

(De)Constructing Boundaries: Affective Economies, Biopolitics, and Drug Users

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Abstract

Illicit drug use in the United States is commonly understood as a deviant behavior, therefore associated with a myriad of negative connotations. In trying to better understand why and how people react the way they do to the figure of the drug user in society, this paper utilizes popular threads from contemporary social theory to examine affect circulation, notions of capacity, and state surveillance in order to complicate the hegemonic stigma attached to drug users. Notions of a pure organic body are deconstructed and analyzed conjointly with state-sanctioned data collection practices. The resultant figure of the drug user contains both excess and lack. There is an excess of affect stuck to the bodies of drug users while they symbolize a lack for capacity.

The position of drug¹ user holds a number of meanings and evokes a variety of affective responses that are materially different than what comes out of variations in race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. For this reason, it is important to examine the potentialities and implications of responses to the image of the drug user. At the same time, it is also valuable to question the meanings and affects drug users themselves produce. This paper is an attempt

¹ The distinction between drug user and non-drug user is necessarily complicated for when we consider the similarities in composition and pharmacological effect between some illicit drugs and some legal pharmaceuticals the ability to discern exactly what substance a person is on becomes nearly, if not completely, impossible. On one level this division is regulative in nature, that is, it is a division that only exists because some ways of using a particular drug are legal and some are not. This paper will not take a stance on how a legitimated user of prescription drugs should be signified (e.g. as drug user or non-drug user) but rather will concern itself with a somewhat conventional notion of drug user as one who uses illicit substances.

to understand how the position of drug user can fit within theorizations of affective economy, capacity for capacity as conceptualized by Jasbir Puar in her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), and biopolitics.

Affect, here, refers to the emotional, gut-level response that one has upon exposure (be it visual, auditory, etc.) to something else. One of the first understandings of affective economies comes to us from the cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg, who states that affective economies "... articulate affective struggles into a limited set of structures..." (1987: 41). Sara Ahmed clarifies the concept by telling us that, "... emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments" (2004: 119). This concept focuses on the circulation of emotion between people, as well as between people and images or objects. It not only refers to the emotions one feels, but also to the emotions one elicits.

The understanding of capacity for capacity that this paper uses speaks to the recognition and marking of capacity (or lack thereof) or regenerative potential within others that in turn can impact back upon the person or governing body making this distinction. The Foucauldian idea of biopolitics, while similar to capacity for capacity, is a bit more generalized. It refers to a governmental concern for the overall propagation of life. In *Society Must Be Defended* (2003), Foucault writes of biopolitics that it is, "... a matter of taking control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species and of ensuring that they are not disciplined, but regularized" (246-7). This is the tack that power takes when it concerns itself with the ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction, and the fertility of a population (Foucault 2003: 243). Using the three analytical concepts of affective economy, capacity for capacity, and biopolitics leads to a more accurate and broader understanding of the significance of the figure of the drug user.

It is important to note that Helen Keane offers a broader, more-discursively based understanding of the figure of the drug user in her 2002 book

What's Wrong with Addiction?, which uses a Deleuzian approach to envision the drug user as an assemblage. While this conceptualization is helpful in that it de-essentializes subjecthood, Keane largely focuses on addiction (rather than drug users) and medical discourse. To my knowledge, the three analytical tools I will employ have not been used in combination to analyze the figure of the drug user. This paper offers this analysis at the same time that it seeks to further these theories of social relationality by incorporating other ways of being into their analytics.

History plays a part in how affect becomes aligned with a particular sign or signs, such as the classic image of a drug user. Whatever emotion this image might elicit it is most likely not a new feeling. It is an emotion felt before or felt similarly towards other imagery. This is how affect can slide from one image to an entirely different one, and history is partly responsible for this. In her 2004 article "Affective Economies" Ahmed asserts, "The movement between signs does not have its origin in the psyche, but is a trace of how histories remain alive in the present" (2004:126). Ahmed discusses beliefs in psychoanalysis that theorize the sliding of repressed emotions onto new or different images. It is not that the affect itself is repressed, but rather the image it was attached to previously (2004:125). I propose that while one's personal history plays into the sliding of affect, social history is accountable too. Examining the social climate during the time when the first major anti-drug legislation made by the federal government, the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act of 1914, was passed is instructive in how affect slides. The fear around Asian immigrants slid over to a fear of opiate users, which informally led to the banning of opiate use in the United States. There were other political and economic reasons for the passage of the Harrison Act, but most accounts cite racism as an important cause (Booth 1998:197).

There is, indeed, a long history of discrimination levied at drug users that feeds into the affective stickiness of the image of drug user. In her book *Using Women: Gender, Drug Policy, and Social Justice*, Nancy Campbell (2000) offers a bit of this history by showing how female drug users were looked upon by the

state during The Daniel Hearings of 1955 whose stated impetus was the threat of dope coming from Communist China, Lebanon, and Mexico. Campbell states, "The question of where to locate truth, how to know it, and how to distinguish it from falsehood surfaced in the Daniel hearings when addicted persons claimed to know what should be done in response to their self-defined needs. They were easily discredited, cast as unreliable witnesses even as they attested to the truth of addiction" (2000:115). The ease of their discrediting and ascription of unreliability speaks to a particular affect in circulation and that continues to circulate today over fifty years later. However, through this passage of time the image of the drug user acquires more and more stickiness as affects circulate. The question of naming the affect that would result in discrediting remains open though it seems to be tied up with capacity to speak "truth." Campbell's documentation of The Daniel Hearings shows how the failure to speak truthfully is ascribed to drug users. She quotes Justice George Rossman, who wrote on the subject of drug user testimonies in 1924 shortly after the passage of the Harrison Act, "The truth is not in him, especially with reference to himself and his habits" (2000:115). So not only can drug users not speak the truth, they do not have the truth inside them.

Current research on drug users shows how the failed capacity for truth continues to circulate within affective economies surrounding drug users. Nina Mulia describes in her 2005 article "Ironies in the Pursuit of Well-Being: The Perspectives of Low-Income, Substance-Using Women on Service Institutions" the attitudes low-income drug users evoke in service providers, "...the drug-using poor confront a degree of skepticism, suspicion, and disdain on the part of service providers that is unique to the social treatment of drug users" (713). The affect evoked by the affective response of the service providers often leads these women to avoid much-needed services all together. Mulia states, "In view of the formal rules and informal practices of service institutions, the women must sometimes weigh the need for institutional aid against the desire to avoid the frustration and strain they experience in service settings" (719). The specific

history of the imagery of drug use makes drug users' bodies particularly sticky as affect has accumulated over time, resulting in the abstention from social welfare services intended to help drug users. Through their affective response to drug users, social welfare service providers enact a boundary between the drug-using women who ask for help and themselves as non-drug users who are not seeking assistance.

What then of the boundaries that are being formed by affect circulation around drug users? There is certainly an enactment of boundaries around us (non-drug users) that differentiates us from them (drug users) and affect plays a role in forming the surface of these collectivities. Ahmed states, "... emotions are not simply 'within' or 'without' but...they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds" (2004:117). It is affect that forms the surface of a collectivity of people who fear or hate or hold another emotion towards another collectivity of people. Affect works to maintain the us/them binary by constituting the border that marks some form of perceived difference that is determined through feeling and emotion. Ahmed writes, "*It is the very failure of affect to be located in a subject or object that allows it to generate the surfaces of collective bodies*" (2004:128). So the affect does not constitute the person, but rather the surface of the boundary between self and other.

Visibility is a vital component of a lived affective economy for drug users. Drug users can and do pass for non-drug users. According to Ahmed, this heightens fear since the not knowing means the drug user cannot be contained. The drug user will pass by uncontained. He writes, the "...fear is intensified by the impossibility of containment. If the others who are feared 'pass by,' then the others might pass their way into the community, and could be anywhere and everywhere" (2004:124). This then justifies intrusions by the state in order to distinguish just who is and who is not a drug user (2004:122).

Passing and passing by, however, are different things. Passing involves identity formation and recognition while passing by implies a physical movement. Ahmed states, "The double possibility of passing commands the nation's Right

and will to keep looking for signs of difference and justifies violent forms of intrusion into the bodies of others" (2004:122). Drug testing is one such intrusion put in place by some (if not all) state sanctioned institutions that seek to eliminate the possibility of passing as a non-drug user, and if the state allows the drug user to pass by uncontained, fear rises as the future actions of the drug user are unknown. Puar states, "...the real danger [is] that he will pass by, the imminent attack unknown in terms of when, where, how, or if. Passing, or passing by, raises the possibility that the difference is imperceptible: the injury is endlessly deferred to the future" (2007:184-5). In the case of drug users, the fear might not be of an attack, but rather an infestation of drug use: the user contagiously pulling others into a collectivity of bodies defined by affective response. It may not be that the drug user is literally convincing others to use drugs, but rather that he or she is contaminating society and degenerating social norms. The drug user that passes by "...contaminates and multiplies into many bodies through a sliding that works metonymically to ooze and seep these bodies into one another..." (Puar 2007:185). This is the risk of passing, and this is precisely what drug users can do because the use of drugs is not directly visible. Unkempt appearances that might be attributed to drug use are not necessarily caused by it. The drug user passes like players who pass in card games. Not knowing their cards or why they chose to pass, you cannot contain them. You cannot do anything. You are immobile. Fear circulates when one passes.

In trying to understand the symbolic meaning of drug users as they are embedded within social relations notions of the pure, organic, or otherwise cohered human body must be questioned. With the intake of a chemical substance and particularly an illegal one, drug users leave the realm of the pure body and enter a place of otherness. However, this distinction does not seem so "other" when we consider that, through the process of surveillance and the subsequent recording of data, bodies become data points. The effect is that, for the governing apparatuses that collect data, bodies become joined with statistics and thus their construction as a pure body is disturbed.

Of particular relevance here is a questioning of the organic whole human by Puar in her discussion of the creation of data bodies. Through state surveillance and collection of statistics, drug using populations achieve an existence as data bodies, which are further complicated by the fact that the data collected signifies them as deviant bodies. Puar writes, "...the purported coherence and cohesion of the organic body is at stake here...informational and surveillance technologies of control both produce the body-as-information and also impact the organic body through an interface—again, organic and machinic technologies that interface to points of mutual dissolution" (2007: 174-5). Thus, the data that mediates the relationship between drug user and the state or the public, if in fact the state makes certain data available to the public, marks or tarnishes the coherence and cohesion of their bodies. Since data is stored and processed by machines, Puar speaks of machinic assemblages to describe the joining of body and data. These appear similar to Donna Haraway's cyborgs (1991: 149-81); however, in Puar's conceptualization, images become possible components of this joining. The popular image of a drug user, which could look like a skinny, pale, pock-marked shell of a person is a component in this assemblage and thus joined with the collection of statistics obtained through surveillance to become a data body. Through this conceptualization, Puar brings together a critique of organic wholes and biopolitics, showing how humans can morph into an assemblage of human, machine, chemical technology, image, and surveilled statistic. This is of particular importance to drug users because, as a pre-existing assemblage or cyborg through the usage of drugs, the state is interested in their demographics and, thus, they become a body of data to be recorded and analyzed.

Campaigns to end the use of drugs ride on the assumption that one's body is a pure, organic whole and that drugs will soil this self in some way. However, there was never a singular self to be disturbed. Puar's analysis critiques this assumption of whole-ness. As she says, it seeks "...to destabilize the taken-for-granted assumption that the discursive body, however socially

constructed it may be, is always already presumed to be a wholly discrete, intact, and fully-abled organic body" (2007:201). Besides being useful to moral entrepreneurs campaigning to end the use of drugs (Becker 1963: 147-50), the illusion of wholeness also serves the purpose of creating threatening "others" who, if allowed to enter, could disrupt the unity and purity the assumption of wholeness relies upon.

In examining affective economies and how particular emotions circulate and become attached to particular people, Ahmed points to the assumptions of purity as undergirding the emotion of fear. In response to white supremacist literature targeted against mixed racial couples, child molesters, rapists, aliens, and foreigners, Ahmed states, "They threaten to violate the pure bodies; such bodies can only be imagined as pure by the perpetual restaging of this fantasy of violation" (2004: 119). What is interesting here is that the resilience of purity is reliant upon a repeatedly imagined intrusion. If drug-free bodies are those supposed to be pure, they can only exist if instances of impure bodies exist. In this way, the imagery of drug users is employed to prop up purity by pointing to a fear-provoking potential for violence inherent within drug use. A community of drug-free people is created through distinguishing that which is pure and that which is not. Additionally, drug users stand to interrupt more than just purity as they break with established norms. Ahmed elaborates,

Furthermore, the fear of degeneration as a mechanism for preserving social forms becomes associated more with some bodies than others. The threat of such others to social forms (which are the materialization of norms) is represented as the threat of turning away from the values that will guarantee survival. These various others come to embody the failure of the norm to take form; it is the proximity of such other bodies that 'causes' the fear that the forms of civilization (the family, the community, the nation, and the international civil society) have degenerated. (2004:134-5)

The fear evoked by bodies that do not conform to social norms is not a fear that can be located within the body of the non-conformer, but rather is a fear that is already in circulation and becomes stuck to bodies that appear to diverge from social norms. Ahmed traces this fear to degeneration, which is upheld by notions of the proper family, community, nation, and international civil society.

This fear comes into circulation through images of purity or propriety that may or may not align with lived realities. The drug user is undoubtedly blamed as a source of degeneration and, thus, is feared for possessing the potential to destroy the supposed fabric of society.

If drug users signal a degeneration of the structures of norms that maintain current understandings of civilization, it is definitely true that they are not able to regenerate the lifeblood of "civilization." Puar's conceptualization of the biopolitical mandate of capacity for capacity or regenerative capacity helps to explain in part the marginalization of drug users. If they do not seem to have the capacity for regeneration, then, in biopolitical terms, they are deviant and in need of disciplining in order to restore their proper regenerative capacity. Puar explains, "Pivotal here is the notion of capacity, in other words the ability to thrive within and propagate the biopolitics of life by projecting potential as futurity, one indication of which is performed through the very submission to these technologies of surveillance that generate these data" (2007:200). This suggests a connection between the willingness to submit to surveillance and the capacity to thrive, for this thriving implies that one flourishes despite or because of state surveillance. Though this connection, is not easily discerned it is clear that being *touched* by surveillance places one in a position to be disciplined into behavior that aligns with the state's notions of regeneration.

An example of the disciplining of female drug users was the practice of prosecuting pregnancy at the start of the crack cocaine epidemic in the 1980's (Seigel 1997:249). In this example, the capacity for regeneration was punished based on the assumption that any new lives put forth by the female crack user would not have the capacity for capacity. Complicating this act of biopolitically-based disciplining is the disproportionate punishment of minority and poor women (Siegel 1997:251). Puar notes the racism inherent in determinations of capacity, "Following Rey Chow's statement that biopolitics is implicitly about the ascendancy of whiteness, the terms of whiteness cannot remain solely in the realm of racial identification or phenotype but extend out to the capacity for

capacity: that is, the capacity to give life, sustain life, promote life—the registers of fertility, health, environmental sustainability, and the capacity to risk” (2007:200). It is easy to see how during the crack epidemic race and drug use colluded to distinguish the capacities from the incapacities of regeneration. Combining Ahmed’s conceptualization of the fear surrounding degeneration with Puar’s conceptualization of biopolitical mandates, I suggest that the drug user’s status is mired by the parallel significations of degeneration and failure to generate capacity. The implication for drug users is that of a double lack where they are already ruining social norms and are marked by a failure of capacity.

Sara Ahmed’s affective economy may be instructive here for understanding what these two significations do to drug users. Ahmed asserts that emotions and feelings circulate among and between subjects and objects rather than being fixed to them, and through this circulation affect gains more value. A Marxian understanding is at work here to show how value increases through circulation using an M-C-M (money to commodity to money) formulation where surplus value is added resulting in more M (money) (2004:120). Ahmed states, “Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an affect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value over time). Some signs, that is, increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to ‘contain’ affect” (2004: 120). So it is in the circulation that affect becomes seemingly attached to particular signs. Myriad emotions circulate around and through the figure of the drug user, perhaps accounting for the usefulness of highly affective imagery employed by anti-drug campaigns. Affect is undoubtedly stuck to images like this one which is part of an anti-drug campaign targeted at methamphetamine:



Ahmed's argument is that images like this are not imbued with emotion but rather simultaneously attract and invigorate kinetic emotion that is circulating around the image of the drug user.

It is important to note that the producer of the above image was ostensibly attempting to tap into the mainstream, commonly-held emotions flowing around the image of a drug user. Certain sub-cultures may read this image differently; therefore, the intended emotional effect will not impact them. Simultaneously, members of mainstream culture, presumably the intended audience, will read this image in a way that reinforces the energized circulation of particular emotions.

Using the concepts of affective economy, capacity for capacity and biopolitics to examine the image of drug user brings forth the excess and the lack this image carries with it. While the drug user lacks the capacity for capacity, it has an excess of affect stuck to it, along with notions of degeneration. The economy of affect engulfs drug users in an emotionally charged exchange that creates boundaries whose very surface are actuated by emotion. And as we have seen, the drug user's lack of capacity to regenerate colludes with race to place the drug user under biopolitically-charged surveillance. The implications of biopolitical practices aimed at drug users can range from humanitarian to punitive, and while they seek to restore the drug user to a cohered organic state, they never question whether this state of being has ever existed.

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