understand the relationship between image and gaps in history. As she puts it, “By using these archival images, Fuentes partially redeems them—not by filling in their stories, but by mourning the eternal loss of those stories. They are mediums of distant events that infect the present” (Marks 2000, 53). “Recollection-images,” says Marks, are “those floating, dreamlike images that cannot be assigned a connection to history” (Marks 2000, 37). Following this logic, it is less important for us to know literally who/what/where these people are—*was the Tillmans photo taken in the 80s? 90s? 2000s? Berlin? New York? Were these guys gay? What happened to them? Are they yuppies now? Are they destitute? Are they even alive?*—than to think of them, much like Fuentes’s Filipina elders, as floating images from some barely hinted-at space and time, *calling attention* to the fact that they are allowing us to fill in the blanks with affective charge by virtue of erasure. This is the generative meaning-space of queer temporality—it is a charged vacuum, a conduit for affect. It doesn’t matter what these images are actual documents of—what matters more, in fact, is the “infinite deferral of historical truth” (Marks 2000, 37). It is the displacement and assemblage of these images through an affective archival pointillism that matters for the circulation of Freeman’s “queer affect,” not their actual place in linear historical narrative.

Queer Reverb

One queer Tumblr user explained to me that the best way to get followers and reblogs quickly was, in fact, not to post on queer-inclusive politics or blog sexy pictures, but to make simple repeating GIF animations (see Ash, this volume). These are short captures from movies or TV shows, only seconds long, with subtitled dialogue and no audio.

Significant moments from *Game of Thrones*, *Parks and Rec*, and the early John Waters film *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), for example, play on endless repeat. Often these GIF animations are comical, the punchline to a famous exchange, a silly moment, or simply an expression of feeling such as disgust or frustration—when Kristen Wiig’s character from *Bridesmaids* demolishes an oversized wedding cookie, for example, or Jake the Dog from the cartoon *Adventure Time!*, rolling his eyes, declares, “I never really take anything seriously.” One of my favorites is a two-panel GIF of grainy TV footage of Anita Bryant in 1977, looking proper and composed, with perfectly coiffed hair and demure hoop earrings in the left panel, mouth moving as a subtitle reads, “We were going to go on a crusade across the nation and do away with the homosexuals.” In the next panel, a hand slams a cream pie into her face. The post has 5,500 notes.

I want to make a case for attention to this smallest and most innocuous of Tumblr practices, for I believe it encapsulates the queerness of time on Tumblr and hints at how users trade in affect across the site. The repeating GIF is a perfect moment of refrain, to invoke Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Their explication of the refrain: “It acts upon that which surrounds it, sound or light, extracting from it various vibrations, or decompositions, projections, or transformations. The refrain also has a catalytic function: not only to increase the speed of the exchanges and reactions in that which surrounds it, but also to assure indirect interactions between elements devoid of so-called natural affinity” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 348). Elsewhere Kathleen Stewart, in her essay “Worlding Refrains” (2010), explains the way we feel and move through the world on intuited and sensed registers; for Stewart, logics of discourse or semiotics are leaky and insufficient systems that do a poor job of capturing the flow of forces that create worlds. In her words, a refrain is “a scoring over a world’s repetitions. A scratching on the surface of rhythms, sensory habits, gathering materialities, intervals, and durations. A gangly accrual of slow or sudden accretions” (Stewart 2010, 339).

Lorne Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie (2010) also explore the concept of the refrain in their analysis of the *Tampa* affair, in which more than four hundred refugees remained in stasis on a huge red tanker bound for Australia, halted in international waters as the Australian government deliberated over what to do with them. For Bertelsen and Murphie, the constant *presence* of the image of the looming red ship as it shot around Australian mass media itself was in itself world-making. Instead of thinking about the hulking red ship on the horizon as a part of a unidirectional semiotic formula, their assertion is that the incessant refraining of the ship was a locus of affective intensity that fed back upon itself: “The repetition of this image did not just *illustrate* a complex political event. It helped *bring it into being*” (Bertelsen and Murphie 2010, 138; emphasis in original). The ship’s simple *immanence*, constantly refrained, created a *thing*.

Refrain is repetition, a scoring of affect fed back on itself, a way of apprehending that is not beholden to straightforward formulas of signification. To use Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology, it is a territorializing, an intensity that encrusts and dissolves. It

is in concert with but exceeds, or has the potential to slough off, discourses and systems of signs; thus it is not the same as a simple semiotics. In this way, an analysis through attention to refrain—that is, the dynamism and procreative sensibility of evocation, often clustered around feeling or affect—opens up the potential to fill in the blanks in leaky or insufficient systems of sign. This is the tie-in to the kinks of queer temporality. In other words, if queer temporality is the condition, then refrain is the mechanics.

Refrain, as it applies to Tumblr: user-created emotional/temporal prisms that span its multiplicity and simultaneously help define it as a set of urges, wants, and hurts, refracting affect through the rhizome in a nonlinear and hardly literal way. Anita Bryant getting pied over and over and over is a perverse queer temporality that has a catalytic function—bringing Tumblrs together by means of a shared affinity.

The most resonant image I have encountered during my time on Tumblr came to me in early October 2010. It was a photocollage of six adolescent boys' faces, most of them smiling broadly, on a purple background. The boys were already famous through most national news media, which had covered their suicides in a rare display of mainstream attention to the plight of bullied queer youth. This collage also carried text:

SPIRIT DAY. It's been decided. On October 20th, 2010, we will wear purple in honor of the 6 gay boys who committed suicide in recent weeks/months due to homophobic abuse in their homes or at their schools. Purple represents Spirit on the LGBTQ flag and that's exactly what we'd like all of you to have with you: spirit. Please know that times will get better and that you will meet people who will love you and respect you for who you are, no matter your sexuality. Please wear purple on October 20th. Tell your friends, family, co-workers, neighbors and schools.

Within several days the image garnered over thirty thousand notes. "Spirit Day" became a phenomenon in the United States, gaining national media attention in its own right when it occurred on October 20th, prompting major celebrities, such as talk show host Ryan Seacrest, to wear purple (Miller 2010).

This post, and the way it framed the suicides of these boys, did more than simply channel anger, grief, disgust, and frustration (though it certainly did do that). I want to move through platitudes of "tragedy" to think about the way the post operates as refrain, like Bertelsen and Murphie's red ship: it is a territorialization of a stubborn negative queer affective charge, constantly resurrected.

There are multiple refrains going on here. The text of the post demands that the occasion of these boys' suicides be refrained into productive public neoliberal logics of state-sponsored individual rights, gathered in a simple semiotics of purple on a single day, rather than attention to or intervention in systems of micropower that infiltrate every second of young queer peoples' lives. The image, however, works on a different refrain. The bizarre, almost perverse arrangement of smiling portraits of these young boys, probably uploaded to their Facebook pages at happier moments, is poignant on a whole other register for precisely what it masks—the duplicitous nature of systemic

homophobic abuse, which demands that one keep a smiling public face because “it gets better,” at the same time that it eats away at one’s will to live. Heather Love states that we have not been able, under the recuperative impulse (e.g., Spirit Day at its most trite level), to allow for “sustained engagement with the stubborn negativity of the past: critics have ignored what they could not transform” (Love 2007, 147). This is the energy of the affective charge in circulation here, hidden behind the recuperative agenda of Spirit Day: a “stubborn negativity” (to put it mildly) that leads nowhere but the end of the road. I see this second refrain, in the words of Elizabeth Freeman, as a “queer hauntological exercise,” a *longing*, in the sense that it “produces modes of both belonging and ‘being long,’ or persisting over time” (Freeman 2010, 13). These boys and their bad feelings persist on the refrain on Tumblr, skating on affective charge, weaving the network between users. One wonders if the creators of Spirit Day realize their double entendre: not simply honoring these boys’ youthful spirit, but also regarding them as spirits, continually haunting us.

My final suggestion has to do with value, or force. If refrain is repetition and encrusting, a bringing-into-being and then dissolving, and if queer temporality describes the general character of the practices of queer Tumblr users described above, then how do we account for direction, force, and intensity? How do we describe the way in which some posts take off, while the vast majority linger with little circulation? Or the fact that some Tumblr users have inordinately large reach, whereas the vast number of Tumblrs I’ve observed and spoken with have small-to-medium reach at best? It is no coincidence that many people I’ve spoken to about Tumblr employ this same language, unprompted, when speaking about why they decide to follow someone or reblog an image. “Resonate,” “immersion,” and “strong reaction” are all frequent terms, though they seem like containers that can’t quite carry what has already been felt. This phenomenon has been explored by Paasonen (2011, 16, 18) as “resonance,” in terms of online pornography and its dynamics of “force and grab” with audiences who feel “sympathetic vibrations.”

I offer “reverb” to further tweak this fruitful concept and posit it as a way to understand how intensity interacts with refrain over *time* and as a function of *repetition*. Though it is not a central focal point of her argument, Paasonen (2011, 185) hints at this ground in her use of terms such as “tempo.” In my conception, reverb is refrain that has the additional quality of amplification or diminishment (intensity) through echo or refrain; in this sense, it can be modulated to serve a purpose. Reverb is a quality and a process, a way to understand the direction and intensity of the flows of affect. It has been startling to watch this pattern over the years: a post lingers until it hits a popular Tumblr, then takes off, dies down again, and takes off again, almost like a breathing thing. We can view any individual Tumblr, or any one of its posts, “as if an echo of irreducible excess, of gratuitous amplification, piggy-backed on the reconnection to progression, bringing a tinge of the unexpected, the lateral, the unmotivated, to lines

of action and reaction”; in other words, affect is the irreducible excess, a “system of the inexplicable” (Massumi 1995, 87), always in emergence. Thrift (2004, 62) describes it similarly: “Affect [is] defined as the property of the active outcome of an encounter.”

This is in keeping with Massumi’s bottom line, and much of contemporary affect theory: that structural and poststructural analyses are all predicated on a static structural referent, and that, therefore, we need to understand relationality through a different vocabulary, one that accounts for movement and potential. I posit that we can think of reverb as a shorthand way to describe this potential as well as its observable traces: certain posts could be said to possess a high degree of reverb, and individual Tumblrs that have many followers enable or possess a high degree of reverb. Reverb describes a quality as well as a process, attention to movement rather than the fixed—this is another way of understanding Massumi’s invocation of the suspense of the event, or as he would term it, the “virtual.” It is “the pressing crowd of incipencies and tendencies, [it] is a realm of *potential*” (Massumi 1995, 91). Like the movement of iron filings on magnetized paper, reverb is the directed territorialization of this affective charge. It is the encounter, prime. It is the multitude of notes that coalesce around a popular post, the saturation and flow of images in the dashboard feed, the pulsations and traces your own picture leaves behind as it traverses the Tumblr space, the wake of the affective charge.

Notes

1. All Tumblr names presented are pseudonyms.
2. Though detailed statistics are hard to come by, the site announced on March 8, 2010, that it was averaging two million posts and fifteen thousand new users every day (Karp 2010). In 2011 the site was due to pass ten billion posts, with an average of 37.5 million per day (Pingdom 2011).
3. There is a popular meme, “Rules of Tumblr,” that reverberates in different permutations across the internet. In a YouTube video posted by JustKidding1026, called “What you need to know about Tumblr,” a young woman gives snarky tips on the site’s etiquette, saying, “If you’re homophobic, you’re prolly not going to last long on this website.” The video goes further: “Seeing as most people on the site are either lesbian, gay, or they support homosexuality. Just saying. Just saying” (What You Need to Know 2010). Elsewhere, another version of Rules of Tumblr states: “[Rule] 8. Tumblr isn’t for homophobes. Tumblr is mostly people who support gay people, or lesbian/gay people themselves. We don’t discriminate on Tumblr” (Urban Dictionary 2010).
4. See Paasonen (2011, 8–12) for a discussion on the false binary between affect and representation.
5. Tumblr users create an account that is usually anonymous, identified only by a made-up Tumblr name, which is the basis of a unique URL and which can be changed at any time. Users can upload pictures, videos, text, or links, or, more likely, “reblog” these items from anyone else

on Tumblr. This means that with a minimum of two clicks, an image that you see on any Tumblr will appear on yours, and a corresponding “note” will be attached to the original post recording your action. Popular Tumblr posts can have hundreds of thousands of notes. All your posts, whether original or reblogged, gather on your own Tumblr, which is customizable with full malleability of HTML and CSS. Sometimes you don’t even know the web page you’re looking at is a Tumblr. When you have an account, you can “follow” other Tumblr users you like, and their most recent posts will accumulate in a dashboard or feed, reminiscent of Twitter. Following is nonreciprocal, also reminiscent of Twitter.

6. There are many strains of “bad queer feelings,” and many authors in this list write against each other, but see collectively the debate on the “antisocial thesis” (Caserio et al. 2006); Edelman (2004); Love (2007); Halperin and Traub (2010); Ahmed (2010); Muñoz (2010); Halberstam (2011).

7. For example, a recent exhibition at Los Angeles’s ONE Archives, entitled “To Whom It May Concern” (October 8, 2011–August 17, 2012), presented a collection of blown-up images of dedications from the inside covers of famous literary works by queer authors that are all veiled, insider, or tongue-in-cheek references to the author’s sexual identity.

8. See the special issue of *GLQ: Lesbian and Gay Quarterly* on “Queer Temporalities” (Freeman et al. 2007) for an extended deliberation on this subject.

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