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Dekeyser, Thomas; Zhang, Vickie; Bissell, David

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What should we do with bad feelings? Negative affects, impotential responses

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Thomas Dekeyser 

Aberystwyth University, UK

Vickie Zhang 

University of Bristol, UK; Guangzhou University, China

David Bissell 

The University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

Bad feelings are everywhere. When faced with this situation in our empirical encounters or conceptual analyses, most socio-spatial research is committed to making things right again, with an eye to unleashing new potentials for action by repairing bad feeling. Yet this ‘ethics of rehabilitation’ assumes both the inherent possibility and ethical desirability of working away those affects that are deemed to be ‘negative’. We argue that this activating process risks delegitimising, in possibly troubling or violent ways, the ethical validity of both incapacities (when one is unable to act) and negative capacities (when one decides to not act). Instead of a rehabilitative ethics, we propose an ‘ethics of impotentiality’ that suspends the urge to activate negative affects, offering a radically situated ethical relation that is neither didactic nor moralising, refuses any easy distinction between empowering and disempowering affects, and allows for subjects to stay with inaction.

Keywords

affect, ambivalence, impotentiality, incapacity, negativity, refusal, ethics

I Introduction

We live in negative times. Just look around and witness the intensification of racial violence, the rise of ugly forms of authoritarianism, the vilification of minorities, mass environmental degradation, looming planetary collapse. Bad feeling is omnipresent. Responding to interconnected crises, we, as geographers, have long been committed to *rehabilitation* – to making things right again. The driving normative ethos of so much of the social sciences is to make a

better world that is more socially just, more egalitarian, more pluralistic. As scholars, we focus on these negative affects – understood broadly in terms of the

Corresponding author:

Vickie Zhang, School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol, University Rd, Bristol BS8 1QU, UK; Center for Human Geography and Urban Development, School of Geography and Remote Sensing, Guangzhou University, Guangzhou, People’s Republic of China.

Email: vickie.zhang@bristol.ac.uk

diminishment of potential (Deleuze, 1988) – and we look for ways of unleashing new potential, or of re-activating existing but dormant potentials. We diagnose situations of harm and injustice, of suffering and pain, with an eye on figuring ways that these might be transformed into more positive, more capacious situations. Sometimes this is about identifying the actions that might change a situation for the better. At other times, this is about spotlighting actions that are already happening but fly under the radar. Other times still, this is about realising latent capacities and potential in a situation, if only that potential to act were properly activated.¹ It is therefore, we posit, an uncontentious claim that human geography is, to a large degree, an activating discipline committed to the rehabilitation of negative affects into positive ones through the identification of potentialities and agencies.

We are not in disagreement with this normative ethics. What on earth would possess any critical thinker to argue for any other ethos? Indeed, our own work has followed this guiding light. Yet we contend that this ethics of rehabilitation is worth subjecting to critical scrutiny, given its omnipresence in the discipline. What troubles us is that this ethics of rehabilitation assumes both the inherent possibility and ethical desirability of evaluating and activating those affects that are considered to be incapacitating. Our central argument is that this activating process of rehabilitation risks delegitimising, in possibly troubling or violent ways, the onto-political validity of both incapacities ('I cannot') and negative capacities ('I can not'). At odds with rehabilitative ethics, we propose – and examine – an 'ethics of impotentiality' for geography that suspends the urge for activating negative affects.

We build upon interventions by scholars within geography (e.g. Ruez and Cockayne, 2021; Wilkinson and Lim, 2021) and beyond (e.g. Ahmed, 2010; Noys, 2013) who each complicate the ethical or political legitimacy of an affirmative ethics centred on transforming negative affects into positive ones. In light of such conceptual moves, we contend that the time is right for a deeper reevaluation and for the development of what we call an 'ethics of impotentiality'. A catalyst for our thinking is the rise of 'negative geographies' – a body of work that has

emerged in response to the overwhelming disciplinary focus on connectivity, networks and relationality (see Rose et al., 2021; Dekeyser and Jellis, 2021; Dekeyser et al., 2022). Instead of foregrounding interconnection, the focus of these negative geographies has been to consider the political and ethical implications of socio-spatial (de)formations through situations of incapacity, distance and loss. Yet, curiously, this body of work that thinks negativity in terms of non-existence, absences and gaps tends to sidestep the more commonplace way of thinking about negativity – as 'bad' situations (for an exception, see Dawney and Jellis, 2023). Our starting point is that, across different traditions of human geographical thought, negative affects understood as a diminishment of potential ('bad' feelings and situations) are treated in a remarkably consistent way. From earlier humanistic geography, through to emotional geographies, to more recent non-representational geographies, negative affects are largely subjected to rehabilitation. This rehabilitation involves two moves. The first move is an *evaluation* of an affect as 'negative' in terms of its disempowerment. The second move is the prescription of an *activation* whereby the negative affect is transformed into a positive, empowering affect. And yet this dominant impulse to rehabilitation is riven with significant practical, ethical and political challenges from how a negative affect is evaluated through to how activation is enacted.

In short, the aim of our paper is to question what we as socio-spatial thinkers should do with negative affects, and to propose a novel response that does not assume, from the get-go, the merits of rehabilitation. To demonstrate the impulse towards rehabilitation of negative affects, the first section of our paper surveys diverse examples of this dual move across human geographical scholarship. We explain how this rehabilitative ethics reaches its apotheosis in recent non-representational approaches. The second section of the paper begins to push away from this tendency by outlining alternatives to rehabilitation. It focuses on the first move of rehabilitation – evaluation – to show how engagements with the concept of impotentiality complicate the normative judgement of 'negative affects' as, necessarily, the terrain of incapacity. In the third section we show how the norm

of activation – rehabilitation’s second move – is a problematic default response to negative affects because it is riven with its own potential for harm. We argue for the need to suspend the logic of rehabilitation by opening up to ‘incapacities’ and ‘capacities not to’. Responding to Callard’s (2003: 307) prescient contention that our disciplinary culture ‘makes it nigh impossible to draw attention to, let alone dwell upon, the possibility that individuals might need to be theorised in terms of impotence, the loss of agency, or the lack of progressive transformation,’ in the fourth section of the paper we offer an ‘ethics of impotentiality’ as a non-rehabilitative manner of responding to negative affects. In doing so, we trouble the idea that rehabilitation – and the willing and mastery that it requires – is an ethical necessity. To finish, we offer five of ‘openings’ and empirical scenes that put our proposed ethics of impotentiality into practice.

II Geographies of ‘rehabilitation’

I Geography and the impulse of activation

To begin, we identify a consistency to how negative affect is characterised across diverse geographical literatures, from earlier humanistic geography to recent developments in emotional geographies. While we recognise that there have been extensive discussions in human geography and beyond about the distinction between affects, emotions, and feelings, which differ depending on the conceptual provenance of researchers (cf. Callard and Papoulias, 2010; Pile, 2010; Dawney, 2011), our intention here is to highlight the prevalence of an ethics of rehabilitation that crosscuts these diverse conceptual commitments. What unites these bodies of geographical thought is an explicit or implicit ethical commitment to *enhancing bodily potential*. From the point of view of this commitment, negative affects in their multiple incarnations are seen to disempower, decapacitate, and deplete bodies – and are therefore in need of rehabilitating.

Since the humanist turn of the late 1970s, geographers have examined how people’s lifeworlds are enlarged or constricted by the vicissitudes of place. Tuan’s (1977) pathbreaking analysis of how

people experience place contains multiple diagnoses of ‘negative’ experiences. Bodily evaluations for Tuan emerge in ‘feeling tones’ associated with different kinds of bodily movement, from those that are painfully difficult to ones that feel natural and therefore pleasurable. Furthermore, there is acknowledgement of the utter contingency of these evaluations, where related experiences in different spaces might be evaluated quite differently. In his discussion on being in crowds, for instance, Tuan (1977) acknowledges that in some places crowds might ‘elevate’ the experience of being in a particular place, whereas in others, crowds might generate the feeling of ‘spatial oppressiveness’. The precise nature of the evaluation remains indeterminate, given its contingency on in situ perception and a person’s contextual lifeworld.

Where Tuan’s concern was to develop a geographic sensitivity to the kaleidoscopic breadth of bodily experiences, negative affects become an even more politically charged concern in later work on geographies of emotion, which brought a feminist sensitivity to highlight differential bodily experiences. Unsurprisingly, centring emotions as the primary object of analysis (rather than emplaced experience more broadly) results in an even more nuanced understanding of the operative role of emotions in the onflow of everyday life. Though acknowledging that there are multiple conceptual lineages that inform work in geographies of emotion – from psychoanalysis to more Deleuzian-inspired ontologies – what unites this work is an implicit political commitment to the movement from negative emotions that deplete subjects to more positive emotions that enliven.

Parr et al.’s (2005) research on mental health in rural Scotland, for instance, foregrounds a more variegated terrain of emotional life than earlier humanistic geography. Through a conceptual lens underpinned by psychoanalytical theories, the emphasis is on how people reckon with ‘negative’ and ‘problematic’ emotions through tactics such as sitting with, repressing, or closing down such emotions (2005: 93, 96). Other work makes this movement from negative to positive affect a much more explicit preoccupation. Walsh’s (2012) research on British transnationals in Dubai, for

instance, identifies ‘negative emotions’ such as ‘nostalgia, disappointment, frustration, anxiety, anger’ (2012: 57) and ‘positive emotions’ such as ‘hope and attachment’. Walsh’s guiding ethos is about examining the conditions through which more positive emotions might be facilitated. The diagnosis of certain feeling experiences as ‘negative’ is widespread practice through geographical literatures more broadly. Jayne et al.’s (2010: 549) research on alcohol and young people speculates on how ‘negative emotions ... can heighten rather than lessen social divides’, while Hughes and Mee (2018: 6) direct our attention to the ‘negative emotions such as fear, frustration, or stress’ that are a hallmark of getting lost.

Other emotional geographical work adds greater indeterminacy to the diagnosis and subsequent evaluation of negative affects. Exemplary is Stevenson and Farrell’s (2018) exploration of the embodied experience of leisure hill walkers. Though their participants’ emotions are similarly diagnosed through vocabularies of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ feelings, the subsequent evaluation of negative feelings is made more complex through a sensitivity to changing evaluations over time. For instance, even the interviewee who expressed negative feelings said that walking generally made him ‘feel better than day to day life’, where ‘the discomforts of walking were outweighed by positive feelings and a sense of achievement’ (2018: 9). Where Stevenson and Farrell’s work highlights the temporal ambiguity of evaluation, Colls’s (2004) work on women’s relationships with clothing adds a different sense of indeterminacy. Colls foregrounds the agentic potential of management techniques which gets away from women feeling ‘inherent positive and/or negative emotions about their bodies’ (2004: 586). Where, for Stevenson and Farrell, the negative affects associated with discomfort ideally yield to a positive affect of achievement and satisfaction, for Colls, nuanced emotional management can effectively dampen negative affects.

In sum, across diverse bodies of geographical thought we discern an enduring denigration of negative affect. Beyond the explicit evaluations of positive and negative affect in the examples above, in much other work this denigration of negative affect is

mostly implicit rather than explicit. However, this implicitness should not be read as a hesitancy to declare this evaluation. Rather, it likely comes from an ethical position that is so much a part of the normative academic habitus that it doesn’t need to be said. As Harrison (2015: 285) asks: ‘What type of monster would embrace sadness over joy, despair over hope, failure over success?’ Negative affects, in spite of their ambiguity and their contingency, are ultimately what disempowers subjects, reducing their capacities to act in the world. The ethical thrust of much work in humanistic and emotional geography is therefore an impulse towards the rehabilitation of these negative affects. We are charged with *responding* to negative affects in a particular way: one that traces a path back to an enlivened subjectivity.

2 Immanent ethics: from sadness to joy in Deleuzian geographies

This rehabilitative impulse towards enlivenment is even more explicitly encountered in non-representational geographies of immanence. Geographers of immanence centre the ethical potential of encounters in ‘stimulating’ and allowing affective energy to ‘flourish’ (Thrift, 2004b: 93, 94). The aim of the ethical being is ‘to create situations for joyful encounters’ (Dewsbury, 2000: 493) which ‘can boost the powers of all concerned’ (Thrift, 2004b: 96). The production of joyful encounters requires, Thrift notes, an ethos of generosity towards how circumstances might be otherwise (Thrift, 2004a), one that develops an openness to the ‘space of virtuality’ that makes up the present (Thrift, 2004b: 93). Thus, we are encouraged not only to seek out and establish new relations that would heighten our capacities to affect, but also to maintain and intensify existing ones (McCormack, 2003).

Unlike the work of humanist and emotional geographers, much of this work that takes Deleuze as a starting point explicitly reads ethics via ontology. It aligns the call of ethics with an immanent ontology where everything that exists is fully present within a single, unified plane of being, in contrast to transcendental ontologies that would elevate ‘God’ (St Augustine), the ‘One’ (Plotinus), the ‘Human’, or

even the ‘Other’ (Levinas) to a distinct plane of existence from which to account for or judge ‘Being’. Aligning themselves with a philosophical history that runs back to the thought of Baruch Spinoza, for geographers of immanence ethics cannot appeal to any transcendental notions of the ‘Good’, ‘Justice’ or ‘Evil’ without separating oneself ‘from the particular viewpoint of an existing mode’ (Deleuze, 1990: 247). It is only through the localised combination with others’ potential that we can enhance individual potential (Spinoza, 1985). The embrace of an immanent ontology therefore pushes geographers to renounce moral opposition (between Good and Evil) and privilege an understanding of ethical difference as emergent from localised encounters: how does an encounter between bodies modify each body’s potential to act? Do we gain possession over, or are we cut off from, our *puissance*, that is, our potential for action (Deleuze, 1990)? It is on the basis of this difference between gaining or losing potential – and its respective alignment with ‘good’/‘useful’ and ‘bad’/‘destructive’ – that geographers of immanence perform their ethical imperative.

This imperative is based on two important distinctions in the work of Spinoza (Deleuze, 1990: 239–246). First, an affection can be either active or passive. An affection is active when the body itself is the cause of an increased potential of acting; it is a measure of affecting other bodies. At this moment, we are in possession of our potential to act, realising our potential. An affection is passive when it can be explained by an external cause, by another body – it is a measure of being affected by other bodies, and thus involves a certain impotence. Our capacity to act is reduced to attaching itself to affective traces by other bodies.

Second, Spinoza draws a further distinction between those passive affections that are sad, and those that are joyful. Sad passive affections are encounters in which we are affected by those bodies that disagree, or partially disagree, with our own ‘nature’. Joyful passive encounters are those with bodies in agreement to our own. Sad and joyful passive affections have distinct effects: sad passions diminish our potential to act, with the external body’s potential subtracted from our own to the point of possible destruction, while joyful passions heighten it. For

Spinoza, as for Deleuze, the ultimate destiny of ethical praxis (even if never fully attainable) is becoming active, moving from passive affections to gain possession over our potential. The first step is to accumulate *joyful* passions: the ethical subject, as Hynes and Sharpe note (2014: 16–17), quoting Deleuze, ‘strives to extricate himself from chance encounters and the concatenation of sad passions, to organise good encounters, combine his relation with relations that combine directly with it, unite with what agrees in nature with him, and form a reasonable association between men.’ Through accumulating passive joys, we gain not only potential to act, but also potential to know: we become more apt at understanding what there is in common or in agreement between the bodies. With heightened potential to act and know, we can exceed the domain of passive joys and enter, finally, into the sphere of active joys, moving beyond joyful passive affections ‘to win the power of action and so at last experience active affections of which we are the cause’ (Deleuze, 1990: 274).

Echoing this Spinozist-Deleuzian impulse towards ethics, geographers of immanence promote joyful encounters and the affective potential that is gained in them (Dewsbury, 2000; Hinchliffe et al., 2005; Hynes and Sharpe, 2009; McCormack, 2003, 2005; Thrift, 2004a, 2004b; Trott, 2017). In Deleuze’s words, this involves ‘organizing good encounters, composing relations, forming powers, experimenting’ (1988: 118). The pursuit towards becoming-active involves, as we have seen, the negative treatment of sad passions as they diminish, inevitably, the ability of enlarging one’s potential to act and affect. Sad passions are either to be avoided as hindrances on the path to becoming active (e.g. Thrift, 2004b), or are actively worked upon in order to alter their nature, re-shaping them into joyful affections and rehabilitating them into a productive resource (e.g. Trott, 2017).

So far, we have traced the dominant evaluation of negative affects across three strands of geographical thought. While they are differentiated by philosophical forebears, conceptual vocabularies, and ethical nuances, we argue that they share an ethico-political commitment to what we term a praxis of rehabilitation. Two central tasks mark this praxis.

The first is an ethical evaluation. Rehabilitation begins from the belief in the ability to parse negative affects from positive ones, and the ability to do so through an evaluation of the potential to act. Here, negative affects signal an absence or reduction of the potential to act, and positive affects pertain to a heightening or coming-into-possession of potential. The result is that, under the banner of ‘capacity’ and ‘potential’, rehabilitation encourages a strong ethical evaluation, one that devalues incapacity, impotence, and passivity. The second is an ethical commitment to activation. Rehabilitation labours to transform the depletion of negative affects into the empowerment of positive affects through the activation of bodies. Thus, geographers inspired by Deleuzian ethics prioritise the accumulation of ‘active joys’ over ‘sad passions’ in order to secure ‘the potential to act’; humanistic geographers propose the rehabilitation of spatial ‘oppressiveness’ in favour of ‘elevation’; and emotional geographers urge us to manage and dampen negative emotions (‘frustration’, ‘anger’, ‘anxiety’) to give way to those that enable empowerment. Yet, while rehabilitation continues to animate the ethical thrust of much geographical thought, its conflation of potentiality with ethical good is, elsewhere, being put to the test. In what follows, we introduce the concept of ‘impotentiality’ to complicate how this conflation operates across the dual move of ‘evaluation’ and ‘activation’, finding pathways beyond rehabilitation.

III Impotentiality: re-evaluating negative affects

Starting from impotence troubles the pejorative evaluation of negative affects. Derived from the Latin *impotentia*, meaning ‘lack of control or power,’ impotence is conventionally understood as a negative affect *par excellence*. Where the Deleuzian lineage of geographical thinking emphasises the ethical imperative to become in possession of our potential of acting, impotence is about ‘being cut off from our power of action’ and is evaluated as belonging to ‘weakness’ and ‘enslavement’ (Deleuze, 1990: 240). Deleuze takes the child as its clearest example. For him, the child lives in ‘an abject state’ (1990: 219), ‘a

state of foolishness in which we depend in the highest degree on external causes, and in which we necessarily have more of sadness than of joy’ (1990: 262–263). Though impotence is not a concept that has received much direct attention by geographers, where it has been drawn on, it largely reinforces this pejorative evaluation of a loss of potential. Anderson’s (2010) work on the affective dimensions of the military power underscores how impotence can be engineered by the state. Here, the collective affect of ‘helplessness’ is identified as a key way of disrupting morale and ensuring military victory. Earlier work in the discipline highlighted a more inward-looking helplessness, referring to anxieties over the impotence of researchers around how their findings are taken up (or not) in policy (Leach, 1974: 44–5; Kong, 2004). More recent work identifies impotence as a negativity that needs to be guarded against through a turn to more affirmative modes of thought (Woodyer and Geoghegan, 2013). As diagnosed by Callard, within much geographical thought there reigns a ‘disciplinary culture [that] makes it difficult to countenance the *lack* of a capacity to act, or the presence of severe obstacles to a subject’s agency’ (2003: 306–7).

Crucially for us, what is overlooked in this pejorative evaluation of impotence (impotentiality) is its close connection to potency (potentiality). For Agamben, the Western world, in eulogising potentiality since at least Aristotle, has forgotten that it can never be separated from what at first blush seems like its reverse, impotentiality. He writes: ‘The greatness – and also the abyss – of human potentiality is that it is first of all potential not to act’ (Agamben, 1999: 181). Agamben offers us an ontology of (im)potentiality that starts from this inseparability, asserting the ‘originary unity’ of potentiality and impotentiality (1999: 270). In his ontology, potentiality loses traction as the central pivot from which to construct a moral logic. He pushes us to challenge the emphasis on ‘capacity’ at the heart of geographers’ ethical-political evaluation of negative affects by troubling the essentialising notion that ‘becoming active’ is what it means to live a good life. Agamben argues that the evaluation at the heart of what we term an ethics of rehabilitation separates us from two distinct expressions of

impotentiality: the capacity not to ('I can not'), and the incapacity to ('I cannot'). Taking seriously Agamben's argument means refuting the impulse to assign humanity a universal telos—becoming an active subject – and, with it, the ethical evaluation implied in the conflation of acting with living. The human is, in Agamben's (2014) vocabulary, inoperative – without underlying task or vocation. It is by honing in on the specific qualities of these two suspensions of activation that we can begin to grasp what is at stake in turning away from rehabilitation towards an ethics of impotentiality.

The first expression of impotentiality for Agamben – the capacity not to – offers a counter-balance to geographers' pejorative *evaluation* of negative affects. This takes form as a re-evaluation of 'negative' affects as not necessarily a matter of diminishment but, instead, as an affective terrain that holds ethical possibilities. It is this reading of Agamben's concept that is dominant in the limited geographical engagement on impotentiality. This is seen most strikingly in Tyner and Colucci's (2015) work on race and capital punishment in the US where 'impotentiality' is presented as a deliberative ethical choice between acting and not acting. What they see as 'zombie-like indifference' (2015: 1097) by large sectors of American society to capital punishment, for them, constitutes people using their impotentiality. Impotentiality here is 'a variation on the idea of 'letting die'' (Tyner and Colucci, 2015: 1093). As such, indifference to capital punishment is culpable as it represents an active choice *not* to act. Elaborating Agamben's first expression of impotentiality more affirmatively, Sharpe's reflections on community economies identify impotentiality as a crucial but overlooked dimension of decision-making, as 'what enables us to live and think in ways that are more than reactive' (2014: 35). Connor's (2019: 14) take on resignation as 'the enacting of one's impotential' is a similarly deliberative tactic, in this case, of resistance; Bissell (2022) draws on this definition to consider how, through their impotentiality, gig economy drivers possess a quiet kind of potential to resist. Finally, Joronen (2021: 254) explores how attunement to the void creates a capacity for play, a positive engagement with the impotentiality of being and its 'positive

plenitude'. Across these studies, exercising one's capacity not to act is positioned as an overlooked and necessary precursor to action, as a deliberative pause rather than a risk of diminished potential that should be whittled away.

Expanding from research that engages directly with Agamben's concept, the politics of refusal offered by queer and feminist theorists in response to negative affects can be read through this understanding of impotentiality as strategic capacity not to. Indeed, refusal and resistance have become prominent dispositions across a range of embodied political geographies, highlighting their emergent and (un)intentional forms (Bhungalia, 2020; Brice, 2020; Hughes, 2020; Meier, 2023). Refusal operates as a suspension of capacities to act that reproduce problematic formations, pausing the pejorative evaluation of impotentiality embedded within geography. Emblematic is Ahmed's writing in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) deconstructing the cultural dominance of good feelings and questioning norms that evaluate negative affects as intensities to be avoided or eradicated. Challenging the implicit coding of good feelings with productivity and bad feelings with diminishment, Ahmed unpacks the moral evaluation of joy, highlighting that, although the term as rendered by Spinoza describes an actualisation of potential rather than 'good feeling' directly, these ideas have nonetheless become blurred, in turn leading to those who are unable to feel good becoming imagined as those who 'get in the way'. Instead, Ahmed troubles the mapping of joy – as good feeling – onto heightened capacities to act. For Ahmed, an increase in potential to act can emerge from sad passions (see also Smilges, 2023), something that is harder to imagine from a Deleuzian ethics in which there is a refusal to think of sadness capaciously.

Ahmed's aim is to re-evaluate and revalue bad feelings by seeing them as a source of potential rather than just diminishment. Bad feelings are a site through which to become active, as 'more than a feeling that should be overcome' (2010: 217). In this sense, Ahmed's project resonates with the broader manoeuvre of activation outlined in section one, in which an ethical evaluation is followed by an action that rehabilitates the negative affect. However, unlike the Deleuzian ethos, Ahmed does so not out of a

belief in activation as the highest good, but in the hope of opening up possibilities of living for those burdened with being ‘unhappy’ subjects. This is not about deliberately going towards negative feelings, but about holding space for those subject to such feelings, galvanising a refusal to reproduce the institutions and practices that enact injustices. The refusal to let go of negative affects might thus be articulated in the language of impotentiality, as an assertion of the capacity *not* to act: *not* to let go of or avoid negative affects, *not* to aspire to joy and *not* to actualise potential. Feminist and political geographers have similarly argued for the importance of negative affects for producing change across difference, such as through the example of discomfort (Wilkinson, 2017; Eaves et al., 2023). Rather than presenting negative affects as diminishing forces that should be rehabilitated and eradicated, they become figured in terms of a body’s interruptive capacity. The embrace of non-action suspends the extant order, opening a space in which difference might emerge.

Within geography, this ethos of suspension as the ‘capacity not to’ is shared in emerging work on ambivalence. Geographies of ambivalence tarry with intensities of feeling that would otherwise capitulate into moments of positive or negative evaluation, to proliferate possibilities for enacting worlds otherwise. As Wilkinson (2017) writes, even ostensibly ‘positive’ relations such as care and love are ambivalent, and able to produce othering exclusion and diminishment. Echoing Ahmed, Ruez and Cockayne (2021) trace a tendency in geographical research to polarise critique as affirmative or negative, producing evaluations that become mapped on to forms of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ feeling. Instead, they highlight that it is not feeling itself upon which evaluations should be founded, but the politics of action enabled by the circuits of feeling-thinking-acting in which those intensities move. Ambivalence is offered to pause habits of evaluation – as an interruptive disposition beyond blind affirmation or negation. Building on this orientation towards difference, Turnbull et al. (2022: 2) show how ambivalence’s evaluative suspensions work to unfold new receptivities, drawing on New Weird fiction to advocate for ambivalence as a ‘productive and unsettling’ disposition for becoming open to unfamiliarity. For these geographers, evaluation of negative affects is

temporarily halted; there is, to use Agamben’s first sense of impotentiality, the diagnosis of a capacity *not* to do something. Rather than offering ‘an assertive direction as to where critical geographers must now turn’ (Wilkinson and Lim, 2021: 115; Linz and Secor, 2021), ambivalence is an incitement to evaluate affects through their potential in specific situations.

What is shared across these studies is an incorporation of negative affects into the scope of rehabilitative action. In these literatures, negative or ambivalent affects are not feeling spaces to avoid or reshape, as in the immanent ethics above. Instead, by troubling the evaluation of negative affects as a source of diminishment – a site of sad passive affections – these approaches reconsider the pejorative evaluation of negative affects. Recognising not just a body’s capacity to act (its potentiality) but also its capacity not to act (one aspect of its impotentiality), negative affects become a site from which alternative powers of action can arise, including agencies to refuse, interrupt and differ. As a result, while the first move of negative evaluation central to rehabilitation is rearticulated, the second commitment to activation remains largely intact. We see this most clearly in geographies of ambivalence in which the demand to act is temporarily deferred in favour of proliferating difference, but later returns in service of rehabilitative action. Across these literatures, impotentialising non-action is offered as a *simultaneously* potentialising moment of suspension, as a space from which alternative capacities and possibilities emerge.

IV Impotentiality: de-activating negative affects

In the previous sections, we have complicated the narrow evaluation of negative affects as only de-capacitating or depotentialising. We have done so by identifying a capacity to say ‘I can not’ as a crucial component of retaining one’s impotentiality. In doing so, we have shown the need to re-evaluate the political value of negative affects, centering interruptive and ambivalent non-action as political and ethical forms of response. However, our central concern is that we are still left with a largely Spinozist way of thinking about

impotentiality, with impotentiality folded back into a politics of activation where we are charged to do something, even if that ‘something’ is a ‘nothing’. Put simply, in geography’s embrace of ‘capacities not’, we still find ourselves firmly in the terrain of activation, one that treats as undesirable the ontological or political withdrawal from acting altogether.

In this section, we build on this re-evaluation of negative affects to suggest why one might hesitate before the imperative to activate negative affects. While activation may be appropriate for some circumstances, a problem we identify is that, far from only capacitating, differentiating and rehabilitating, activation can also have harmful effects. We identify two forms of alienation in particular at play in geographers’ ongoing activation of negative affects. The first infliction involves the ostensibly innocent, even generous, disposition of empathy that precedes the prescription of activation. This suggestion might initially seem bizarre, given that empathy has been at the core of feminist human geographies for decades (Bondi, 2003; Katz, 1994; Gillespie, 2017). Although encompassing plural approaches, empathy has tended to be viewed as positive, as evidence of connection to and care for an other (Angeles and Pratt, 2017; Banta, 2017). Yet we suggest that the empathetic disposition that underpins activation can come charged with its own problems, undermining the idea that advocating activation is necessarily an act of care.

Empathy, as a compassionate practice, is denotative: it marks who is the sufferer, and who is able to alleviate suffering. Activation’s intersubjective address makes a ‘claim on the spectator to become an ameliorative actor,’ assuming that one can be such an actor in the first place (Berlant, 2004: 1). While empathy can lead to a reflexive practice of transforming the self (e.g. Docot, 2017), it can quickly become a remedy in itself – ‘employed to combat ‘negative’ feeling’, and contending to ‘heal past wounds and move us forward’ (Pedwell, 2014: 94). Empathy can lead to didactic assertions that invoke activation’s claim on the ‘right’ way for an other to respond, buoyed by the belief that such claims are actualising another’s latent but seemingly unrealised potential. In the process, activation’s assertions project a particular mode of agentive subjectivity,

inflating one’s agency to transform their scene of inhabitation by imagining people as ‘animated, detached, sovereign’ actors (Closs-Stephens, 2022: 74) and misreading subjecthood through ‘dramatically powerful’ forms of ‘heroic authorship’ (Berlant, 2011: 124). Agamben (1999: 254) would read this as exemplary of the long-standing ethical tradition that reduces the problem of potentiality to a question of willing. As long as there is a *will*, the argument goes, impotentiality can be transformed into potentiality. For Agamben, this is a misreading of the nature of potentiality and impotentiality. In harsh terms, he writes that ‘to believe that will has power over potentiality, that the passage to actuality is the result of a decision that puts an end to the ambiguity of potentiality (which is always potentiality to do and not to do) [...] is the perpetual illusion of morality’ (Agamben, 1999: 254).

The second infliction of activation involves the tacit conceit that negative affects can be expunged in the first place. Activation can forget that negative affects are fundamentally responsive, emerging unwilling and in the wake of events already in motion. For Bergson (1988), for example, negative sensations such as pain are understood not as the *source* of damage to the body, but a body’s *response* to limits already breached. These are productions not of a sovereign self, but of a body and subject exposed to impingements of unpredictable encounters and turbulent entanglements. A re-situating of negative affects at the heart of the subject is enacted by geographers who understand the subject melancholically, as constituted by its traumas. Rose (2018) and Joronen and Rose (2021), for example, have argued for subjectivity to be understood not primarily as the sovereign willing of a capacious subject, but as a precarious claiming of self in the face of enigmatic, indifferent and ungovernable worlds. For geographers such as Brice (2020) and Harrison (2008), vulnerability is a constitutive condition of bodies, rather than a synonym for diminished subjectivity. Exemplary of the approach to the historicised subject is the temporal understanding of subjectivity offered by Jean Laplanche, who reads Freud’s account of trauma in terms of *Nachträglichkeit*, or *après-coup* (afterwardsness). Laplanche understands trauma as unfolding through two events: where the first event is

what is conventionally understood as the trauma-inducing encounter, the second is the event of its memory, its reliving or 'revivance'. Laplanche shows how trauma's negative intensities emerge as an oscillation between these two moments, suggesting that '[i]t is not the first act which is traumatic; it is the internal revivance of this memory that becomes traumatic' (Caruth and Laplanche, 2001: n.p.).

Our contention, then, is that the injunction to activate negative affects is not just an innocent event that opens the door to repair. Asking people to return to their negative affects – to the resonating effects of traumatic encounters (even if it is in the hope of taking it elsewhere), can enact fresh harms, reviving the event without any guarantee of a 'better', or rehabilitative, outcome. Such returns are incidental but necessary to the affective economy of evaluation and activation; and yet to undertake this return is to engage the potential for debilitation rather than rehabilitation. If, as suggested, bad feeling is not the event that causes harm but rather exists in the afterlife of the harmful encounter, then any suggestion to return to those scenes should induce a pause. Activation might not be appropriate for the occasion: it might not be possible, worth the costs it would incur, nor able to achieve the outcomes it promises. As an injunction, activation burdens bodies with another task. Even if approached with attentiveness and care, how and whether rehabilitative potential will be realised cannot be calculated in advance.

We argue that this impossibility means that the language of rehabilitation should be complemented by a language of rights. This language of rights would move outside of the actuarial framing of action – one that is contingent on the calculation and evaluation of outcomes – and towards recognition of one's right to not enter into this emotional exchange to begin with. Acknowledging the blindspots of rehabilitation, the limits to evaluation and the unknowable effects of activation, we assert a subject's *right to impotentiality*. This ethical position would entail a right to not to engage in evaluation, activation or rehabilitation, and would be uncontingent on a justifying analysis or cataloguing of specific harms. It would affirm one's right to be inoperable. Even if the result of non-action would be to remain in the space of bad feeling, we uphold a person's

right not to engage in transforming their negative affects. By asserting a right to impotentiality, our aim is to expand the ethical field of critical response to include the possibility of non-response and inaction.

To identify an alternative to the lives of activation, we may do well returning to Agamben. For him, besides the embrace of 'capacities not to' described in Section 2, impotentiality also entails a second expression: the 'incapacity to'. Where the majority of geographical engagements with impotentiality have drawn succour from the former, much less has been said about this second kind. Our contention, following Agamben, is that impotentiality has a double-layeredness that must account for both kinds of suspension. This negation is neither the activation of negative affects (Section 1), nor the political potentialisation of non-action (Section 2) but, we argue, activation's perpetual suspension. On the one hand, this 'incapacity to' is the external suspension of the exhausted subject – the 'I cannot'. Far from an at-hand capacity that can be mobilised to rehabilitate negative affects, activation is perpetually suspended when one is 'consigned in unheard of measure to forces and processes over which [one] has lost all control' (Agamben, 2011: 44). On the other hand, the perpetual suspension of activation can have an inner life. It is Bartleby – the eponymous protagonist of Melville's short story – who most embodies this position for Agamben.

In this enigmatic 1853 tale, Bartleby is a scrivener who arrives at a lawyer's office in New York looking for work. Bartleby is hired, and initially works industriously but mechanically, leaving 'no pause for digestion [...], copying by sunlight and by candlelight' (Melville, 1997: 31). But, after an initial stretch of three days, the protagonist begins to reject his employer's demands, simply telling him: 'I would prefer not to'. The lawyer is first puzzled, then frustrated, and finally furious as Bartleby sustains and continues to mount his withdrawal from work. As Agamben (1999) notes, however, to read Bartleby as purely the negation of activity would be to miss what makes his 'I would prefer not to' formula so ungraspable to the lawyer. He does not say 'I will not', which would have negated a duty (to pursue work) and, in its transgression, fulfilled the duty's

function. Instead, as Deleuze also affirms, Bartleby's insistence on 'preference' 'stymies all speech acts' (Deleuze, 1998: 73). Bartleby appears to infuriate his employer not by negating his requests to write, which would have likely simply led to being fired, but by refusing the willing that both the affirmation or negation of work signify. Through this passive refusal of willing, Bartleby becomes 'a pure outsider to whom no social position can be attributed' (Deleuze, 1998: 73). The result is that 'the categories of the man of the law have no power over Bartleby' (Agamben, 1999: 254).

To return to our own vocabulary, we can read Bartleby's impotentiality as an absence of rehabilitation, understood through its moves of evaluation and activation. His withdrawal emerges not from a choice to not do *despite* possessing the capacity to do (potent impotentiality), but rather to the desubjectifying suspension of a total lack of willing (impotent impotentiality) (Han, 2015). If the former remains wedded to activation, then Bartleby's impotent impotentiality is 'a performativity of pure passivity' (Cooke, 2005: 83). In other words, what Bartleby, via Agamben and Deleuze, underscores is the necessity to take seriously not only activated impotentiality, but equally its non-activating expressions. By including the latter, we maintain ethical space for an articulation of impotentiality as the incapacity to actualise potentiality *and* impotentiality alike. Within geographical scholarship, Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar's (2019) writing on the 'right to be weary' in the face of UK austerity's slow violence might be seen to inhabit this space. Managing and surviving negative affects are precisely what is at stake in weariness' retreat from action, as a muted – but no less significant – form of (non-)response whose only aim is '[t]o stop, make no progress, and to not feel bad' (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2019: 164). By circumventing disciplinary habits that would seek to rehabilitate by folding negative affects back into positive capacity, the assertion of a 'right to be weary' resonates with our proposal for an 'ethics of impotentiality'.

V Ethics of impotentiality

Building on Agamben's opening definition, impotentiality can take multiple forms in the face of

negative affects: First, there is an active and political impotentiality in the sense of refusing to do something. Second, there is a more passive impotentiality in the sense of being impotent in the face of injustices and infractions. Third, there is an impotentiality that undergirds both of these in the sense of being a part of life whether or not it is a political 'act'; the originary passivity of Harrison's oeuvre (2008; 2009; 2015) or Bartleby's formula. To be clear, in highlighting the multiplicity of impotentiality, we are not arguing that action is redundant. Rather, we argue that to just focus on action risks ignoring at our peril the side of existence that is concerned with inaction. An ethics of rehabilitation is compromised precisely by this persistent flip side.

To close, we offer geographers five openings through which this multi-sidedness of impotentiality can be imagined, populating an 'ethics of impotentiality'. To avoid these being overly abstract, we illustrate each by returning to five scenes of activation discussed in the first section of our paper. The aim is not to play down how the scenes were engaged by the respective geographers, nor to evaluate them as somehow flawed. Instead, and in the spirit of the ethics of impotentiality we are developing, we simply ask: how would geographers inhabiting an ethics of impotentiality respond to these events and encounters differently?

First, we offer that an *ethics of impotentiality distances itself from the evaluation of specific affects as either positive or negative*. Stevenson and Farrell (2018) emphasise how, despite initial experiences of discomfort, walking generates a sense of perspective and wellbeing for their participants. While significant analytical complexity is offered, they sustain the separation of 'positive feelings' from 'negative feelings' as a matter of empowerment versus disempowerment. An ethics of impotentiality might suspend this evaluative gesture of rehabilitation by probing and staying with the kinds of separations – and the spaces those open up – that are also a part of the experience of landscape (Wylie, 2017).

Second, an *ethics of impotentiality is radically situated*, drawing from the context of a negative affect to determine whether joy, hatred, or indifference constitutes the most ethical of responses. As we have noted, Walsh (2012) explores negative

encounters experienced by British expatriate migrants in the Middle East. Her analysis disrupts the presumptive generosity given to research participants' negative affects, engendering something closer to shame than empathy (Pedwell, 2014). Yet, the rehabilitative response offered by Walsh is an ethos facilitating more positive emotions through encounters that might interrupt these negative circuits. An ethical approach that foregrounds impotentiality might not attempt the labour of rehabilitating these affects in this case due to their specific racialising investments. Rather than rehabilitating their destructive affects, it might consider it best that these migrants depart, and encourage them to do so.

Third, *an ethics of impotentiality deprioritises activation*. In line with our first 'opening', Turnbull et al. (2022) stay with the seemingly negative affects of 'weirding' experienced in the face of a changing world. In their account, these affects might be activated by New Weird Fiction to foster encounters that are 'generative rather than regressive' (ibid. 12). Instead, an ethics of impotentiality might ask: why are only 'acceptance and openness to the outside' considered 'useful' or 'generative' outcomes of negative affects? (ibid. 13) An ethics of impotentiality might stay with responses like refusal, alienation or *schadenfreude*. It might suggest that the affective forces of New Weird fiction need not be activation – subject-forming or productive of openness. They could simply be a breath, a pause, an affective timespace of reprieve.

Fourth, *an ethics of impotentiality proposes an ethical relation that is not didactic in nature*. Evaluating the 2000s 'anti-globalisation movement', Hynes and Sharpe (2009) celebrate the affective cultivation that insisted that 'another world is possible'. What is perhaps overlooked are those actors who, at the fringes of the anti-globalisation movement, suspend the allure of 'worldly futuring' (Dekeyser, 2022), and write on the walls of cities that 'another end of the world is possible'. An ethics of impotentiality would not write off such fragments as simply an impotence of sad passions, or instruct participants to guide their energies elsewhere. It would stay curious about those negative passions, and suggest that they need to be neither 'useful' nor 'moral' to be valid elements of the movement.

Fifth, *an ethics of impotentiality allows for inactivity*. Inaction does not need to be justified despite the possibility of action, just as it has not been necessary to justify action against inaction. People have a right to be inoperative. Parr et al. (2005) identify how a culture of silence overwhelms and restrains the emotional terrain of people in the Scottish Highlands. They recognise that this absence of speech plays a crucial role in repressing emotions and in the problematic emotional states that this enables. An ethics traced by way of impotentiality might take a slightly different approach, one that does not assume the possibility or ethical necessity of a wilful subject. It might specifically question the presentation of 'emotional exchange' as, necessarily, a desirable path from passivity (the preference 'not to') to flourishing, recognising how it might delimit people's ability for inaction, restraint and withholding.

VI Conclusion

What might it mean to insist on absence, gaps, distance, and loss as spatial arrangements? In turn, how does an insistence on radical alterity, emptiness and outsides extend or complicate foundational geographical concepts such as 'space', 'world', or 'subjectivity'? These are the conceptual questions animating scholarship on negative geographies. We started our paper from the insight that while taking seriously negativity in a theoretical vein is both useful and necessary, what is largely lacking to date is a careful consideration of the more everyday meaning of the term 'the negative' outlined by Anderson (2022: 16): 'damage, suffering, or loss to self, other and/or world'. In other words, for all the theoretical talk of negativity, we run the risk of neglecting a seemingly more straightforward question: how do we, as geographers, deal with 'bad feelings'?

Our argument in this paper is that much geographical scholarship is driven by a shared inclination towards an ethics of rehabilitation. This inclination is made up of two central moves. The first is an evaluation: identifying an affect as negative when it involves a reduction in capacities to act. The second is the prescription of activation that involves a call to transform this negative affect into

a positive, empowering one. Tracing these moves across a number of geographical subdisciplines, we asked: what is gained, and what is lost, in the rehabilitation of negative affects? Responding to this question, we argued that rehabilitation tends to overlook the political potential of negative affects, that we must trouble the idea that action is an ethical necessity, that activation assumes and requires a supremacy of willing and mastery, and, most significantly, that rehabilitation's injunction towards activation can carry its own significant harms. Our main contribution was to introduce our own alternative: 'an ethics of impotentiality' as a (non)relation to negative affects that departs from the ethics of rehabilitation dominant within much geographical thought. An ethics of impotentiality is unique in its making-space for potent impotentiality (the capacity not to) and impotent impotentiality (the incapacity to) as crucial ways of inhabiting negative affects. The result is not a flattening of the ethical terrain to an 'anything goes', but its sharpening at a time when feelings are under assault from all directions.

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ORCID iDs

Thomas Dekeyser  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3809-313X>

Vickie Zhang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3368-1522>

David Bissell  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0964-186X>

Note

1. Though we do not wish to distinguish between capacities and potential here, the use of these terms reflects different trajectories of thought within the discipline. Where 'potential' is a term that is more commonly invoked in non-representational geographies via Deleuze to refer to both the virtuality that exists within entities and the potential of a body to affect and be affected, 'capacity' is a broader term that is drawn on by a range of theories of process and practice. We use the term potential, given our preoccupation with impotentiality as a concept.

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Author biographies

Thomas Dekeyser is a cultural-digital geographer who is currently a 150th Anniversary Research Fellow in Geography at Aberystwyth University. His research interests revolve around technological power, the politics of refusal, and theories of pessimism and nihilism. He has published on these topics in journals including *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *Environment and Planning A*, and *Theory, Culture & Society*, and is currently writing a monograph titled *Techno-Negative: a History of Refusal*.

Vickie Zhang is a Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Bristol and Visiting Fellow at Guangzhou University. She is a cultural geographer who explores the affective lives of workers in transforming economies, tracing economic transitions as embodied experiences through qualitative methods and postphenomenological theories. She has published in journals including *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *cultural geographies* and *GeoHumanities*.

David Bissell is Professor of Geography at the University of Melbourne. He is a cultural geographer who undertakes qualitative research on mobile lives and technological futures. His current and recent projects explore the impact of digital on-demand mobile work on cities; how automation is changing workplaces; and how households respond to mobile work practices. He is author of *Transit Life: How Commuting Is Transforming Our Cities* (MIT Press, 2018) and coeditor of *Negative Geographies: Exploring the Politics of Limits* (U Nebraska Press, 2021).