

**'It's this pain in my heart that won't let me stop':  
Gendered affect, webs of relations, and young women's activism**

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To be published in *Feminist Theory*, December 2014

**Abstract**

Interrogating the oft-stated emotion of 'guilt' amongst young female activists, I develop a theoretical account of why young women seem to be more burdened with such negative emotions than young men. Drawing on feminist theorizing, I posit that young women's emotional accounts of activist work highlight the retraditionalisation of gender under neoliberal modernity. I provide evidence of the gender-differentiated demands that heightened forms of reflexivity place on women, young women in particular. I then consider alternative conceptions of politics, grounded in the work of Hannah Arendt, and extending my own earlier work on relational agency (Kennelly, 2009). Drawing on phenomenology to offer an account of political engagement grounded in the lived experiences of activists, I suggest that social movements might be bolstered through a deepened understanding of the role played by webs of relations and world-building practices, without losing sight of the gendered implications of such a turn.

**Keywords**

Affect, reflexive modernization, neoliberalism, activism, young women, Arendt.

**Introduction**

The essential dilemma that this paper is working to address is the role of affect in configuring gendered subjectivities within contemporary youth-dominated social movements: how do emotions figure in young male and female activists' accounts of the pressures of activism, and what can this tell us about the shape that gender takes in twenty-first century social movements?<sup>ii</sup> Gender has revealed itself slowly within this project, and the very slowness of its revelation is telling. As a feminist who imbues *everything* with a gender analysis, I was perplexed by the role that gender played within my ethnography of youth activist cultures. I spent a year shadowing young activists (ages 13 to 29) engaged in anti-globalization, anti-

poverty, anti-colonialism and anti-war organizing (collectively referred to as 'global justice' activists) in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, Canada. Within my original analysis, class and race as figurative social categories were prominent, while gender remained a foggy backdrop. While in earlier publications I provided some preliminary analyses of the gendered configuration of youth social movement participation, and its links to neoliberal responsibilization, its contours were not well developed (see Kennelly, 2009; 2011). It was not until I decided to do a word search for 'guilt' within all of my activist transcripts that the shape of gender began to crystallize: within my 38 interview and 3 focus group transcripts, that search brought up thirteen transcripts, twelve of which were from women or were from conversations between women (in the case of the focus groups). Given that 23 of my respondents were women, this meant that more than half had made mention of 'guilt' in their interviews or focus groups, which were wide-ranging discussions of their own histories of activist involvement. While I had noticed the prominent profession of guilt amongst female activists before, the prevalence of this particular semiotic reference within the women's transcripts was stunning, particularly when contrasted with its absence amongst the men. Why the repeated reference to guilt, and what does it say about the constitution of gender within social movements?

Guilt is a signpost, not an objective fact that stands separate from the social context of how gender is lived in our high modern societies, but an indicator of some of the strains and threads that run through contemporary gender relations. As Sara Ahmed notes, 'emotions are not "in" either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be

delineated as if they are objects' (2004/2010: 10). Some two decades earlier, feminist theorist Sandra Bartky made a similarly phenomenological point:

[T]he feeling lives of men and women are not identical. But what needs to be asked about such emotional differences is not only their relationship to typical gendered traits or dispositions but, following Heidegger, the way in which such attunements are disclosive of their subjects' 'Being-in-the-world' i.e., of their character as selves and of the specific ways in which, as selves, they are inscribed within the social totality (1990: 84).

Following Ahmed and Bartky, I am interested within this paper in investigating how specific emotions 'produce the surfaces' of activist work for women and men, and what such expressions of affect can tell us about how 'as selves, they are inscribed within the social totality.' Alerted to the possible signifiers that might indicate gendered elements in activist practices, I looked again at my transcripts, carefully parsing the expressions of affect made by the forty-one women and men with whom I had conducted interviews and focus groups, and shadowed at various activist events over the course of twelve months in 2006-07. In doing so, I began to see more clearly other signposts to gendered experiences within youth activist subcultures. Amongst the women, I noted professions of an overwhelming -- at times even crippling -- sense of responsibility and culpability. They regularly commented on the powerful sway of negative emotions (feeling upset, outraged, angry) acting as both motivators and self-flagellation devices for their activism. In both field observations and interviews, I witnessed their tense negotiation between 'caring for self' and 'caring for others.' Such expressions of intensely experienced and generally negative affect stood in sharp contrast to that which was articulated by many of the men: '[I became involved with activism because] I enjoy connecting

with people. I like meeting new people. I like being involved in interesting projects and so that's my purpose. That's my objective' (Jonathon, age 25).

As noted in a recent special issue of *Feminist Theory* examining 'the affective turn,' '[f]eminist engagement with affective politics ... requires attention to the ways in which feelings can (re)produce dominant social and geo-political hierarchies and exclusions' (Pedwell & Whitehead, 2012: 120). In the case of this project, I attempt to attend to this requirement through an analysis of the broader cultural forces in the contemporary high modern society within which these young men and women are engaging in activism. To this end, I situate the regular manifestation of such intensely negative emotions amongst the women in my study as a gendered *structure of feeling*, to co-opt Raymond Williams' (1977) succulent phrase. Their repeated occurrence tells us less about the individual women, and more about the broader social and cultural spheres within which these young women are positioned. That, for instance, "guilt" was such a common expression amongst the young women is a feeling with precedent: two decades ago, Sandra Bartky identified guilt as one of the 'patterns of mood or feeling ... [that] tend to characterize women more than men' (1990: 84).

In the sections that follow, I trace what I see as some of the relevant components of contemporary feminist social theorizing that can help to explain this particular gendered *structure of feeling* within youth-led social movements. I follow the critiques offered by Adkins (2002) and McNay (1999, 2000) of the detraditionalization thesis (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994), working to understand how gender has been *retraditionalized* under current neoliberal regimes. I also

consider the shifting role of reflexivity, itself part of the *habitus* of modern neoliberal subjects (Wee & Brooks 2010). Drawing on some of the ‘post-feminist’ literature that posits women as the unwitting heirs to neoliberal responsabilization (e.g. Baker, 2010; Genz 2006; Harris, 2004; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001), I argue that reflexivity under neoliberalism needs to be understood as a gender-differentiated practice, with particular kinds of inducements to self-interrogation experienced by young women. The combination of retraditionalized gendered subjectivities, the gendered incorporation of reflexivity as a *habitus*, and the pressures on young women under neoliberal times, ultimately create a situation of what Bourdieu terms *symbolic violence*, felt by women within social movement organizing as burnout, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorders. Such profound, yet subtle, differences in the experiences of women and men within social movements means two things: that activist work remains highly gendered, and that its gendered impacts are systematically misrecognized by the women and men involved, such that these shared experiences come to be attributed to individual frailties or personal decisions.<sup>iii</sup> This can have tremendous implications for who continues in the challenging yet essential work of social movement organizing, and who, on the other hand, ultimately becomes disengaged.

The potential for negative affective experiences to constrain young women engaged in activism is the first part of this account. The second turns towards the potential for affective connections to *enable* political organizing. In this section of the paper, I discuss the essential role of communities of practice for sustainable activism – similar in contours to what Clare Hemmings (2012) has called ‘affective

solidarity' and an expansion of my own work on 'relational agency' (Kennelly 2009). Here I draw on Hannah Arendt and feminist theorists who have taken inspiration from her (e.g. Dietz, 2002; Zerilli, 2005). In Arendt's work, I would suggest, we find a way of thinking about political action that permits a circumvention of the dilemmas of individualized agency and the problematic role of reflexivity as a gendered habitus. In particular, the Arendtian concepts of 'thinking', 'space of appearances' and 'web of relations' are useful tools for re-imagining how activism might continue to play the essential role that it does within democratic public spheres, and how women might continue their engagement within diverse social movements. Responding to Lois McNay's (2010) recent call for phenomenological investigations into the means by which political agency manifests, the paper draws on the experiences of activists engaged in 'global justice' movements to highlight the concrete possibilities and limits to a generative account of political organizing that keeps both 'thinking' and a 'web of relations' at the centre of its analysis.

### **Reflexive modernization, gender retraditionalization, and neoliberalism**

One of the dominant theoretical approaches to understanding contemporary society within twenty-first century sociology is that of reflexive modernization. This concept, most prominently developed and expanded by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash (1994), posits that current social forms are undergoing a transformation marked by increasing reflexivity and individualization, and an associated loosening of traditional ties and structures. Such loosening is fostered by the increased speed with which individuals, information, and finances can flow

across borders under globalization, resulting in enhanced opportunities and requirements for contemporary subjects to 'shape themselves' -- and the world around them -- through individualized processes of reflexivity. Under the reflexive modernization thesis, traditional effects of social categories such as gender, race, and class begin to give way in the face of the relentless transformations of the social world wrought under advanced modernity.

Unsurprisingly, feminists have taken issue with the supposed dissolution of such central social structures. While not denying that gender structures have been, and continue to be, transformed under processes of globalization and modernization, they refute the suggestion that this renders them irrelevant or obsolete. As Lisa Adkins notes, 'I question the commonly found thesis that processes of mobility and reflexivity are linked to... a straightforward dispersal, breakdown or undoing of sexuality and gender.' Instead, she suggests that 'reflexivity and mobility are a crucial ground for the reconfiguration of gender' (2002: 5). She calls this process *retraditionalization*, capturing the changes that have happened while highlighting the sedimentation of social relations such that categories of gender (and race and class and other social markers) continue to hold relevance.

Reflexivity remains central to the retraditionalization of gender, though in an altered form to that originally proposed by Giddens or Beck. No longer understood as a 'theory of the ever-increasing powers of social actors, or "agency"' (Lash 1994: 111), reflexivity instead is seen as embedded within a 'new set of structural conditions' (Lash, 1994: 111). Specifically, reflexivity under high modernity has become a resource used towards accumulating cultural capital, thus becoming

embodied within subjects as a form of *habitus* (Cronin 2000; Wee & Brooks 2010). In other words, modern subjects *must* be reflexive; reflexivity has become a disposition by which people habitually act in order to maintain their position in the *field*, in the Bourdieusian sense of the word (Adkins 2002; Lash 1994; McNay 1999).

Accompanying globalization and its loosening of traditional ties is the associated ideology of neoliberalism, a form of political governance that makes a merit out of individualism, flexibility, and forms of self-regulation that decrease reliance on the state while increasing individuals' sense of responsibility for themselves. Various feminist theorists have noted the manner in which women have become the neoliberal subject extraordinaire (Baker 2010; Harris 2004; Walkerdine et al 2001); their ability to be flexible, self-regulating, and responsible have meant that areas of employment (for example) previously inaccessible to women have become increasingly feminized, opening opportunities for women to earn higher wages and claim an unparalleled place in the new globalized economy. Likewise, affective expressions that might be associated with activism (such as empathy and compassion for others) have become 'affective skill[s] or capacit[ies] with market value' (Pedwell, 2012: 164) under neoliberalism. As Anita Harris notes, today's young women are expected to "take their place" in the world 'through their personal competencies and from a sense of their responsibilities to the social world' (2004: 72). Under this scenario, women are increasingly positioned as the new success stories under neoliberalism, with their culturally configured flexibility, responsabilization, and adaptability (Baker, 2010; Walkerdine et al, 2001). Yet simultaneously young women are overburdened with the pressures of neoliberal



responsibilization. In a “post-feminist” moment, as Stéphanie Genz notes, young women are faced with ‘the mixed messages and conflicting demands of a neoliberal consumer culture that offers women both freedom and enslavement’ (2006: 347).

It is not surprising that under increased pressures to become more self-regulating and to shift the emphasis of care away from the state and towards individuals that women have come to play a central role. As Ruth Lister (1997/2003) and other feminist theorists of citizenship and the state have pointed out, the public/private divide that has been at the centre of liberal notions of citizenship has often left women in the position of private care-giver, located within the domestic realm. As the public gives way under neoliberal pressures to an enhanced place for the private – through shifting the focus of public care away from the state and towards individuals – it is women who fill in the gap left by the retrenched welfare state. Simultaneously, as women play a larger and more visible role within the public, the sedimented burdens of gendered expectations for care and nurturance shift with them, following them from the devalued private sphere and into their new roles within the public.

Within the context of my research, this manifested through the articulated motivations for engaging in activism by the young women with whom I spoke. Rather than expressing their commitment to social change in an abstract language of justice or ethics, they posited their decision to engage in social movements as a personal choice drawn from a deeply felt sense of responsibility, inflected with powerful emotions including guilt, despair, and suffering:<sup>iv</sup>

Suzie: I don't understand how people can't be upset when they think about the war in Iraq. It's so upsetting to me. It really is. Like I think about it. It's very consuming. And having that guilt I think, or feeling like a horrible person, comes alongside it and I'm so aware of it. It has to propel you to do more (age 23).

Minna: I also think I have a hard time just, yeah, like guilt. And it's really not something that I like to operate from, um, it's not even guilt, it's just this pain that I have in my heart that won't let me stop. And it's hard to negotiate with that (age 23).

Christine: I feel it so much the suffering of the world and how messed up the society is and how it impacts me (age 26).

In grappling with these deeply felt and often painful emotions, these young women are exhibiting the hallmarks of both reflexive neoliberal modernity and retraditionalized gender norms. Both aspects are captured by the expressions of guilt, of 'feeling like a horrible person', of being bound by the suffering of the world; through such feelings, these individual subjects are reflexively placing themselves at the centre of efforts to create social change – yet also feeling that their efforts can never be enough. Guilt belongs to women under retraditionalized forms of gender in modernity; instead of benefitting from the liberal freedom that is meant to accompany the newly individualized subject, women continue to be tied to the gendered expectations that they care for others, expressed in this case through their activism (Bartky, 1990; Federici, 2012). That they can never ultimately do so in sufficient measure results in feelings of guilt, anxiety, and the constant propulsion to "do more."

By contrast, when I asked male participants about their reasons for engaging with activism, their responses emphasized rational and abstract motivations that

were grounded in a sense of injustice in the world – but not a sense that was felt as emotional pain, so much as injustice that simply did not ‘make sense,’ and thus required rectification:

Andrew: I worked a couple of summers at [a factory]. And the first summer I was 17 or 18 or whatever and just went and did my job and the second summer **just through my thinking** I sort of found out more about the union and you know, just talked more with my coworkers about how crummy the company was (age 28).

Patrick: So that was an early political idea for me that **it doesn’t make sense** – like I’d write in notebooks and the things I’d write was just rant about how nations don’t make any sense. And why is it that somebody from another country doesn’t count here and like they’re both people and it shouldn’t make any difference whether you’re on the other side of the border or born in other places (age 21).

That there are emotions beneath these assertions is not hard to see, and I am in no way suggesting that the men in my study were devoid of emotional responses to the injustices they saw around them. What interests me is the marked contrast in how they *accounted* for their activist involvement, turning not to emotions as a motivating factor for their activist work but instead recounting activism as a rational, thoughtful and reasonable response to a world that ‘is fucked up’ (Conrad, age 25). They would likewise draw upon larger political ideals and even self-interested motivations to explain their activism:

Phillipe: But you know most of my work has been enlightened by the idea that people should have a say in their life and with what they want (age 24).

Jonathon: And then why I want to change the world or whatever is for my own objective. It’s because I want to grow up in a place that’s not fucked up.

In these contrasting accounts, we can see the sedimented gender effects of long histories of women’s cultural association with the private sphere, where emotions are predominant, versus men’s affiliation with the public, which has traditionally

emphasized rationality and logic over and above any recourse to emotions (Lister 1997/2003; Pateman 1988). The difference, here, is that the above accounts come from young women and men who are *all* engaged with the public – yet clearly in very different ways. That their individual accounts, felt as deeply personal experiences, map directly onto traditional gender divisions between the ‘emotional woman’ and the ‘thinking man’ speaks to the retraditionalization of gender in the high modern period. Concealed by the liberal illusion that such emotions are personal rather than social, gender may *appear* to have lost relevance in contemporary youth activism; after all, many women are involved at all levels of social movement organizing, and formal barriers to participation have long since disappeared. Nonetheless, gender continues to play a structuring role in the very experiences that women and men have of activism. This, in turn, has specific implications for how they navigate the fraught and complicated world of the global justice movements with which they are involved.

One mode of gendered differentiation relates to women’s and men’s responses to the stress associated with activism. Mobilized by guilt and a sense of responsibility, young women were left vulnerable to these overwhelming pressures, and the relentless demands for time and energy that come with social movement organizing. Here, we witness the retraditionalization of gender through the tensions for young women between caring for themselves and caring for others. While a neoliberal state cultivates ‘care for the self’ as amongst the highest of ideals (Rose 1999), such self-care came at tremendous emotional costs for the women involved

in this research, going against their deeply engrained gendered habitus of 'care for others':

Carolyn: So this weekend for example there was this huge climate change march here. I woke up on Saturday and I just didn't want to go. And I really just needed to do my laundry and I needed to cook and I needed to relax and take a nap and feel good about life and not—you know. And there was so much guilt around not going. And I made the decision not to go because I knew that I needed that for myself but again—there was so much guilt. People coming up to me all week: Where were you? Like why weren't you there? Why? You postered for it. And just this idea of, it feels like it's almost selfish at times. But at the same time realizing that if you're not there for yourself, if you can't be good to yourself and you can't sustain yourself, how are you expected to do all of this within the activist community? (age 20)

The capacity to say no, to assert one's need for space and recuperation, was sometimes only achieved after a woman had reached a breaking point. As Farah relates, sometimes it was only the requirements of her acquired disability, which she attributed in part to the strain of being involved in activist work, that rendered her capable of saying 'no':

Farah: I always feel that an expectation [in activism] is to be more involved to do more. To do more. To do more. To do more. You know?

Jackie: How do you deal with that one?

Farah: I just have to say no and just don't. I just like seriously will hang up on people when they start talking about activism with me and all the things that need to get done and stuff, I'll just be like I can't. It's my one day off, I can't do that right now, you know? But having to be really, really serious about asserting myself. And it doesn't come without guilt for sure.

Jackie: Do you find that people are pretty understanding? Or do you get sort of a --

Farah: People know that I have a disability and stuff and that I have chronic fatigue and [that] I have to take care of myself. So they know that they can't push it but -- I think some people are genuinely like 'that's cool' you know. But some people don't get it that's for sure.

Both men and women made similar comments about the intense expectations associated with activist cultures; but it was the women who appeared to take these expectations in and transform them into self-debasing emotions such as guilt or feeling selfish. In addition, as documented in the above accounts, women felt themselves to be scrutinized by others when they were not able to meet the demands of activist work; Carolyn recounts being asked why she was not at the protest that she had helped organize, while Farah notes that ‘some people don’t get it’, where ‘it’ is her need for a break from the intensity of activism. While these accounts cannot tell us whether women are simply more sensitive to these perceived interrogations or whether they are, indeed, questioned more intensely for their absences, the result nonetheless is a sense of overwhelming pressure and an associated difficulty with setting reasonable limits for themselves. <sup>v</sup>

Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that women described activism as frequently contributing to or exacerbating experiences of depression, stress, anxiety or burnout. Farah recounts how activism, and in particular her experiences with police, resulted in her post-traumatic stress disorder; Nazlin (age 24) describes how activism contributed to the deterioration of her health including gaining thirty pounds; Carolyn and Suzie discuss their experiences of burnout. While each experience is unique, they can perhaps be best summed up by Minna, who says: ‘I’m tired, I’m really tired, I’m really exhausted, I’ve been exhausted for a long time, totally depleted.’

By stark contrast, many of the men in my study attributed to activism the *improvement* of their mental and emotional health, due in part to their expanded

sense of being connected to other people and to larger issues:

Jean-Paul: So there was that year, 2003...I helped organize... one of the largest demonstrations in London, Ontario history. And I was unemployed at the time and kind of depressed, just sort of didn't know what to do with my life and **that felt really good for me to be doing that stuff and being involved** (age 25).

Andrew: **I feel like I'm a more complete person and I just feel that it's a good experience in life.** You're participating more in democracy in all of its forms and...if you have a good conception of it you should feel more affinity for other people in general. You might feel a little more dislike of a few people like George Bush or you know the political and economic elites, but in general you should feel more connected to other people I think by being an activist.

Jonathon: What brings people to action? I think there's got to be something that they take away from it. There's got to be a reason why one is active. **And for me it's because it's been so fun.** Like, I love connecting with people.

How to account for such contrasts between the experiences of women and men?

One way is to return to the specificities of subjectivity under high modern times.

Reflexivity might be required of *all* modern subjects, but it is women who must struggle with *both* the demands of individualized reflexivity *and* the retraditionalized expectations of affective engagement with the world. This means that reflexivity is not mobilized equally by all subjects, nor is it necessarily used in the same manner or with the same effect. In the case of young people engaged in activism, it would appear that reflexivity takes a distinctly different shape between men and women; whereas men draw on claims to justice and rationality to inform their reflexive processes and find in activism a reprieve from depression or a source of joy that fuels them, women's reflexivity seems to be shaped by often overwhelmingly negative emotions and they experience activism as a burden that creates or exacerbates experiences of stress, depression, and burnout.

When the felt contradictions between reflexivity and affective self-expression is brought together with insights into the pressures of neoliberalism on young women, the complexities of young women's experiences as activists begins to be illuminated. Rather than benefitting from their increased individualization, the sedimented effects of gendered retraditionalization means that young women in global justice movements end up bearing the unbearably heavy "weight of the world," resulting in substantial emotional injuries. Even within activist subcultures contesting neoliberalism, we see the cultural effects of neoliberalism at play, in particular via the belief that young people might "choose" to "change the world" through their individual actions. While this sentiment was expressed by both men and women, it is women who bear the burden of that "choice" as an overwhelming and impossible responsibility. It is in this way that the collision between retraditionalized gender norms and the responsabilization of young women under neoliberalism result in what Pierre Bourdieu (2003) describes as "symbolic violence": the internalized experience of pain or suffering that results from social conditions but is misrecognized by the subject as somehow of their own making. In the case of young women engaged in activism, such symbolic violence may include depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorders, and may result in women dropping out of global justice organizing altogether.

I would not want to leave the argument here, however. I follow many feminists and other social theorists in seeing social movements as a hopeful intervention into larger structures of injustice, even if such movements are themselves immured within unequal social relations. As Beate Kraus argues, 'Above all...when arguing in



the framework of Bourdieu's social theory, profound social change results not from a revolt of the great individual, but from the political action of many individuals: from *social movements*' (2006: 131, emphasis in original). How social movements can continue to draw on the strengths of being made up of collectives, rather than as a series of atomized individuals, was a question posed by many of the participants in this research. In the final section of the paper, I turn to feminist theorists on the possibility for developing "world building" practices, following Hannah Arendt, to investigate this aspect of social movement organizing in more depth, and as one response to the problematic effects of gender retraditionalization identified above.

### **World building in a web of relations: political action beyond the individual**

The above analysis leaves us with some substantial dilemmas in terms of the potential for political organizing. If modern subjects are required to become reflexive under high modernity, and if such reflexivity has become part of the gendered *field* of contemporary social movement organizing such that it is *habitual* rather than the result of thoughtful self-analysis, then where do we go from here? The very language of reflexivity has been essentially absorbed here – even Pierre Bourdieu suggests that it is through reflexivity that one might shift one's relation to their own *field* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). But what happens if reflexivity is understood as belonging to the pre-habitual doxa of the contemporary activist *field*? If reflexivity can no longer be relied upon to generate freedom from social constraint, what then of political engagement? In other words, when theorizing

constraint, such as that wrought by gender retraditionalization, how might we still account for the possibility of action within the public sphere?

Arendt's response to such a problem might be to posit *thinking* as the necessary resolution. What differentiates *thinking* from *reflexivity* in this case is that it is always a capacity that stretches beyond habitual action, and is the means by which we attempt to make sense of the world around us, which in turn allows us to engage in political action. In *The Life of the Mind* (1971: 11-12), she describes *thinking* as follows:

We are what [wo/]men have always been: thinking beings. By this I mean no more than that [wo/]men have an inclination, perhaps a need, to think beyond the limitations of knowledge, to do more with this ability than use it as an instrument for knowing and doing.

'Thinking', in the Arendtian sense, is paradoxically contained within the individual, and yet only results in political action when that individual acts in concert with others. At the very centre of political practice, Hannah Arendt tells us, lies not an individual subject enacting his or her will, but rather the revelation of an individual's "whoness" only possible through action in the public sphere 'in sheer human togetherness' (Arendt 1958/1998: 180). In Arendt's phenomenological account of the public, when action and speech take place between two or more people, it creates an "in-between" that is not tangible, but is 'no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common.' It is this that she calls the web of human relationships, 'indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality' (Arendt 1958/1998: 183). This web of human relations happens in a political world marked by what Arendt calls "plurality," which she understands as the unique aspects of each human being as revealed through their whoness. She opposes whoness to

whatness, or the act of reducing people to descriptors that can never capture our ineluctable essence, that which makes us human. This “whoness” is different from feminist and social theorists’ concern with “agency” (Zerilli, 2005); its difference lies in the fact that it cannot simply be reduced to a willing agent freely “choosing” his or her actions in the world: ‘It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions, that action almost never achieves its purpose’ (Arendt 1958/1998: 184). Instead, human action within the public creates a unique ‘space of appearance’ which ‘comes into being wherever [wo]/men are together in the manner of speech and action’ (Arendt 1958/1998: 199).

In this conception of political action which displaces the individualized subject of modernity, feminist theorists have recently found some resolution to the problem of freedom and public life. In Linda Zerilli’s reading of Arendt, political freedom needs to be understood ‘as a relation to the world and to others’ (2005: 15). She sees in Arendt’s work the potential for re-centering action, as a creative, always contingent and never predictable outcome of human relationships within the public sphere, a process that she calls, following Arendt, ‘world-building’ (Zerilli 2005: 22). Mary Dietz (2002) sees Arendt’s space of appearances as particularly evocative and hopeful for formulating new modes of insight into political possibilities, grounded in human relationships. Others who do not make use of Arendt’s work have likewise identified the centrality of ‘connections to others’ (Hemmings, 2012: 154) and the necessity of ‘a feeling of belonging to a group’ for political organizing (Jasper, 2011: 290).

While some feminists have found hope in Arendt's work, the revitalization of Arendt's conceptual apparatus has not come without its critics. In a recent article, Lois McNay questions Zerilli's Arendtian conception of political action, suggesting that it 'lacks any phenomenological underpinning and, as a result, fails to advance thought about the social conditions necessary for the emergence of effective political agency' (2010: 512). Rather than expanding our understanding of political possibilities, McNay questions whether the 'phenomenologically de-centered "world-building" alternative has much meaning apart from as a utopian cypher' (2010: 516). In its place, McNay calls for a close investigation of political action as experienced by individuals themselves:

The subjective representations that individuals have of themselves and the social world, their intentions and aims, perceptions and evaluations, form the fundamental substrate of any active theory of political agency and must be taken into consideration (2010: 517).

McNay suggests for this process a return to Bourdieu's idea of habitus to provide 'a way of analyzing aspects of embodied agency in the context of the construction of social inequalities, especially gender' (2010: 518). In my own previous efforts to theorize political agency, this was precisely the process that I attempted, articulating a conception of "relational agency" based upon a phenomenological investigation into the experiences of the activists who had participated in my research (Kennelly, 2009; 2011). Noting the centrality of the repeated experience of being "invited in" to activist subcultures, I theorized the core role played by relationships in permitting activists to both become engaged in, and remain involved with, political activism. I did so through feminist theories of agency that

displaced the liberal individual and focused instead on the potential for agency as residing within collectives (e.g. see Lovell, 2003).

I wish to revisit that work here, expanding upon the concept of relational agency to more centrally integrate the Arendtian concepts of “thinking,” “web of relations” and “space of appearances”. I agree with McNay’s assertion that such concepts are emptied of meaning without a phenomenological grounding on which to base them; what does it mean to take action within a “web of relations” and how does a “space of appearances” permit the enactment of political agency? And how do we reconcile this move towards collective political action with the carefully painted account above of gendered retraditionalization in global justice movements? Drawing on the professed experiences of young activists themselves, I hope to provide some insight into the historical specificity of lived, gendered activism under neoliberalism, which acknowledges the constraints posed by social structures such as gender without capitulating to a hopeless nihilism about the potential for social change.

Returning, then, to the experiences of the young women of my study, overwhelmed by the neoliberal weight of responsabilization and their retraditionalized gendered subjectivities, we see one manner in which a “web of relations” can enable political action through the capacity to share with others the burden of this otherwise individualized experience:

Suzie: As long as I’m having this conversation I don’t feel that horrible feeling that we talked about. So this internal dialogue, this conversation, like, talking with other people is kind of like narrative that is ongoing. That has to be ongoing or else I’ll feel that sense of guilt.

The idea of the “narrative that is ongoing” can be mapped directly onto Arendt’s understanding of the human condition, whereby we each narrate our own stories and yet ‘nobody is the author or producer of [her] own life story’ (Arendt 1958/1998: 184). This Arendt identifies as the core dilemma in political philosophy: ‘that in any series of events that together form a story with a unique meaning we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion; and although this agent frequently remains the subject, the “hero” of the story, we can never point unequivocally to [her] as the author of its eventual outcome’ (1958/1998: 185). In other words, telling one’s story to others, as a form of action, cannot be reduced to the self-contained liberal individual seeking therapeutic release from her demons, as the predominant psychological model with which we currently live might suggest. In Suzie’s case, telling her story to others hooks her back into the web of relations, reducing her internalized sense of crippling responsibility and enabling her continued involvement in social movement organizing. It is thus a *political act* in the Arendtian sense, creating the conditions of possibility for further action in the public sphere.

Many of the participants in my research recognized the need for such interactions, and also lamented their absence within activist spaces. They saw this absence as leading directly to activist burnout:

Christine: So many people I re-meet and it’s like they’re a-political. And they used to be like -- the torch. Where they would be rallying and chanting and organizing and so on top where it’s like, they were living it you know? No more. And I wish I could say it was only one or two people but there’s so many people. And it seems like the reason being [is] that that notion of the community – the activist community if we will – hasn’t done any contemplating at all in terms of ‘how do I actually give out support’ because you have to, if you see this as a lifelong struggle.

Minna: When young people are joining struggle, we don't do a lot of 'here's how you take care of yourself' or 'here's how we're going to support you,' and how we support each other, because we don't have that built into how we work. So I feel as though if we had more support structures in place for each other, a lot less people would be dealing with burnout, and consistent burnout, and multiple years of burnout before really really burning out, and having to stop, and becoming sick.

Christine and Minna are identifying here the “space of appearances” that is created when two people come into contact, in this case to “offer support”; but such support is in the interest of continuing the political “lifelong struggle.” In neoliberal times, our language is littered with references to human relationships in terms such as “giving support” as if it were an individualized, psychological need. What I am suggesting here is that these activists are identifying it as a *political* need, one that is essential to enable ongoing engagement within the public. In other words, the web of human relationships is at the core of effective, sustainable activist practice, constantly creating the ever-contingent possibilities for action that Arendt sees as the foundation of political life. It also serves as a corrective to the debilitating gendered isolation experienced by the young women as a crippling sense of guilt and overwhelming responsibility.

Beyond offering support, human relationships are at the very heart of what brings young people into social movement organizing in the first place. But it is worth noting that, despite the gendered differences identified above in terms of women as emotional and men as rational, both women and men identified the importance of relationships to their social movement involvement. In the excerpt below, Andrew notes that it is not “books” that will bring you into social movements – ie it is not merely through Arendtian “thinking” that one becomes involved in

social movements, even if such thinking lay at the base of the original interest -- but rather it is through human relationships:

Andrew: I don't think a book is going to do it for you. If you don't meet enough of those people who are doing activist things and they convince you – not, I mean sitting down and telling you, you have to do this with your life. Just convince you by their example or you know, then it helps if you also meet people who are nice people and interesting people.

It is likewise through human relationships that the ongoing motivation to continue the political work comes:

Christine: My ability to organize and struggle comes from community... My ability to organize and to push forward and to do it comes from the motivation so that whenever I feel low there's a plethora of people that I can scroll down who are doing similar things. Who are like engaged in the fights, projects, campaigns and a lifestyle that really is all encompassing around the notion of social revolution. Right? Like trying to build a new world. And you know that human contact is so important.

As Christine notes, the efforts required to 'try to build a new world' can only happen in the context of community; what Arendt and Zerilli similarly identified as "world-building" practices happen not only through the incitement to action that is created within the space of appearances, but also ineluctably through the web of human relationships that lie at its core.<sup>vi</sup> By recognizing this, we might move beyond the symbolic violence created by entrenched gender norms and neoliberal subjectivity, and towards new possibilities for political action within the public sphere.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has set out to investigate the role played by expressions of affect in configuring gender relations within contemporary youth-dominated social movements, making use of feminist theories of reflexivity and neoliberal subjectivity



under conditions of modernity. Tracing the differential experiences of women and men involved in social movement organizing, the paper attempted to theorize the emergence of profoundly negative emotional accounts connected to social movement organizing by women, in contrast with the positive or non-emotional accounts given by men. Such differences, I suggest, carry profound implications for who carries on in the difficult yet essential work of social movement organizing, and who, on the other hand, burns out or becomes otherwise overwhelmed by such internalized negative experiences as depression.

While such an investigation might lead us to conclude that women will inevitably be pushed out of social movement organizing, thanks to sedimented gender norms, instead I attempt to offer a more hopeful assessment of what might happen, and does happen, to allow women (and men) to continue their activist work. Drawing on the scholarship of Hannah Arendt and feminists who make use of her theories, I suggest that activism, as political action within the public sphere, must be understood as indelibly embedded within a web of human relations. Such relations, though often read in individualized terms such as “giving support,” are in fact the bedrock upon which political organizing and action can unfold. In this manner, they do not belong to what Arendt dismissively labelled “the social” but instead are firmly lodged within the realm of the public, where political action takes place. Young activists themselves understand the necessity of these relations for their ongoing engagement in social movements, and likewise see that the necessary structures to sustain such relationships are sorely lacking within social movement spaces. We might understand the reason for this as being in large part due to the

wider cultural space of liberal and neoliberal political ideologies, with their cult of the individual, which understand political action as belonging to isolated citizens who enact their democratic duty through the solitary act of placing their ballot in the ballot box. Arendt disavowed such visions of democracy as unbearably impoverished (as did Pierre Bourdieu), instead seeing democracy as an agonistic process that is always contingent and never predictable. By understanding social movements as part of the public sphere, we might better conceptualize the professed need for human connections by young activists not as a call for individual care but rather as a recognition of the importance of relationships for political action. In doing so, we might shift the emphasis away from agency as contained within an individual actor and towards the conception of agency as belonging within a collective, or in the “space in between” as theorized by Arendt. Such a recognition might help activists move beyond the sedimented gender norms and habitus of differential reflexivity that has resulted in uneven experiences of social movement organizing for men and for women. Where both men and women recognize the essential role played by relationships, combining such insight with recognition of the manner in which gender continues to play a structuring role can help activists organize their support networks to address these inequalities. In other words, we need ongoing analyses that assess the role of social constraints, as theorized by feminists and other social theorists, as well as the emancipatory potential captured by the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt and those who make use of her work. Through careful phenomenological investigations of the actual lived experiences of

people engaged in social movement organizing, we might come to a clearer understanding of both the limits and possibilities for social change.

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<sup>i</sup> The author gratefully acknowledges Stuart Poyntz, Alexis Shotwell and Jennifer Henderson for very helpful feedback on an earlier version of this article. I owe a further debt of gratitude to Alexis Shotwell for helping me navigate the complex land of affect theory, and the loan of many relevant books. Jessica Azevedo and Amelia Curran provided invaluable research assistance in securing appropriate literature and reviewing the data for this article. I am also indebted to the anonymous reviewers for this piece, whose suggestions about further literature to incorporate have strengthened the piece substantially. Any gaps or absences are entirely my responsibility. Earlier (and shorter) versions of this piece were presented at both the Canadian Sociological Association (2011) and the Pacific Sociological Association (2013). The work was originally supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) doctoral award; later research assistance was supported by a SSHRC Standard Research Grant as well as the Research Fund provided by Carleton University.

<sup>ii</sup> It is worth noting here that there is a distinction between ‘affect’ and ‘emotion’; Eric Shouse follows Deleuze and Guattari in noting that “affect is not a personal feeling. Feelings are *personal* and *biographical*, emotions are *social*, and affects are *prepersonal*” (Shouse 2005: 1). While I do not pursue this distinction further in this essay, such a definition is broadly aligned with my understanding of affect as preceding its personal expression – from a phenomenological perspective, we might understand affect as having its own historicity, separate and apart from the individual’s emotional and felt expression of it. This is also consistent with Ahmed’s approach to emotions, on which this piece also draws.

<sup>iii</sup> While the young women and men with whom I worked did not readily identify the gendered elements of their social movement involvement (with some exceptions), other academics have published auto-ethnographic pieces that explore some of these dynamics in the global justice movement. See, for example, Coleman & Bassi, 2011 (and responses by Conway, 2011 and Sullivan, 2011), and Sullivan, 2005.

<sup>iv</sup> Although I am theorizing within a different tradition here, any reader familiar with landmark feminist works will note the similarity between statements such as these and the gendered differences identified by Carol Gilligan (1982) in her hugely influential book, *In a different voice: psychological theory and women’s development*. While pursuing this investigation from a sociological - rather than psychological -- perspective, I find it telling that such differences between men’s and women’s political commitments were identified thirty years ago. I do not make use here of the distinction between an ethic of care and an ethic of justice, however it is clear that the remarks made by the young women and men in my study have prominent antecedents and have not sprung from nowhere.

<sup>v</sup> It is worth noting here that these experiences of guilt and burnout appeared to more or less cut across distinctions on the basis of class and race/ethnicity. In other words, women from both working and middle class histories, as well as both white women and women of colour articulated broadly similar experiences of the overwhelming emotional burdens of global justice activist work.

<sup>vi</sup> This insight about the importance of human relationships and collective self-care has been well documented within non-academic social movement literature, such as on social movement websites. For some of the salient discussions in the U.S. and Canada, see <http://www.organizingupgrade.com/index.php/component/k2/item/729-end-to-self-care>, <http://rabble.ca/news/2013/01/nine-self-care-reminders-over-committed-activist>, and <http://theselfcareproject.org>. Also see a recent issue of the independent journal *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory* dedicated to self-care, and the piece by Kevin Van Meter in particular, entitled “To Struggle is to Care” (2012).