

Spring 2023

Rhetorical New Materialism, Queers, and Cringe

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RHETORICAL NEW MATERIALISM, QUEERS, AND CRINGE

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Bachelor of Arts
Aurora University, 2021

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

English

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2023

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ABSTRACT

Cringe, the negative reflexive reaction we experience when we witness something embarrassing or awkward, has a bad reputation in the queer community. In online and physical queer spaces, there is a pervading belief that “cringe culture” must be antithetical to queerness, that no queer community could possibly achieve liberation until it has eradicated the threat of cringe. This thesis revises that cringe vs. queer positioning by reimagining cringe as its own rhythm of queerness and examining the productive aspects of cringe through engagement with thinkers like Karen Barad and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. The thesis, formatted as a response to a recent forum on rhetorical new materialism, is primarily driven by an examination of Jonathan Flatley’s *Like Andy Warhol*. In it, Flatley presents Warhol as a sort of bastion of anti-cringe culture queerness. Warhol would often claim to “like everything and everyone,” a mindset which, in the true spirit of liberation, welcomes and approves of all that is habitually cringed at by heteronormative society. This thesis explores the idea that such all-inclusive liking functions not simply as a rejection of or defense against cringe, as Flatley outlines, but also as an example of how the embodiment of cringe can function with its own productive rhythm, acting as both an affirmative and destructive force in uniquely queer ways.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In a recent *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* forum on rhetorical new materialism (RNM), Laurie Gries describes the forum and RNM at large as a project about “grappling with posthuman existence in the face of intensifying entanglements, about discovering agencies within relationality, about confronting change, transformation, unpredictable eventfulness” (137). In pursuit of those interests, RNM seeks to engage “interdisciplinary theories, philosophies, and cultural epistemologies that challenge human exceptionalism by prioritizing ontological relationality, recognizing the active force of all matter, and seeking out ways to account for the diversely entangled enactments that constitute everyday life” (138). The forum makes many strides in that direction; the authors pull from anthropology, affect studies, geography, and media studies among other disciplines while consistently considering Indigenous modes of thought. Notably, though, queer theory remains absent from the forum’s list of engagements.

Despite that absence, the authors do engage several key queer thinkers throughout the forum. To name a few, Karen Barad, Stacy Alaimo, and Katherine McKittrick are each mentioned several times. When these theorists are invoked, though, it is in a way which gestures toward but does not follow up on how their queer sensibilities drive their work on materiality. In fact, the whole forum barely mentions the word “queer” and on the rare occasions when queer theorists are engaged, it is always without addressing them

as such. Even Barad's writings on matter are discussed with no mention of queerness despite the fact that queer and trans potentiality are so central to Barad's thinking as to appear in the name of the article being cited, "Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings." To be clear, this broad approach to discussing queer thinkers is not necessarily a failure of the authors; in fact, in addition to being a ubiquitous and possibly necessary academic practice, it might be a respectful way for non-queer thinkers in RNM to engage queer thought without speaking for or over it. This article, however, seeks to extend the forum's project by drawing sharp and explicit connections between RNM and the queer thought it both already does and eventually can interact with.

I am not the first to seek out those connections; many have pointed out that queer theorists and other scholars interested in oppression have long investigated materiality. That point may be accepted broadly enough to be left unspoken. To take one quick example, Sara Ahmed notes in "Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the 'New Materialism'" that queer feminist scholars working with materialist ideas have been frequently dismissed as operating only in the realm of the social. Judith Butler is one theorist who often receives this response; Ahmed writes that Butler's work "offers a powerful exploration of how histories are sedimented in the very 'how' of bodily materialization: it makes sex material, even if it does not offer a theory of the coming into being of the material world, as such" and that "to ask it to do so would seem unjust: as if accounting for the materiality of sex is too partial, not enough, insufficient" (33). Many queer theorists get told the same: sure, maybe they theorize the entanglements of subjectivity, relation, and matter in the context of queerness, but that must be peripheral to the project of RNM. The fraught belief that

these discussions simply do not go far enough to be relevant to RNM's purposes may underlie the absence of explicit mentions of queerness in the forum I'm responding to here, and it certainly drives engagements with thinkers like Barad that reach past their queerness and transness to retrieve only what seems general-purpose rhetorical¹.

In response to these underestimations of queer thought's pertinence to RNM, this article asserts that not only does queer theory already perform many of the theoretical moves associated with RNM but that RNM is, whether it says so or not, already doing queer theory. A particularly vivid intersection of the two fields can be found in affect studies, one of the interdisciplinary interests the RNM forum does mention by name. Queer theory has a deep interest in affect; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote extensively on affect's materiality and contemporary writers such as Jonathan Flatley carry on that line of thinking today. Sedgwick and Flatley give special attention to the affective phenomenon of shame, and this paper responds to that by examining Sedgwick and Flatley's insights into shame in the context of RNM. Those insights, with their persistent interest in how shame drives thought, may significantly aid RNM's stated desire to find and produce ways "to do, think, be otherwise" (Gries 138). This article begins by taking a close look at what queer theory has already said about affect and shame, where the future of those discussions may be headed, and how that trajectory already involves doing something like the work of RNM. Then, to demonstrate the generative possibilities of converging RNM and queer theory, it integrates elements of both to think through a new perspective on another, more recently popularized affective phenomenon: cringe.

¹ Note that this framing presents queerness as a specific and unusual manifestation of rhetoric rather than a constitutive element of matter which is therefore inseparable from rhetoric. More on this in the following sections.

CHAPTER 2

QUEER THEORY ON AFFECT

Queer theory has spent decades investigating the affective force of shame. In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick actually places the phenomenon at the center of queer identity, writing that “for certain (‘queer’) people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity: one that has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities” (14). To Sedgwick, queer shame is a blessing and a curse: it weighs heavy on queer hearts, yet it has a hand in producing some elements of queer culture that are held quite dear by many. Following Silvan Tomkins, Sedgwick describes this identity-structuring force of shame as an “affect theory,” a term which describes the “largely tacit theorizing all people do in experiencing and trying to deal with their own and others’ affects” (135). Affect theories are “highly organized ways” of “selective scanning and amplification [and] of interpreting information so that what is possibly relevant can be quickly abstracted and magnified, and the rest discarded” (Tomkins, cited in Sedgwick 2003, 135). Like the phenomena mapped by discussions of RNM, these affect theories are complexly relational and ethically rich.

Sedgwick presents camp as an example of shame’s affective duality, its ability to both generate and degrade. “Camp” refers to an aesthetic style which takes pleasure in the ironic, the ugly, or the obscene; it is typified by the figure of the drag queen. In traditional drag culture, the community seeks out and celebrates all that is “too much”: a

wig that is obviously not one's natural hair, drawn-on eyebrows so outlandish that they look comical, and performances of a gay femininity that could not possibly be mistaken for the "real thing" of cishetero womanhood. Drag's aesthetic has historically embraced anything that is so bad that it circles back around to being good, at least in the eyes of the right viewer. This unabashed too-muchness is fondly referred to as camp, sometimes adjectivized as "campy" when referring to a specific individual, item, or act. As a queer sensibility, camp is undeniably fueled by shame, and for that reason, some queer folks reject or dismiss it as "just" a result of homophobia; Sedgwick refers to this as a choice to view camp through a "paranoid lens" (27). "Camp," she writes, "is currently understood as uniquely appropriate to the projects of parody, denaturalization, demystification, and mocking ... a dominant culture; and the degree to which camping is motivated by love [is] understood mainly as the degree of its self-hating complicity with an oppressive status quo" (28). This paranoid image of camp is not incorrect so much as incomplete, preoccupied with a pessimistic fear that queer culture might be regressing if it plays too nicely with any part of the dominant culture's homophobia. Sedgwick addresses this fear by presenting camp as productive, interesting, and saturated with love. She stresses that camp can be motivated both by the shame many queer people feel *and* by the love they have for themselves and their queer kin, a love that she sees as blossoming "both in spite of shame and, more remarkably, through it" (8). Here Sedgwick presents shame not just as an emotion felt by an individual queer person but as a sprawling and slippery aspect of queer ecologies, one that produces some of the most beloved elements of queer life. In that sense, Sedgwick's shame is not a brief disruption to queerness but a valuable occurrence of it.

Ahmed notes in her response to RNM that much of feminism already “emphasizes precisely the entanglements and traffic between nature/biology/culture and between materiality and signification” (35), and that is certainly true of Sedgwick. Her work frames affect not as a simple cognitive or social process but as a living, material phenomenon which, to quote Gries, emerges from the “diversely entangled enactments that constitute everyday life” (138). It’s something in the air (or at least something moving through it) and it does not originate neatly within one given subject nor spread linearly from one to the next; it is made up of a never-present, always-morphing web of movements, reinventions, and patterns². Recall here that Kristin Arola calls for RNMists to try to follow Indigenous practices by imagining how we could understand our world not just cognitively but “through mind, body, emotions, and spirit,” an aspiration which Gries calls “especially vital for helping to generate constructive insights” (138). Gries notes that this call raises the important question, “How might rhetorical understandings of living in the Anthropocene transform should scholars get closer to such holistic modes of inquiry rather than further away from them?” (139) For that reason, the holistic thinking of affect put forth by Sedgwick may be one path RNM could take toward finding ways to understand through emotion, body, mind, and spirit due to its liveliness, its complex subjective and objective composition, and its constant emphasis on queer relationality.

Sedgwick’s descriptions of queer affect also resonate with Barad’s insistence on the queerness and transness of matter. Take, for instance, the way that Barad describes the electron during a keynote presentation at Duke University:

² For details on Sedgwick and materiality, see Scott Herring’s RSQ article, “Eve Sedgwick’s ‘Other Materials.’” Herring argues that “while critics have extensively detailed Sedgwick’s contributions to literary interpretation, sexuality, gender, affect, and performativity, we should also appreciate her writings as theorizing queer material relations” (5).

The electron does not exist as an isolated particle but is always already inseparable from the ... field of virtual particles around it. ... For example, the electron will emit a virtual photon and then reabsorb it, ... electromagnetically intra-acting with itself. ... In addition to the electron exchanging a virtual photon with itself (that is, touching itself), it is possible for that virtual photon to ... metamorphose/transition—change its very identity. It can transform into a virtual electron/positron pair that subsequently annihilate each other and morph back into a single virtual photon ... And so on. ... Particle self-intra-actions entail particle transitions from one kind to another in a radical undoing of kinds—queer/trans formations. (31:15)

Because RNM draws deeply from Barad’s conceptualizations of matter, RNM also draws deeply from queer theory; you cannot have one without the other. This is because to Barad, discussing the queerness of matter does not entail speaking about articulations of matter which occur in queer contexts; rather, it means understanding self-touch, identity transformation, and confusing or unexpected relationalities as constitutive elements of materiality itself. Barad calls the electron “a queer theorist’s delight” for this reason (31:06), a sentiment which drives all of their works on materiality. All of Barad’s work on matter understands materiality as queer and presents it as such, and because Barad has been so central to RNM discussions on materiality, so too has queer theory been integral to those discussions. This is relevant for two reasons. First, it highlights the powerful role that queer thought has always played in RNM, regardless of whether or not it has been acknowledged by name. Second, this Baradian understanding of matter can reinforce and

broaden Sedgwick's shame in important ways, for instance by expanding on the idea that a drag queen is not somehow regressive or less queer because she likes to have fun with homophobic sentiments. Barad's work makes visible that the messiness of camp actually reflects the queerness of matter itself. Camp in this light does not need to be seen through that paranoid lens that would present it as a stop on the road to queer liberation or an unwelcome interruption to queerness. Instead, camp could be conceptualized as its own articulation of queerness, one that is just like the electron. It is a mishmash of genders and belief systems and feelings that is inseparable from its "field"—camp emerges from, embodies, and catalyzes queer transformations, its own glorious undoing and remaking of kinds.

Queer studies scholar Jonathan Flatley takes up Sedgwick's thinking of shame in *Like Andy Warhol*, a work which puts Sedgwick in conversation with more canonical figures in rhetoric like Foucault and Deleuze. The book brings these thinkers together to examine Andy Warhol's unusual approach to shame, presenting it as an incredibly powerful affect theory. Flatley's argument begins with Warhol's habit of making statements like "I like everything" and "I like everybody," announcements which may contain an implicit "I *am like* everything" and "I *am like* everybody" (1, emphasis in original). That personal, all-inclusive liking is a large part of what initially sparked Flatley's interest in Warhol's experience with shame. Flatley points out that Warhol's shame undergoes intense fluctuations: at some moments throughout Warhol's life he seems to drown in shame, at others he appears to wield it intentionally to embarrass others, and in some moments he actually seems impervious to it, rising above shame like it holds no power over him whatsoever. Warhol encounters shame-inducing situations

quite often, but rather than becoming numb to or blushing under the force of that shame, he develops a style of inhabiting it that opens him up to liking everyone and everything around him; for this, Flatley calls him a paradigmatic instance of Sedgwick's famous description of queerness, that "keenly, it is relational, and strange" (8).

To illustrate Warhol's unusual affective approach, Flatley recounts a story about his reaction to the Kennedy assassination. Warhol had always liked Kennedy as a president, yet he feels very little when Kennedy dies: "What bothered me," Warhol says, "was the way the television and radio were programming everyone to feel so sad" (47). He spends a while shamelessly trying to cheer up his friends, but his efforts fail as everyone around him seems to be operating on the same untouchably solemn affective wavelength. Many people would consider it at least a little bit shameful to loudly evangelize one's good mood during a national tragedy—it is akin to the classic offense of laughing at a funeral—yet Warhol shows no hint of self-conscious remorse. Flatley points out that rather than easing into the same low spirits as those around him, Warhol responds to the president's death with "an attempt to shift the mood by creating a way of being with others—'having a ball,' going out to dinner—in which a different set of things matter" (43). He adds that "as Spinoza (and Deleuze and Massumi following him) emphasized, the sad are more docile. Warhol's mood-shifting opposition to the given programming has clear political consequences" (47). The *telos* of Warhol's affect theory, then, is not simply to respond to all events with rote liking—which would lead him to like the Kennedy assassination and his friends' reactions to it—but rather "to maximize his openness to liking" overall (43). In other words, he uses like strategically as a catalyst to relate, especially when the cultural norms surrounding forces like sadness or shame

might otherwise discourage it. This is just one story of many that *Like Andy Warhol* uses to depict Warhol's original affective approach, especially in terms of how it allows him to alter his environment and catalyze new connections.

CHAPTER 3

SHAME VS. CRINGE

To complicate Flatley's depiction of Warhol's relationship to shame, this article introduces "cringe" as a related phenomenon which has not yet been theorized as thoroughly as shame but can be just as influential. Cringe, a term popularized in the 2010s (Wynn 0:45), usually refers to that uncomfortable "oh God, I can't look" sensation which can bubble up when one witnesses something awkward or humiliating (examples might include an unfortunate Freudian slip or a barely watchable *American Idol* audition). It is a near opposite of "cool." When we witness something uncomfortably un-cool, we cringe; the object of our discomfort can be described as cringeworthy or cringy. A good heuristic for beginning to distinguish shame from cringe as they're generally used today might be that if liking or doing something could be considered a "guilty pleasure," then it's cringy, but if liking or doing it only induces non-pleasurable guilt, then it's shameful. In other words, shame might be associated with breaking a moral or ethical law while cringe might be more strongly associated with breaking a social one. Screaming show tunes at the top of one's lungs during the morning commute to work may be considered a guilty pleasure since it's cringe-inducing in a harmless way; however, practicing serial murder is generally considered so morally shameful that calling it cringy would be so misleading as to be straight-up incorrect. Other actions, like lying about one's past to impress a potential date, might be seen as both shameful and cringy since they break ethical and social norms to a similar extent. Note that while I am proposing

this social/moral dichotomy as a useful starting point for discussing cringe and shame, it is of course, like all binaries, false; the social is always already moral just as the moral is always already social. We are dealing only in degrees of intensity here.

In *Cringeworthy: A Theory of Awkwardness*, pop psychologist Melissa Dahl defines cringe as the “intense visceral reaction produced by an awkward moment” (3). Her work provides a useful mini-taxonomy of cringe. The first category, termed “compassionate cringe,” describes the feeling of embarrassment that results from empathizing with a cringy subject; this is the sensation we feel when someone we love pocket dials their ex or when one of our students gravely mispronounces “bourgeoisie” throughout a long oral presentation. The second category is called “contemptuous cringe,” and rather than coming from empathy, this one arises in situations when a subject becomes the target of spoken or unspoken ridicule. This is the contempt that results in schoolyard bullies pointing and laughing at the girl wearing the smudged makeup, and it is the style of cringe that makes up most of the “cringe content” available online. For a better understanding of contemptuous cringe, just try searching YouTube for “cringe compilation”; you will find a shocking volume of videos full of cringy subjects for the viewer to sneer at. If you have been a target of such sneering in the past, then you may find yourself cringing compassionately on behalf of the poor souls on screen.

If you do check out those cringe compilations, one recurrent theme you will notice all throughout them is queerness. Queer people have often been considered cringy, which is part of why the phenomenon has such a nasty reputation in queer circles today; it is not uncommon, especially in online spaces, to see calls for the death of “cringe

culture” or claims that queer liberation can never be achieved so long as queer folks live in fear of cishetero contemptuous cringe. In fact, the queer pushback against cringe is so strong right now that Natalie Wynn, a very prominent figure in online trans circles, recently released an 83-minute-long video essay on the topic. Her video presents a list of 23 groups that tend to fall victim to contemptuous cringe, including such categories as “beat poets,” “queer AFAB ukulele players,” “fedora tippers,” and “fat people.” She notes a few patterns in the list’s broad categories: “deviancy (whether physical, mental, social, or sexual), a combination of passionate sincerity and amateurism, the perceived tendency to lack emotional composure, obsessive interests in unconventional hobbies, and low social status” (17:17). Going by that catalog of social sins, it’s easy to see why queer circles, infamously friendly to sexual deviants, social outcasts, and loudly emotional outbursts of self-expression, might be at a naturally high risk of fostering cringe³. Wynn goes on to fracture Dahl’s taxonomy of cringe into four categories: contempt for self, contempt for others, embarrassment of self, and embarrassment on behalf of others, “self” and “others” here referring not to the individual but to social “in-groups” and “out-groups” (47:12). Wynn credits contempt for others for most of the cringe content available on social media and points out that the fear of attracting that type of hateful cringe drives many queer anxieties about being perceived by the dominant homophobic culture as cringy. She does not theorize camp in these terms, but the word does appear once in the video: when Wynn approvingly says of cringy 20th-century

³ While this article connects these categories of cringe with queerness, it’s worth noting that autism may have an even stronger correlation with Wynn’s list of traits. For more on queerness and neurodivergence, see Beth Randulski’s “Conceptualising Autistic Masking, Camouflaging, and Neurotypical Privilege: Towards a Minority Group Model of Neurodiversity” and Nick Walker’s works on “neuroqueer.”

opera singer Lady Florence, “Behold this fucking camp queen. Oh we have no choice but to stan” (27:05)⁴.

Wynn’s video is cited in Charlie Markbreiter’s recent article, “‘Other Trans People Make Me Dysphoric’: Trans Assimilation and Cringe,” subheaded, “When the right deploys cringe to control trans assimilation, trans people cringe at each other.” Markbreiter draws attention to Wynn’s invocation for viewers to “reclaim” the cringy parts of themselves, arguing that certain forms of cringe are “inherently hierarchical” (it can be cringy to be visibly poor, visibly trans, etc.) and it is therefore the responsibility of any good queer citizen to identify and destroy their own cringe-driven thoughts. Following Sianne Ngai’s writing in *Ugly Feelings*, Markbreiter notes that negative affective forces like envy become vilified because they express “real material differences”; what we think of as bodily envy, for example, can often be traced back to class differences. Markbreiter posits that cringe is also inextricable from societal forces like racism and classism, it stems from a conservative worldview, and it can drive a hefty wedge between people who ought to be comrades. Calling something cringy, then, is not simply a matter of taste; it’s a deeply political claim about who “deserves access to the social body and its rapidly shrinking resources.” The article concludes that the pursuit of any kind of social perception is inherently “toxic” because it “operates from scarcity”; eradicating cringe, then, could be considered a progressive achievement. Markbreiter and Wynn make up just two drops in the recent wave of anti-cringe sentiment, a wave that has passed through queer spaces ever since the term first gained relevance. The prevailing assumption across many if not most contemporary queer communities is clear: cringe is

⁴ “Stan,” a term popularized by Eminem’s song of the same title, usually refers to being a dedicated fan of someone (as in, “I stan Olivia Rodrigo” or “he’s a Sinatra stan”).

bad, and to cringe less at ourselves and each other would be to take one step closer to queer liberation.

Cringe, though, is not exclusive to queer communities. Like shame, cringe affects queer folks in particular ways while also playing a powerful role in non-queer circles. A fantastic overview of cringe's impact on non-queer academic spaces can be found in Eric Hayot's "Academic Writing, I Love You. I really Do." Hayot discusses the many barriers to liking academic writing, giving special focus to the embarrassing, the awkward, and the cringy. Take this particularly poignant conversation quoted in his article: "Have you ever noticed how little we talk, in the book reviews and readers' reports, about the quality of someone's prose? ... It would be like talking about how someone smells. If you say you don't like it then you've embarrassed them; if you say you do, you've embarrassed yourself. Writing is the odor of a body in a crowded elevator" (Hayot 62)⁵. His description of the impact of that embarrassment is not too different from Sedgwickian affect theories: "Taste is an interface," he writes. "It mediates the subjective and the objective, organizing feeling's relation to the world (organizing, in fact, the state of the interface, itself too subject, metastructurally, to a taste for certain arrangements of concepts like world or feeling)" (59). Those sentiments will be familiar to academics who question the political correctness of their own tastes, especially those who write about the ethical urgency of expanding one's taste to broader horizons. Though he doesn't explicitly invoke the term, Hayot's article demonstrates a deep concern with cringe, vocalizing the deep-seated anxiety around being *cringed at* which rings all throughout academia.

⁵ See Brian Glavey's "Friending Joe Brainard" for an in-depth theory of embarrassment and how it "helps to generate and maintain the sense of the social that is vital to Brainard's life and work" (336).

A traditionally rhetorical thinking of cringe, the kind which could speak more directly to the palpable anxieties in Hayot's article, may begin by figuring cringe as a full, complex affective phenomenon in addition to being an emotion. The Deleuzian/Spinozan understanding of affect makes that move, as Flatley discusses in *Like Andy Warhol*. Emotion is sometimes imagined as a state of being located within or at least beginning from one subject—a constant or something tethered to a constant—whereas to Deleuze and Spinoza, affect is instead a moving, flowing play of forces involving human and nonhuman subjects and objects. To Spinoza and Deleuze, affect is a field or medium of play which can be only ephemerally articulated through constants. Stormer and McGreavy frame this distinction as a shift from agency to capacity: rather than being comprised of discrete, agentive forces carried out by individual actors, affect instead describes the sprawling capacity for those and other forces within a given ecology (5). The boundaries of that ecology are temporary and always shifting; we produce and reproduce them whenever we participate in a given rhetorical/affective situation. In this sense, cringe has less in common with humiliation or embarrassment and more in common with camp: it is a distinctive but always-active style of rhetoric which can be thought as a medium of iterative play. Like all rhetorics, then, cringe will more easily facilitate the repetition-with-a-difference of particular signs and forms of life, allowing recognizable patterns, social structures, etc. to be invented and reinvented over and over again. This may be one productive way to understand the “cringe culture” bogeyman popping up in many queer spaces. Many people have identified a high volume of contemptuous cringe within their queer ecologies, and that cringe is seen as damaging enough to warrant calls for the death of the culture that continually reproduces it.

Here it is important to avoid framing affect as something that exists around or outside of a given rhetorical articulation. Instead, rhetoric itself occurs through affective force. This is true in the sense of persuasion always emerging from an affective field, but even the minute, logistical details of rhetoric, such as the physical mechanisms of reading, are themselves affective phenomena. As Massumi notes, “[every] perception is a force-effect” as is “[every] vision, every touch, every intermodal experience” (72). The psychologist Russell T. Hurlburt illustrates this in his investigations into how reading works: reading can involve visualization, sensory awareness, emotional feeling, wholly unsymbolized thinking, or an infinite array of other processes (Hurlburt et al. 12). Reading, then, is a process of affect not in the sense of being a series of stable, simply present sensations but in the sense that affective movement is the only way in which reading can do anything at all. To read is to produce affective and sensory movements, and the patterns emerging from those movements give rise to what we think of as a given “meaning” of a text. Similarly, rhetoric is not one temporary effect or articulation of affect; it is itself affect. This is why the field of rhetorical studies urgently needs a theory of cringe: if rhetoric is affect and the affective force of cringe carries ethical weight, then all rhetoricians who are interested in furthering the goals of RNM can benefit from carefully thinking through how they navigate cringe. To that end, I suggest turning again to Flatley.

CHAPTER 4

CRINGE AND FLATLEY'S WARHOL

A reader attuned to the presence of cringe can find it at each step of Flatley's description of Warhol, though it is never quite dealt with on its own terms. Instead, Flatley discusses Warhol's love of the shameful, the embarrassing, and the campy. He identifies a "pedagogical effort in [Warhol's] promiscuous liking, an ambitious attempt to initiate others into its pleasures: 'I think everybody should like everybody,'" even those who are generally considered too embarrassing or shame-inducing to like (2). Warhol speaks on how this outlook can alter the bittersweet experience of gazing at a far-too-beautiful stranger:

If you see a person who looks like your teenage fantasy walking down the street, it's probably not your fantasy, but someone who had the same fantasy as you and decided instead of getting it or being it, to look like it, and so he went to the store and bought the look that you both like. So forget it. Just think about all the James Deans and what it means. (10)

Flatley clarifies that this instruction to "forget it" does not mean that one ought to "forget your attractions or to refrain from picking up the person who looks like your fantasy"; instead, what we are forgetting is "the idea that you can ever have or be your fantasy object, because you never *are* a subject without some internalized object you are imitating ... Warhol is encouraging us to forget the sense that we must relate to others by way of either identification ('being') or desire ('having')" (11). In other words, instead of

feeling bitterly ashamed that we cannot become nor sleep with the sexy stranger we pass on the street, we can welcome that shame, “like” it, as a reminder that we are always identifying with and desiring subjects while also being identified with and desired ourselves: “We are, each of us, going back to the Marilyn or Elvis or James Dean model” (12). Flatley notes that this can be an especially comforting insight for those of us who have spent more time feeling desirous than desired. It transforms shame into a reminder that our relationalities and our identifications are always in movement, always touching; they are never simply present nor finished.

Warhol’s interest in cringe and shame extends into his consumption of media. He once admitted to preferring shameful and cringy content over anything else, even taking pleasure in the types of media that might induce unbearable secondhand embarrassment in the average viewer. In fact, when he does witness media that does not include any cringeworthy moments, he sometimes imagines them into being anyway:

When I see an old Esther Williams movie and a hundred girls are jumping off their swings, I think of what the auditions must have been like and about all the takes where maybe one girl didn’t have the nerve to jump when she was supposed to, and I think about her left over on the swing. So that take of the scene was a leftover on the editing room floor—an out-take—and the girl was probably a leftover at that point—she was probably fired—so the whole scene is much funnier than the real scene where everything went right, and the girl who didn’t jump is the star of the out-take. (28)

That outtake would be right at home in one of today's cringe compilations, and Warhol's description of it amusingly echoes Wynn's comment about Lady Florence: "Behold this fucking camp queen. Oh we have no choice but to stan" (27:05). While many people enjoy witnessing a camp or cringe other, though, few go so far as to mentally fabricate cringe where there previously was none. In an attempt to make some sense of the unusual depth of Warhol's affinity for cringe content, Flatley situates it within the context of Warhol's own experiences with being "left over": "embedded in Warhol's 'I like everybody,'" he writes, "may be the wish 'everybody likes me'" (6). Flatley lists several reasons for Warhol's failure to fit in: he was socially awkward, he was balding and covering it up with strange wigs, and he was so flamboyant that even other gay artists refused to acknowledge him (29). He would belong to quite a few of Wynn's 23 categories of those who tend to attract contemptuous cringe. Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg are two of many fellow gay artists who flatly refuse to be seen with him, and when Warhol asks a friend why that is, he is told, "try to look straight; you play up the swish—it's like an armor with you" (30). Rather than taking the advice to heart, he leans even harder into what Flatley calls his "fey presentation," almost daring his straight-passing colleagues to confront him about it. He "*want[s]* to embarrass Johns and Rauschenberg for refusing to recognize their similarity to him," Flatley explains, "for pretending to be above such abjection" (31).

Flying in the face of the Johns and Rauschenbergs of this world, Warhol's insistence on both appreciating and embodying cringe produces something amazing. It projects and performs a sense of pride in his queerness, his strangeness, and his cringiness, clearing a path for others to do the same: "one might also see Warhol's

flamboyant swishiness as an invitation to be embarrassed (and stigmatized) together” (32). Flatley calls this a praxis. “Liking” in this active sense, the choice to alter the way one engages with the world to stay vulnerable and remain open to good and bad, makes up a uniquely queer theory of affect. Flatley elaborates,

In Warhol’s affect theory, prioritizing the information that is relevant for liking means first of all setting aside the opposition between the same and the different, scanning instead for similarities, which are then “abstracted and magnified.” Instead of asking, Is this person the same as me, or different? Warhol’s is an affect theory that wonders, How am I like this? How is this like other things? How can I relate to this thing as somehow imitable? In what way are we alike? How do we (mis)fit together? (43)

Flatley concludes that Warhol's ability to maximize the capacity for liking has political implications in that it “allows [us] to overcome barriers put up, say, by racism or misogyny or homophobia that might discourage us from liking and feeling alike” (41). Simply ignoring or attempting to eradicate cringe would not have the same effect; since cringe is inextricably tied to social hierarchies, simply sweeping it under the rug would likely have the same effect as brushing away any other social inequity, which is to say that it would not lead to any meaningful change at all. Warhol’s affect theory works differently: it is bold, it is active, and it leads to meaningful change in how Warhol and others are able to move through the world.

I agree with Flatley here in that the capacity for feeling connected to a broader selection of things does seem to be a huge ethical strength of Warhol’s affect theory. I would add nuance, though, to *how* that increased relationality plays out. In particular, I’m

skeptical of the idea that finding likeness where we previously saw none can automatically lessen the disdain or contemptuous cringe we experience. This is where the distinction between shame and cringe becomes vital, as does Wynn's explanation of in-group and out-group cringe. Following Flatley's own logic, while a random passerby on the street may slightly cringe upon glimpsing the performance of a mediocre drag queen, a skilled but insecure drag artist may experience tenfold that level of cringe in response to the same performance. The fact that she shares a James Dean with the shoddy performer, that she views them as each seeking to have or to be the same object, can be exactly what prevents her from finding something to like in the performance. This is why Johns and Rauschenberg hate Warhol so much: because they do misfit just like he does and that relation deepens their contempt. In other words, while asking "How am I like this?" and "How do we (mis)fit together?" might cut through the barriers to like which are closely related to shame, it might also *reinforce* some barriers more strongly associated with cringe. In those situations, the presence of a disconnect between social groups may actually magnify rather than diminish our ability to like.

In her video essay, Wynn addresses Calvin Garrah, a popular YouTuber and trans man who is best known for making unkind videos reacting to cringy queer people. Garrah seems to have a particularly intense response to "transtrenders," a term which usually refers to young, white queer people who were raised as girls and use a more complicated label than "man" or "woman," often identifying with terms like "nonbinary," "genderfluid," or occasionally obscure microlabels like "autgender." Transmedicalists or "transmeds," those like Garrah who believe that only people who experience traditional, debilitating gender dysphoria should call themselves trans, tend to believe that

“transtrenders” are cisgender people who have simply gotten caught up in the recent waves of queer pride or taken on a false identity in order to seek attention⁶. Wynn’s video includes a short snippet of one of Garrah’s videos in which he looks at an image of a young queer person, appears viscerally disturbed, and scoffs, “So this person is an asexual, non-binary, transgender lesbian, who uses he/they/it/thons pronouns. According to my calculation, you are a transtrender” (52:48). In response, Wynn points out that while she understands Garrah’s hesitancy to accept microlabels, she doesn’t experience the same visceral cringe as him when she thinks about “transtrenders”:

I’m with you on wondering what a he/they/xir genderflux lesbian demiboy is, but unlike you, Calvin, I just don’t have a morbid cringe obsession with feminine AFAB trans people. They can identify as however many genders they want for all I care. I may not always understand it, but I support their journey. I guess it doesn’t bother me because I’m not worried that anyone will judge me because of how they behave. I don’t feel in-group cringe.
(55:41)

Following Wynn here, encouraging others to view every individual person they come into contact with as “like” them in some way, as a member of some temporarily produced group they share in common (such as “visibly trans people,” “James Dean wannabes,” or even “misfits”), could have the unintended effect of facilitating *more* contempt rather than less.

⁶ I am oversimplifying here; transmedicalists, sometimes called “truscum,” do not all believe that debilitating gender dysphoria is required to be trans and not all who do hold that belief identify as transmedicalist. Exclusionary viewpoints like Garrah’s have been around for at least as long as queer identity has existed and they will remain long after the term “transmedicalist” falls out of relevance.

This is where RNM can make a powerful intervention into queer theory: reimagining this insight about the emotional experience of cringe as a rhetorically distinct affect theory. Sedgwick notes that even highly criticized affect theories can produce valuable phenomena, like the love-and-shame-fueled aesthetic of camp. The same could be said of cringe. Flatley, for example, views Warhol's affinity for cringe as motivated by both shame and love. A new materialist approach to that might decenter the subject and imagine the affective theory of cringe as a stylistic quirk of queer societies, an element of queer ecology which is constantly shifting, forming and reforming without ever sitting still. Following the lead of Rickert's ambient rhetorics and Hawk's sonic rhetorics, cringe could be an affective rhetoric which catalyzes the development of certain forms of queerness and stymies others.

To take one example of how this type of thought might play out, we can consider whether queer communities which foster high amounts of in-group contemptuous cringe may be more likely to produce particular forms of identity. We could theorize, for example, that they may see an influx of identities based on negation, relying on disidentification to avoid unnecessary in-group resentment. In my own limited experience, this is true; queer communities with high affective attunement to in-group cringe do tend to rely on negative statements of identity. Because being seen as cringy on the internet can do intense damage to a person's life and misdefining an identity word is an online social sin, an increasing number of young queer folks on the internet define "lesbian" as "non-men loving non-men" to avoid strictly defining "woman" or describe their own genders as simply "nonbinary" or "not cis" to avoid saying anything tangible about their own gendered experiences. These tendencies are not direct results of cringe

the emotion; it is not as if an individual lesbian sees a homophobic onlooker or an exclusionary queer person, feels the threat of cringe, and decides to identify as a “non-man loving non-men” to evade criticism. Rather, the affect of cringe moves all throughout such queer ecologies in thought and touch and non-human agents (e.g., algorithms), and that particular rhythm of queerness tends to catalyze the crystallization of these negating patterns. Before dismissing this identity trend as silly, “chronically online” behavior as many have before⁷, it is worth noting that it shares a lot in common with “negative theology,” the habit of speaking about God only in terms of what cannot be said about him. Derrida and others write about how this approach to theology evades criticism by saying practically nothing of substance and only making claims about what is not: God is not evil, God is not knowable, God is not human. As philosophers have spent quite some time debating the pros and cons of negative theology, so too have contemporary queer theorists weighed many benefits and drawbacks to negating identity terms. To my knowledge, this conversation has not yet incorporated the language of a Deleuzian, Spinozan, or Sedgwickian notion of affect, nor has it taken up the ecological and holistic approaches of RNM, though I suspect that will not be the case for long.

⁷ We have again run into anti-autistic sentiment in this discussion of queer cringe: “chronically online” and “touch grass” are ableist, often anti-autistic pejoratives which were popularized on social media and are frequently spammed in the replies to posts calling for or simply using inclusive language.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: CRINGE FOR THE RHETORICAL NEW MATERIALIST

There has been little to nothing written on the rhetoric of Warhol's liking or even Sedgwick's affect theory of shame, but the recent first edition of *The Routledge Handbook of Queer Rhetoric* does include one brilliant chapter by Allen Durgin on these topics. The chapter, "Queer *Topoi*: Writing 'Like' Sedgwick," follows how Sedgwick's uses of certain *queer topoi* allow her to produce particular affective and cognitive responses in her readers. Durgin defines *queer topoi* as "haunts or commonplaces of an individual writer, their particular aid to self-recognition" (100); they are the uniquely queer realms of thought that allow Sedgwick to do what she does so effectively. Throughout his analysis, Durgin cites Flatley's desire to understand precisely how Sedgwick's engagements with these *topoi* push her readers to become "not just smarter, but happier too," an achievement which rarely receives recognition in other corners of academia (100). Durgin's description of *queer topoi* highlights the relevance of Sedgwick's work to rhetoric, and it provides a useful starting point for rhetoric folks who want to draw from Sedgwick and Flatley in their own theories of cringe.

While I cannot dive deeply into the details of that project here, I can at least put forward some early ideas for how to navigate it. Many queer folks have detected the presence of contemptuous cringe in their own communities and expressed a desire to do something about it, but few if any have described that presence as a rhythm, an ambience,

or an attunement. Rather than relying on the negating power of a resolution to “stop participating in cringe culture,” an RNM perspective on queer cringe may instead call for the formation of “different places, with different attunements and different assumptions about what it means to be—to be rhetorically—in the world” (Barnett and Boyle 2). To follow Gries, it could encourage queer folks to “adopt and adapt constructive methods, such as inventorying/auditing (Ackerman), and new methodologies, like ‘hydrotropic rhetorics’ (Gottschalk Druschke and Rivers 152) and ‘mushroom rhetoric[s]’ (Nicotra 159), that may ‘reveal different ways of thinking, relating, and living’” (141). Warhol’s promiscuous liking and his practice of finding pleasure and value in the celebration of cringe seem an excellent place to start.

The language of cringe may also help academics to make sense of the affective barriers put in place by rhetorical traditions. Richard Marback voices a desire to do so in “Unclenching the Fist: Embodying Rhetoric and Giving Objects Their Due,” writing, “We must be able to unclench our fists if the full range and fluidity of embodied rhetorical possibilities are to be returned” (49). In pursuit of that goal, he asks readers to practice vulnerability:

Vulnerability to the moment of a rhetorical event is more than openness to circumstance. Vulnerability is an activity, a making do in the conjoined mental and physical worlds of embodied expression. . . . It lives in the event as the availability, the responsiveness, of ourselves and objects to each other. (65)

What Marback calls for here is a rhetorical tradition which knows how to lean into the self and the Other without so quickly shrinking back out of fear or simple habit. He calls

for us to open ourselves up, to find ways to express and receive the expression of others without flinching in the face of anything raw. Warhol's liking praxis may aid in that endeavor. As Flatley notes, "liking is not so much an emotion as a force propelling us toward something instead of away. As such, it is the condition of possibility for being affected by something. Like interest, it prepares us to pay attention" (37). Some negating affective modes may encourage added distance between subjects, leading to the proliferation of everything from Derrida's suspicion of negative theology, to the online queers' "non-men liking non-men" phrasing, to the paranoid dismissal of drag queens as "regressive," to Hayot's fear of embarrassing himself by speaking too enthusiastically about another scholar's prose. However, just as affect is not the same as emotion, the complex effects of taking on an affect theory like Warhol's cannot be simplified down to a binary like "fosters connection" or "fosters distance." It is worth asking, though, whether a culture which produces less contemptuous cringe and more liking may lead to the formation of ecologies where vulnerability is not met with as much immediate recoil. Out of those ecologies may emerge a new sort of attunement to cringe and shame, one that leans into these maligned phenomena as valuable aspects of life. In short, listening to what the queers have to say about affect may aid rhetoricians in their pursuit of new ways to be vulnerable, to be open to the Other, to affirm—to do, think, and be otherwise.

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