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Feeling

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CULTURE REVIEW

Feeling

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Sometimes I don't know what to feel. There's too much emotion in the air. Like humidity building up before a storm that never breaks: a cloying pressure that dulls and dizzies. Emoting is in, competency out. Trump rages and rants, our prime minister smiles and coos, lulling us into complacency (and then growls at the naughty people who criticise Australia); from a distance, the English appear flabbergasted by Brexit or shouting and ready to draw swords. It's become gibberish to me. Closer to home, someone on the street is screaming at a real or imagined foe, my students are overwhelmed with anxiety about assignments, friendships, expectations, the price of housing, the pitiful number of 'good' jobs. On any given day, colleagues are frustrated, despondent, confused or cynical about the state of contemporary higher education.

It's easy to get lost in the drama. Feeling gets lost.

What I want to think about is not feeling. Or what 'we' (that mysterious pronoun) can feel and not feel. I don't simply mean a lack of empathy or disengagement: but what and who evokes a prescribed emotional response (and why). A sort of emotional short-cut. Or to misuse Raymond Williams, uncritical habits of the heart.¹ And what moves 'us', puts us into motion, reorients, jolts, loosens us from our emotional, political identity.

Lauren Berlant writes that visceral responses are a trained thing.² Feelings and emotions are learned: they aren't simply personal; they are charged with political meaning. Emotions are shared, communal experiences. We know and inhabit the world through emotional attachments: emotions are not something one has, but rather it is through emotional responses to things and others that surfaces, boundaries and distinctions are constructed.³ They ascribe value, are a way of apprehending the world: understanding who I am and where I fit.

What about not feeling? Or rather being trained to respond with certain emotions, which block and limit our capacity to feel.

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Colleagues are gathered to discuss Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*. The Kurdish journalist and asylum seeker's account of incarceration in the Australian Government's immigration detention facility on Manus Island. There must be at least forty people in the room. It's a diverse cohort—artists and historians, legal, politics, literary, media and cultural studies scholars—who bring distinct insights, experiences and interests. The first hour is devoted to our responses to the book; in the second Boochani is Skyping in for a Q&A.

His memoir thwarts pity. The detail of the relentless brutality inflicted upon the asylum seekers leaves nowhere for an Australian to hide. Some talk about how the book 'makes them feel', others take a more dispassionate academic approach. Nonetheless, no one is immune from the banality of the violence, the concentration camp conditions. In Boochani's clear-eyed testimony evidence piles up and up, demanding accountability.

Maybe Skype was too risky. Manus, after all, was a prison. After a wait, and some negotiation, we speak to Boochani on Whatsapp. He is generous and loquacious in his answers to our questions. Someone tells him that they had a long-term interest in Manus and Nauru and, reading his book, she was shocked and horrified by the conditions and treatment. She said something like, Australians need to know what the government is doing. He shoots back, infuriated: Why do Australians say they don't know? How could you not know? It was aimed not at the individual who spoke, but more broadly those in the room, and seemingly Australia. 'We did not know'; 'What can we do?' Familiar Australian refrains. He says he has written numerous pieces for *Guardian Australia*, *The Saturday Paper*, and there have been podcasts and films: how can Australians say they don't know? He sounds tired and exasperated.

Addressing herself or maybe us, she says she feels guilty, ashamed. I feel enraged. I repress the urge to say we shouldn't be feeling guilt but responsibility. Guilt seems like such a cop out. There is a politics to these emotional manoeuvres. It's all too familiar. White fragility: trained emotional responses to reassure that I am good, I care, while suppressing all those confusing quieter feelings. A diversion, a ruse. We're stuck in unfeeling emotions.

What's the cost (and to whom) of uncritical emotional habits? When, and how, do feelings galvanise another politics?⁴

Is Boochani trying to awaken us? *No Friend* is shocking: it disturbs (self) recognition and conscious understanding. I wonder if the will of the book (not necessarily the author) is to break the emotional patterns that bring such comfort and block our capacity to be affected by others.

In class, my students are reading an article Boochani wrote for *Guardian Australia*. It's a shorter piece and less harrowing than his book. I ask them if they need a little more time. Without looking up, one responds, 'Yes, there's a lot to take in'. They are still, silent, slowly absorbing his words. Feeling stuff. Another sits up, says, 'It's just so bad. How can we do this?' The class murmur agreement. They didn't know it was this bad. They don't know what to do. But in a different kind of way, I think, then my colleagues and me. I feel them feeling. Not big, captivating emotions like guilt, shame, anxiety or anger. Gentler, subtle sensations.

I try to move on to the next exercise. They keep their heads down, intent on staying with Boochani. A student looks up, raises his eyebrows. Oh, they want space, quiet. Not to have to shove one more thing in their head (heart), to comprehend, analyse, dissect. It's like this for a while until someone is moved to speak.

Feelings need tributaries.

Endnotes

1. Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1985.
2. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2011, p. 52.
3. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2004, p. 10.
4. Thanks to Andrew Whelan for his questions and insights.