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## Ambivalence as a Feminist Project

**A**mbivalence has historically been cast as evidence of indecision or even weakness, as the regrettable position of persons who are unable to make up their minds, as an indicator of confusion, inertia, or moral failure. Against this long-standing view, we argue for the feminist, critical, and political value of ambivalence. In this essay, we identify ambivalence as a nascent intervention that may aid feminist scholars across the humanities and social sciences. Ambivalence, as a feminist analytic, holds particular promise because it can sharpen a scholar's ability to trace contradictions and complexities and to perceive new patterns in subjectivities marked by historical oppression. In this way, it can usefully supplement existing feminist frameworks by bringing greater nuance, and hence better understanding, to the multiple valences of our lived experience.

We define ambivalence as a concept, a mode, and a theoretical and methodological practice that encompasses several capacities. These include the capacity to hold seemingly incompatible emotions, views, and values simultaneously (a both/and model); the capacity to interpret two apparently opposed entities as equivalent in value, as equally important or reasonable (a tension of opposites model); and the ability to imagine holding opposed emotions, views, and values over time (a durational model). In particular, we see promise in the capacity for ambivalence to steer one's epistemological orientation in productive ways. Ambivalence, we suggest, can refine feminist scholars' analysis of how people are affected by power and how they respond to it beyond simplistic models of "oppression" and "equality." As

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systems of power proliferate and mutate to survive, people who are negatively impacted may feel compelled to ignore how complex power dynamics collide in their lives. Rather than view their response as a problem, we maintain that the ambivalence they express about the operations of power can be particularly illuminating.

We propose that ambivalence—when paired with the feminist imperative to consider that which has been devalued—offers a set of strategies for feminist scholars to study the complicated workings of systems of privilege and oppression. In particular, we offer three guiding principles for thinking with and about ambivalence. We highlight how ambivalence can trouble the subjection/liberation binary, alert us to the presence of conflicting emotions, elevate the value of uncertainty, and encourage constructive ambivalence in the researcher themselves. In the case studies that we explore below, we foreground forms of ambivalence that arise from a mixture of proximity to and distance from privilege, considering, as well, the ways that such an experience is often itself constitutive of ambivalence. In short, we contend that ambivalence functions as a practice of noticing that makes the mundane new again. It is a crucial lens for capturing what would otherwise be missed.

### **Feminists and ambivalence**

Feminist scholars are already lingering in the practical irresolution of ambivalence and positioning this concept in relation to their theorizing. Over the past two decades or so, ambivalence has cropped up in feminist, queer, and antiracist scholarship across the humanities. Witness, for instance, Jennifer Nash's (2014) analysis of Black feminist ambivalent responses to pornography, Saidiya Hartman's (2007) evocative meditation on her ambivalent stance toward the archive of slavery, and José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) assertion that ambivalence might enable queer politics. A number of scholars have thematized ambivalence as a historical, social, cultural, or psychic phenomenon: Aida Levy-Hussen's (2013) account of post-Civil Rights Black representation, Jennifer Dominique Jones's (2023) analysis of queer Black political activism, Dana Luciano's (2007) exploration of grief as an ambivalent political affect, Andrea Long Chu's (2017) analysis of ambivalence as a response to structural violence under neoliberalism, Sarah Banet-Weiser's argument that US consumer brand culture is structured by ambivalence (2012), and Stephanie Swales and Carol Owens's (2019) proposal that an ambivalence foundational to subjectivity, when foreclosed or disavowed, fuels contemporary racism and xenophobia.<sup>1</sup> In social science research, where

<sup>1</sup> See also Coviello (2017) and Corrigan (2020).

ambivalence has frequently been underacknowledged or misrecognized, ambivalence has become an object of inquiry for which new methods are being developed, as in the studies conducted by Anu Gómez et al. (2019), Stephen C. Craig and Michael D. Martinez (2005), and L. J. Zigerell and Heather Marie Rice (2011).

Ambivalence is not, however, only a theme within scholarship; it is also a critical affect, the recognition of which opens new lines of analysis. Jennifer Nash (2017) and Lauren Berlant (2022) both identify their own ambivalence as an affect that is produced by historical conditions and that profoundly shapes their research questions.<sup>2</sup> Heather Love's (2007) proposal of "feeling backward" similarly works from the scholar's experience of ambivalence, as does Clare Hemmings's (2018) conflicted identification with Emma Goldman and Juana María Rodríguez's (2014) queer identification with borderland pornography. Other research is propelled by scholars' ambivalence toward their archive (Hartman 1997, 2007, 2008; Rusert 2015) or a field's accepted methods (McClelland 2017). Indeed, ambivalence has been proposed as its own form of feminist method, insofar as it frames and directs an approach toward a research question. Explicit arguments for its methodological value have appeared in the realm of clinical practice, particularly regarding the experience of obtaining or providing an abortion (Harris 2012, 2019a, 2019b). It is also marshaled at the level of method in psychology (McClelland 2017) and literary study (Traub 2016; Mendelman 2020). Note that this list—which could be supplemented further—spans affect theory, African American studies, communications, media studies, obstetrics and gynecology, history, literature, psychology, psychoanalysis, and queer studies. Ambivalence, it seems, is a transdisciplinary concern, characterizing not only certain objects of inquiry but also scholarly and clinical responses to them; occasionally, it is offered as the solution to tricky methodological and disciplinary challenges. As a conceptual category, ambivalence clearly has had local value for scholars and activists engaged in specific projects. We suggest that it also promises cross-modal value insofar as its cross-disciplinary travels sharpen our sense of its diagnostic and analytical purchase and limitations.

Despite its widespread interest in and recourse to ambivalence, feminist scholarship has yet to foreground the conceptual weight ambivalence carries or to theorize its specific functions. Even when ambivalence appears as a key term—as when Nancy Fraser (2015) describes the political legacy of second-wave

<sup>2</sup> On theorizing political affects more generally, see Sedgwick (2003), Ahmed (2004), Ngai (2005), and Berlant (2011). Space limitations prevent a fuller discussion of ambivalence within the various genealogies of affect theory.

feminism as ambivalent, Lisa Mendelman (2020) explores the generative ambivalence in recent feminist literary criticism, Clare Hemmings (2018) advocates the need to confront ambivalence and uncertainty in feminist history and theory, or Lauren Berlant asks whether it is “possible to turn ambivalence from the atmosphere of negativity . . . into a genuinely conflicted experience that allows us to face up to the phenomenality of self-disturbance in the space of coexistence?” (2022, 8)—ambivalence appears as an attribute of some other phenomenon rather than as a primary critical object. In general, it has been treated as topically specific and populated by local examples, with its utility confined to a particular research problem.

Such localized invocations are instructive and effective; however, they remain disconnected from one another. The utility of ambivalence has been circumscribed by the tendency to approach it as an epiphenomenon, to limit its applicability to the specific, and to fail to see patterns in its use. This circumscription has forestalled recognition of its pervasiveness and analytic potential. In other words, while feminist scholarship has attended to ambivalence in valuable and illuminating ways, it has not yet advanced ambivalence as a conceptual category or as the focus of a critical conversation. We look to change this trend by suggesting a new and explicit approach to utilizing ambivalence. We propose that ambivalence represents, in fact, an emergent strand of feminist theorizing that is evolving to address contemporary affective, social, and political conditions.

The currency of ambivalence for feminist projects requires that the concept be legible and useful across various fields and disciplines, each with its different priorities, methods, and presentational modes. Seeing the potential for a feminist practice of ambivalence in this work, we aim to identify and unpack it as a nascent critical intervention. We begin by historicizing the meaning of ambivalence and reconceptualizing it as a concept that can indicate capacity rather than merely deficit. We then explore several case studies of ambivalence in the humanities and social sciences, describing how and where we noticed its presence and suggesting its affordance as a “weak theory” (Sedgwick 2003, 134). We end by acknowledging our own ambivalence about ambivalence by identifying some of the risks of embracing it. In short, we explore what ambivalence is, what it does, and what it can and can’t do.

### **Historicizing ambivalence**

Our focus in this essay is on the use of ambivalence in the current moment with an eye toward its future utility for feminist theory and practice. But past perceptions of ambivalence inform our understanding of its contemporary salience. Since the appearance of the term “ambivalence” at the beginning

of the twentieth century, ambivalence has mainly been viewed as a problem, whether it takes the form of insignificant data, political inertia, moral weakness, behavioral deficit, or more simply indecision, incapacity, or self-contradiction.<sup>3</sup> “Tilted negatively” (Berlant 2022, 27), ambivalence has been seen variously as insignificant and unpromising or pathological and dangerous. In most cases, ambivalence is an “un”: something that is *undecided*, *uncertain*, *unclear*.

Ambivalence, various historians opine, derives from the modern “age of anxiety” in which individuals confront too many ethical, political, and consumer choices and are unable to decide among them (Bauman 1991; Razinsky 2017). Prioritizing experiences of ambivalence that derive from particular forms of economic and social opportunity, this model identifies ambivalence as a decadent, confused affect. In this view, “ambivalence is, by definition, problematic for the ambivalent person,” and “ambivalent people must aim at resolving their ambivalence” (Razinsky 2017, 6). Such a definition of ambivalence, we maintain, assumes moral, emotional, and political normative values, which are presumed to orient a person in a single direction: in this view, one can and should have certainty, especially about one’s own feelings and beliefs. This imperative aligns with and confirms hierarchizing structures of thought: it reflects a commitment to choosing between values, feelings, or ideas presumed to be opposed or organized along an axis of priority. To feel ambivalent, that is, is to hesitate in the face of a binary opposition or to waffle about an epistemological dilemma or axiomatic order.

Derived from outside of feminist thinking, this historical view of ambivalence not only devalues this experience but feminizes it. Indeed, by the late 1920s, ambivalence was specifically associated with women and “homosexuals” (Mendelman 2015). Rather than deny this historical association, we seek to uphold it as an indicator of untapped potential. Reclaiming its dynamic and tensile etymology as “ambi-valence,” we reject the univocal assessment of ambivalence’s bad rap and see it, instead, as analytically abundant. (“Ambi” signifies “both” and “around,” and “valence” signifies the

<sup>3</sup> The German word “ambivalenz” was coined in 1910 by Swiss psychiatrist Paul Eugen Bleuler to denote schizophrenia; it appeared in the British medical journal the *Lancet* in 1912 and was quickly adopted by popular psychology (Mendelman 2015). It has been most strongly theorized within psychoanalysis, particularly the work of Melanie Klein (1921–45), where the enmeshment of love and hate is constitutive of the subject. In more recent psychoanalytic work, the emphasis has been on how “our ambivalence reveals what matters to us” (Swales and Owens 2019, 1).

property of an element, especially its capacity to unite, react, or interact; it is derived from the Latin *valentia*, “power,” “strength,” or “capacity.”)

### **Noticing: A feminist approach to ambivalence**

In considering both the negative history of ambivalence and feminists’ more positive (but mostly descriptive) use of it, we focus here on ambivalence as its own category of feminist analysis. We have traced the explicit and implicit invocation of ambivalence across feminist works and tracked its analytical potential. Through our reading of texts, cultural objects, and individuals’ narratives, we discovered that ambivalence may operate as a form of evaluation that prompts us to *notice* relationships between (sometimes disparate) events, people, themes, and time periods. The act of noticing here is crucial because we found that when we focused on the ways that ambivalence flowed through events, people, themes, and chronologies, we saw the potential for this analytic as an animating force that brought considerable complexity where before there had been flatness, exclusion, siloing, and other forms of silence.

We could, for instance, place in meaningful conversation the scholarship of Jennifer Nash and W. E. B. Du Bois or Heather Love and Sianne Ngai by examining how they engage with ambivalence. With ambivalence operating as an analytic and not merely a descriptor, we noticed how these different writers turn to ambivalence to illuminate the interwoven projects of subjection and resistance, challenge teleological narratives of progress, or speak to the humanizing nature of ambivalence across race, gender, sexuality, and class. We charted how ambivalence revealed one’s multiple affective commitments to various communities, one’s simultaneous access to and exclusion from institutional hierarchies, or one’s relation to important but incomplete political projects. In this way, our method constituted a form of nonsystematic noticing of threads that tie together texts, time periods, and implications for how ambivalence moves us toward more layered interpretations of, and engagements with, feminist work.

By engaging in what Sara Ahmed calls the political labor of “noticing,” we documented how ambivalence surfaced and cohered feminist concepts, theories, and projects (2017, 32). Our noticing revealed the salience of ambivalence for feminist work aiming to be more inclusive of affects, experiences, and identities that have historically been (and continue to be) silenced or sidelined, for examining multifaceted historical experiences that might otherwise be obscured, and for contributing to politically efficacious strategies. We therefore approached ambivalence as we do other feminist and antiracist analytics (such as intersectionality, racial capitalism, gender

performativity, reproductive justice, and heteronormativity): that is, as a framework that enables us to notice, identify, and interpret uneven distributions of power, resource hoarding, supremacies, and hierarchies but also alternatives to status-quo living, strategies for liberation and justice seeking, and possibilities for coalition building.

### Case studies of ambivalence

In the following section, we use this feminist practice of noticing to examine a range of primary and secondary texts in which ambivalence emerges or is leveraged by authors to examine the often unacknowledged. We highlight critical invocations of ambivalence, analyzing its articulations across the humanities and social sciences. In curating relevant scholarship, we offer a “nonce taxonomy” as theorized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003, 23): ambivalence is explored not through a systematic account anchored in established disciplinary genealogies but through ad hoc recourse to its presence as an interpretive strategy or affective resource.<sup>4</sup> Because our reconceptualization insists on the analytical and practical value of that experience, ambivalence, as we conceptualize it, is also subject to ongoing revision that we hope feminist researchers will take up in future work. It is not a master concept. This is one reason we ultimately identify ambivalence as a feminist *project*—rather than solely a feminist analytic or a feminist practice. “Project,” as its etymology suggests (literally, to throw forward), underscores a crucial orientation toward future use, future value, and ongoing conceptualization.

In the following discussion, we focus on three principles that guide how ambivalence could be productively deployed in feminist scholarship. We suggest that ambivalence asks researchers to more carefully consider the subjection/liberation binary, the value of uncertainty, and the role of the researcher’s own skepticism and ambivalence. Each of these contentions provides synergy to aspects of feminist theorizing; they offer scholars additional tools to study how power is enacted and distributed. A feminist approach to ambivalence offers a humanizing framework to understand people with mixed feelings, which includes, most importantly, people who are often most disadvantaged by power imbalances. Rather than an established set of procedures, ambivalence-as-analytic provides an epistemological orientation to an object of inquiry, which includes the encouragement to notice and sit with conflicting affects and the situations that generate them.

<sup>4</sup> Sedgwick defines nonce taxonomies as “the making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world” (2003, 23); they can be learned from, played with, and abandoned.

Ambivalence might reside in the object of study—thematics of ambivalence in a work of fiction or memoir, or the irreducible dimensionality of feelings and experiences that elude traditional survey methods—and it may also surface in the scholar themselves.

### **Trouble the subjection/liberation binary**

By employing ambivalence as a feminist analytic, we were keen to notice the ways in which marginalized people, both historical and contemporary, use ambivalence to refuse neat narratives of progress and challenge the false binary of subjection and liberation. By leaning into ambivalence, minoritized people have used their mixed emotions to illuminate and critique oppressive structures (such as top-down messaging about legislative triumphs and democracy at work), to provide evidence of their emotional acuity, and to signal their frequently doubted humanity. Our exploration of ambivalence here opens a new vista on the feminist adage of resisting binary modes of thought and makes room for those who constantly dwell in ambivalent spaces.

A critique of binary oppositions, of course, has been a feminist concern since Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* ([1949] 1993). Binary worldviews and political structures, feminists note, tend to enforce the limited simplicity of either/or choices or the subsuming of oppositions under a “higher” resolution. Within such logics, ambivalence is conceptualized as stalling out in the middle. Feminists have developed a sophisticated repertoire of strategies to resist this pressure, especially by refusing the terms at hand, troubling their either/or logic, and/or attempting their deconstruction (Johnson 1986). We submit that ambivalence provides a unique purchase on binary structures precisely because it names the *failure* of attempts to resolve them—but failure in this case is to be embraced rather than avoided. This failure lays bare how ambivalence holds space for discordant emotions and contradictory historical phenomena. We turn to two examples that highlight ambivalence's role in critiquing these types of binaries. The first example illustrates evidence of ambivalence as a means to amplify the limits of a progress narrative; here, ambivalence is explicitly invoked in the primary text.<sup>5</sup> The second example illustrates how ambivalence is a way

<sup>5</sup> Heather Love's *Feeling Backward* (2007), which argues that queerness and queer studies have been defined by and structured around ambivalence, also invokes figures and texts that unsettle narratives of historical progress. Aiming to create an archive of “queer modernist melancholia” (5) uncolored by attempts at “emotional rescue” (31) and to explore the ambivalence attendant in literary modernism, Love argues that those who come to embody “backward feelings” (27) have been elided or written off as exceptions—as self-contradictory,



to approach evidence. Here, ambivalence is not readily apparent in the text, but we argue that it is a primary outcome of the analysis.

Ralph Ellison's profound articulation of mixed feelings is not only explored through the obvious theme of ambivalence in his 1952 novel *Invisible Man* but also through his personal correspondence concerning his layered reactions to a seemingly unequivocal victory for civil rights. Typical depictions of the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision portray one-sided, exuberant, and uncomplicated positive responses from African Americans about the desegregation of public schools. But when Ellison wrote to his friend on May 19, 1954, about feeling "twisted with joy and a sense of inadequacy" after learning of the *Brown* decision, he admitted contradictory emotions about the ruling (2019, 360). Ellison's sentiments, however, were not just confined to the Supreme Court case but spoke to the realities of living with a braided sense of exultation and dejection, a willingness to embrace irresolution, and an intent to honor the discomfort of dwelling in the midst of competing feelings about definitions of progress. Ellison further explains, "The decision came while I was reading *A Stillness at Appomattox*, and a study of the Negro Freedman and it made a heightening of emotion and a telescoping of perspective, yes and a sense of the problems that lie ahead that left me wet-eyed" (360).<sup>6</sup> Our study of ambivalence enables us to recognize that Ellison may be reflecting on the contradictions of freedom and deprivation, accessibility and restriction, self-determination and subjection that had characterized Black life from the end of slavery until the moment at which he wrote, and beyond. His mixed feelings about *Brown*, in which he can simultaneously proclaim that "another battle of the Civil War has been won," and, "for me there is still the problem of making meaning out the past" (2019, 360), illustrate the emotional astuteness that Black people have developed out of necessity—in "holding" the many ambivalences that attend the afterlife of slavery (Hartman 2007, 2008).

Ellison's ambivalent response, when analyzed on its own or through the familiar lens of civil rights historiography, may be read as another instance of African Americans' contradictory feelings about *Brown*, in which some Black people applauded the legal triumph but lamented the potential loss of all-Black learning communities (see Brown-Nagin 2004). Using the analytic of ambivalence, however, we can see how Ellison sits with not just the complex cultural and educational implications of the decision but with the larger, persistent, and inextricable tensions between African American progress and

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ambivalent folks who make things too complicated. In their refusal to be redeemed, Love's archive of melancholy modernist texts and figures likewise refuse progressive teleologies.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Catton's *A Stillness at Appomattox* describes the American Civil War's final year.

ativism since the Civil War. We may imagine that the ruling engendered a “telescoping of perspective” for other African Americans who outwardly celebrated the decision but held more unsettled feelings about whether justice had been achieved. As a feminist analytic, ambivalence affords the opportunity to hear the accounts of those who hold complicated emotions when faced with apparently straightforward, unambiguous social justice victories. It compels us to explore ambivalence in these accounts in order to challenge the simplistic binary of subjection and liberation and to imagine more complicated Black subjectivities.

Just as historical actors have written about their ambivalence while navigating the blurred lines between oppression and freedom, so too have scholars used ambivalence as a way to blur those same lines. Jennifer Nash’s work on pornography prompts us not to privilege injury or liberation in Black feminist scholarship on the body, reminding us that an “injury-focused account that forecloses pleasure and ambivalence necessarily jettisons complexity” (Nash 2017, 269). In *The Black Body in Ecstasy* (2014), Nash undertakes a close reading of pornography from the 1970s and ’80s to “open up new black feminist attention to ecstasy” (147). Against the vibrant debates around pornography, sexual freedom, and representation that had flourished, Nash (2014) finds that feminist scholarship on racialized pornography has engendered a “singular theory of representation that presumes the violence of the visual field” (146).

Such arguments about the harmful entanglements of the Black female body and visual representation draw on a long history of racialized sexual violence, with Saartjie Baartman’s nineteenth-century exhibition standing in as both exemplar and origin story for much of the scholarship to which Nash is responding. Yet reading for ecstasy need not preclude an acknowledgment of these violent histories nor of the way the “profound racial inequality” they mark continues to “shape the unfolding present.” Rather, Nash’s readings demonstrate that “pleasure”—particularly the complex, complicated pleasure of the pornographic archive—“is often shot through with pain” (2014, 150). The continuous both/and work of Nash’s rhetoric not only nuances the singular narrative of existing scholarship around Black pornography and representational politics but also functions as a form of redress, a restoration of Black female pleasure: “Indeed, while black feminists have labored to document representation’s violence, too often our work has reproduced another kind of violence, effectively rendering black female pleasures invisible and making impossible the conceptualization of black female pleasures from within black feminism” (149). By developing a more ambivalent relationship to overdetermined depictions of Black sexual subjection, Nash encourages more complex, feminist analyses of pleasure; robust

understandings of Black visibility, corporality, and sexual subjectivity; and a deeper exploration of the vast space between the poles of oppression and liberation.

As seen in this set of examples, ambivalence compels us to cohere the ostensibly unrelated: Ellison's personal writings about desegregation with Nash's (re)reading of injury-laden accounts of Black pornography. Ambivalence manifests as a through-line, a link between past and present actors who seek to collapse binaries of subjection and liberation, oppression and resistance, injury and restitution. Ambivalence, as we conceptualize it, urges researchers to pay attention to potential contradictions in seemingly direct evidence, like obvious legal victories and clearly "violent" visualities, and to challenge uniform ways of assessing social justice and racial progress. The imperative to shatter binaries requires an embrace of simultaneity, residing in the world of both/and, and, at times, sitting in and with uncertainty.

### Embrace uncertainty

The embrace of uncertainty calls upon scholars to find value in the unsettled, the unknown, and the unknowable. Social scientists and literary scholars have identified discomfort and not knowing as holding epistemological, pedagogical, and political potential (Mezirow 1991, 2000; Traub 2016; Hemmings 2018). In this respect, ambivalence fosters what grammarians call a "subjunctive mood"—a mood that lingers on feelings, especially those of uncertainty.<sup>7</sup> An embrace of uncertainty does not, we maintain, foreclose the possibility that ambivalence offers a diagnostic value, thus helping to unpack complex social and political dynamics. The openness to surprise attendant in deploying ambivalence-as-analytic may well provide clarity to the researcher about the origins of ambivalence, even as the present-tense experience of ambivalence demands the valuing of uncertainty and irresolution.

This principle is not just about honoring people's emotions (although it is that as well). Ambivalence as a feminist analytic provides an *epistemological* orientation to an object of inquiry. By encouraging the scholarly practice of noticing divergent affects and the resulting friction, it asks that people sit with the discomfort or disorientation of not knowing and hold onto the tension involved in acknowledging conflicting forces. An embrace of ambivalence thus

<sup>7</sup> While the indicative mood states a fact, the subjunctive mood is "used chiefly to express a wish, command, exhortation, or a contingent, hypothetical, or prospective event" (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 3rd ed., s.v. "subjunctive"). The subjunctive is used to express speculations and possibilities rather than certainties; these overlap with (some) feelings but are not identical.

resists expectations of resolution or arrival—from uncertainty to certainty, or from past trauma to celebration of personal or political accomplishment. Against such progress narratives, ambivalence exists within an extended temporality in which confused or antithetical feelings or commitments are felt simultaneously and over a marked duration. The dilated temporality of ambivalence is experienced at the level of the body—thus, our recourse to the verbs “holding in tension” and “sitting with.” The resulting experience may manifest as pleasure, disappointment, anxiety, or relief. In its transformative potential, it can feel devastating or energizing; it may be draining but simultaneously animating.

This recognition of ambivalence is important because the drive for certainty and the strategic avoidance of uncertainty may result in the misreading or misinterpretation of data. For instance, in a study about pregnancy intentions and contraception use, Anu Gómez and colleagues (2019) collected young adult women’s narratives about their perspectives on pregnancy. In studies that rely on survey measures alone, young women are routinely misclassified as ambivalent about their pregnancy intentions, in part because researchers have historically conflated women’s complex feelings about their actual pregnancy with whether they had intended to become pregnant. The authors foreground how individuals express a wide range of affects and experiences, which could be read as confused or uncertain if not approached more carefully. Because they treat the young women’s ambivalence seriously and do not dismiss it as something to be ignored, judged negatively, or easily assessed, the interviews they conducted investigated whether the women were “pulled between two poles or [were] truly uncertain” (8). Gómez et al. (2019) turned to qualitative data provided by these women, including the women’s explanations of feelings and intentions, desires and plans, and found not only more details on women’s internal clarity but also captured new, multidimensional logics about how people make decisions about their reproductive lives. This study offers an example of what it looks like to take ambivalence seriously as both a concept and an object of inquiry. Gómez and colleagues imagined ambivalence as an important concept, assessed its presence and assumptions about its meanings through a variety of methods, and used it to apprehend young people’s humanity beyond the one-dimensionality of the survey.

In a second example that also draws on social science methods to trouble the value of certainty, Sara McClelland’s study of how individuals interpret survey items illustrates a way to think about ambivalence as it moves from object of analysis to mode of research and research design. Drawing on feminist researchers’ desire “to disrupt the taken-for-granted and to introduce elements of plurality and polyphony into empirical research,” McClelland

proposes the “self-anchored ladder” (2017, 451) as a method to interrupt researchers’ assumptions about how individuals imagine the range of possibilities available to them when answering a question on a survey. McClelland developed an adapted form of Hadley Cantril’s ladder. In her version, participants first rate their sexual satisfaction on a ten-point scale and then are asked to provide information about how they defined the possible range of answers (e.g., “how do you define low sexual satisfaction?”).<sup>8</sup> The self-anchored ladder is one example of “empirical procedures that simultaneously prioritize developing knowledge claims . . . and developing deep skepticism about this very knowledge” (McClelland 2017, 460). For example, McClelland found that women consistently reported low sexual satisfaction as defined by the presence of discomfort and painful sex. Men, in contrast, reported things like “not having sex” or “less good looking partner” as their criteria for determining low sexual satisfaction (460). In this way, McClelland’s methodological disruption embeds the survey question in more contextual data, forcing new perspectives on the survey response and introducing ambivalence to any interpretation of the survey item. The researcher knows both more and less; they must contend with definitional data that are nearly always excluded from the survey response. In the absence of a framework that acknowledges ambivalence, survey researchers largely overlook these differences in an effort to rely on shared definitions that make it easier to assess a large group of people. The self-anchored ladder method, in contrast, insists on prioritizing uncertainty in the researcher as well as in the survey method and sheds light on the productive tension between two desired outcomes—knowing and not knowing for sure.

Both Gómez et al. (2019) and McClelland (2017) turn to social science research, an enterprise embedded in positivistic values and often dedicated to reducing uncertainty, and they use these methods to investigate the presence or absence of ambivalence by valuing uncertainty in the individual (as seen in Gómez et al.) and in the methods and findings themselves (as in McClelland). Both studies employ mixed methods in their research and lean closer to the limits of what can be measured well. We argue that these serve as useful models for understanding how ambivalence enables us, at the same time, to accept and appreciate uncertainty. Without ambivalence, uncertainty lingers without a purpose and produces concerns about incompleteness. With ambivalence, uncertainty can be leveraged and appreciated as a useful investigative mode. Ambivalence asks the researcher to linger in uncertainty, not to collapse in it but to utilize it to produce a new relationship to skepticism and conviction.

<sup>8</sup> Cantril’s ladder was an image of a ladder that was presented to respondents who were then asked to note their criteria for their “best possible life” and “worst possible life” (1965, 22).

### Value scholarly ambivalence

A scholar's own ambivalence—which could center on their evidence, methods, subjects, and any other aspect of the scholarly process—may lead them to question or revise disciplinary norms, identify important arenas of research obscured by established methods, or index experiences unaccounted for in standard narratives of historical progress. Because scholarly ambivalence may arise from specific coordinates of identity, method, and scholarly identification, it cannot be codified beyond a baseline recognition in the scholar or their object of inquiry. It remains a perhaps unresolvable co-existence of incongruous thoughts and feelings. For example, in disciplines grounded in positivism (such as psychology and medicine), the refusal of conviction might carry significantly higher stakes for researchers and raise questions among their peers about their aptitude for conducting accurate and persuasive research. Letting go of claims to truth and valuing skepticism will be challenging for certain scholars—mentally, emotionally, and professionally. Without suggesting that letting go is easy or without risks, we offer examples of scholarship that demonstrates where and how this work might happen.

Ambivalence—at once emotional and intellectual—offers the chance to reflect on an unresolved and unresolvable plurality that, if honored as a resource and opportunity, enables scholars to ask deeper questions of their sources and to cultivate unconventional ways of approaching people, texts, and histories. Ambivalence, we contend, prompts us to engage in an extended holding of tensions, a sitting with them rather than attempting to move through them. By attending to ambivalence in our scholarly evidence as well as in our reactions to that evidence, we grant ourselves greater latitude to pause over what is troubling us and to perceive paused moments as sites of scholarly reflection and production. As Berlant remarks, ambivalent relationality can induce “elbow room, breathing space, and patience with the contradictory demands we make of our objects” (2022, 28).

Scholars may, for example, pause to interrogate the tensions that emerge from unmet archival expectations and unsatisfied historical desires (Cvetkovich 2003; Taylor 2008; Manalansan 2014). Literary scholar Britt Rusert writes about her research on nineteenth-century friendship albums created by free Black women in the North and admits that she was “underwhelmed” by their sentimentality; she yearned to find evidence of “resistance, subversion, or irony” in her source material (2015, 21). In short, she was disappointed, and she marked this disappointment as inherently ambivalent since disappointment commands the inextricability of hope and dismay, anticipation and discouragement. But she frames this scholarly disappointment as potentially advantageous, noting, “The reflection and stasis that are part of

disappointment may also help us get at the profound ambivalence that structures these albums, an ambivalence that eludes our current critical approaches to the archive” (29). Sitting in her own squelched desire prompted her to think about the friendship albums more complexly, not as either resistant or sentimental but as embodying “both the possibilities and pitfalls of black women’s education in the nineteenth century” (25).

Rusert’s combined optimism and thwarted longing highlight how scholars may use their own feelings to develop more ambivalent relationships with the evidence they seek. We understand this affective response—in this case, disappointment—as conversant with the larger issue of scholarly ambivalence and epistemological questions about how to see and how to know. Reading the albums again through the prism of disappointment, Rusert noticed how, for instance, sentimental poems about wifehood registered not as patriarchal capitulation or resistance to stereotypes of “wanton” Black women but as “the disappointment that accrued from models of bourgeois femininity and respectability . . . the burdens and disappointments that plagued free black women in the antebellum period” (22–23). According to Rusert, scholarly disappointment allows us to more clearly see the twinned realities of Black aspiration and unfulfillment and to rethink disciplinary and analytical norms wherein African American history and Black studies occupy either heroic accounts of subversion or Afro-pessimistic narratives of inescapable defeat.<sup>9</sup> Disappointment, she contends, may “prove productive for understanding freedom’s vexed, ambivalent archive” (27).

For Rusert, scholarly ambivalence operates not only as a theme within the materials she studies but as an affect of research and an approach to historical research. Rusert focuses our gaze on the researcher’s ambivalent relationship to the archive and the messiness of want and disappointment when faced with historical texts, figures, and the traces left behind of those whom one wishes to grasp and know. Ambivalence, then, may break down the constructed barriers between researchers and their subjects of study in critical and productive ways—exemplifying the long-standing feminist critique of scholarly objectivity and positivism.

<sup>9</sup> See also Jennifer D. Jones’s *Ambivalent Affinities* (2023). Jones analyzes how ambivalence shaped the relationship between Black and queer identities and, in addition, the ambivalence of Black liberals attempting to navigate this complex relationship. Through the lens of ambivalence, Jones answers the call of African American historians of sexuality like Michele Mitchell (2004) and Evelyn Hammonds (1994), who have urged historians to create new, complex concepts through which to understand Black genders, sexualities, and politics over time. Ultimately, in Jones’s estimation, the ambivalence that Black liberals face(d) “conspires to compound the structural vulnerabilities to harm that affect Black queer subjects” (194).



As illustrated in the previous example, scholarly ambivalence encourages researchers to probe their own layered feelings as a way to ask novel questions about their sources and make space for the multiplicity of historical emotions and subjectivities. This reflexivity, in which scholars' ambivalence is ramified in their research methods and their approaches to the production of historical knowledge, may engender a healthy feminist skepticism about oversimplistic analyses of classic texts or historical moments. Residing in a space of mixed feelings may, paradoxically, equip scholars with tools to reapproach these texts and histories with a more precise, skeptical eye. Although some might presume that ambivalence works to confuse and obscure, we note its potential to reveal, clarify, and elucidate.

By intentionally harboring scholarly ambivalence, we reassessed an oft-referenced passage from Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* to capture how Jefferson used ambivalence to deny the humanity of enslaved people. We read Jefferson's *Notes* several times, in some cases dozens of times, prior to our study of ambivalence. We understood that when Jefferson questioned, "Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race?" ([1787] 1996, 138), he was advancing a white supremacist argument about a white beauty ideal ("fine features of red and white" as contrasted with "that immoveable veil of black").

But "fine mixtures of red and white" is also a reference to the act of blushing, which, as Valerie Traub (2024) writes, is a manifestation of ambivalence—a marker of the supposedly opposed feelings of shame and desire. Traub lingers on the physiological act of blushing to draw out the racialized, sexualized, and gendered significance of this mixing of two putative opposites. And with ambivalence—rather than ideals of beauty—as a frame, we see something anew: for Jefferson, blushing is not merely a sign of pulchritude but evidence of multidimensional human expressivity that those with an "immoveable veil of black" ostensibly lack.

By cultivating a sense of scholarly ambivalence in our (re)reading, we notice the depths of Jefferson's dehumanization project, account more historically for that project, and utilize that accounting in the service of feminist and antiracist scholarship. With ambivalence as a frame, new questions emerge that demand our attention. We may ask how people of African descent not only responded to Jefferson's objectionable claims but also built their own aesthetic and affective repertoires of ambivalence. We may inquire how oppressed people engaged in their own world making of multifaceted, contradictory, and transcendent emotions. Ambivalence as a feminist analytic raises



questions about how powerful actors use ambivalence to advance pernicious ideas about subjugated groups, how those groups demonstrate their humanness by laying claim to ambivalence, and what alternative renderings of history, subjectivity, and affect are possible once ambivalence is conceptually centered.

In cultivating, holding, and appreciating one's ambivalence, scholars may approach source materials—whether an archive, dataset, classic text, or body of scholarship—with a healthy skepticism grounded in feminist convictions. In the examples cited above, scholarly ambivalence afforded a fruitful suspicion about common interpretations of historical evidence. It then expanded possibilities to see inherent contradictions and other complexities in that evidence. Put simply, scholarly ambivalence allows us to examine materials from a position of curiosity about what has been missed, overlooked, undertheorized, and underanalyzed.

### **Taking stock: Ambivalence as a feminist project**

Our reconceptualization of ambivalence is provisional, contingent on specific contexts, and dependent on current uses of the term. For this reason, the feminist analytic of ambivalence does not necessarily point to or require a shared methodology or method.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, we believe ambivalence may best be understood as a “traveling concept,” a term Mieke Bal (2002) uses to name the creative ways in which terms deployed across disciplines are formed in relation to their changing object of inquiry. Ambivalence presents something important for feminist theorizing that we see as crucial to addressing contemporary affective, social, and political conditions.

### **A feminist project**

Part of what makes this project feminist is the choice of whose voices and experiences to elevate and how these voices are described. Like other feminist analytics, ambivalence surfaces phenomena that are otherwise subtle, embedded, imperceptible, or intentionally hidden. Although some of the themes detailed here may seem emblematic of *all* feminist scholarship—illuminating subjection and attending to complexity and false dichotomies are basic feminist principles—we suggest that projects oriented toward ambivalence will engage with these issues in tandem, leading to novel questions:

<sup>10</sup> We define “methodology” as a shared set of expectations about the nature, relation between, or value of particular kinds of questions or evidence, and “method” as the specific procedures by which that evidence should be generated, interpreted, assessed, and conclusions drawn from it.

How does ambivalence emerge as a salient analytical category? What are the social contradictions animating this research object? Why do people feel conflicted? Why are their options so limited? How does the desire for progress constrain people's choices? What kinds of complexity are being ignored or silenced? What would it mean to foster further ambivalence about this object? What are the potential affordances and the risks of doing so?

We see unique value for feminist scholarship when ambivalence is foregrounded. Ambivalence prompts us to consider important tensions and binaries that saturate feminist scholarship: between subjection and liberation, certainty and uncertainty, skepticism and conviction. Ambivalence, when valued, makes these binaries explicit and at the same time lets them go unresolved. Ambivalence, in this way, can function as a holding environment, one that can foster an epistemological orientation that is politically astute and situationally flexible—especially when leveraged for a collectively pursued strategy. Thus far, we have identified three guiding principles to aid in this work and encourage more attention, theoretically, methodologically, and analytically, in feminist scholarship. We identify this articulation of ambivalence as a feminist *project* because our task here is to help others see more clearly how they might use ambivalence in their own thinking and research. In what follows, we take stock of additional implications for ambivalence conceived as a collective feminist project.

### **Potential for feminist organizing**

In addition to being a productive scholarly intervention, ambivalence can serve a diagnostic function for people's layered political orientations. In our current climate, political and social polarization has exacerbated the long-standing association of ambivalence with illogic, apathy, and self-contradiction; in some contexts, polarization makes the possibility of expressing ambivalence difficult in public discourse. To be sure, taking firm political stands is often politically efficacious; yet research suggests that steadfastness can sometimes be antithetical to progressive change, which requires understanding complexity across social, economic, and political divides (Seewald et al. 2020). Such an undertaking may require the reevaluation of go-to methods or the invention of new ones, as well as deliberately and self-reflexively persisting in experiences of discomfort, uncertainty, and irresolution.

For example, in one study, research audiences were exposed to messaging about abortion's complexities in which “two seemingly opposing things are true at the same time”: abortion “stops a developing human from being born” and, simultaneously, “it feels wrong to decide for someone else that she must continue a pregnancy, because that takes away her ability to determine the course of her life” (Harris 2019b, 23). By naming abortion's complexities

and lifting up the “tension of opposites” involved, this messaging generated shifts in public opinion toward greater support for legal abortion and a preference for fewer abortion restrictions (Harris 2019a, 191; Seewald et al. 2020). Indeed, having complicated feelings in response to hearing a physician messenger was one of the best predictors of shifts in support of abortion access. When named and validated, the mixed feelings people have about abortion become manageable. Furthermore, their ambivalence can be rerouted from a signal to vote against abortion to a signal that people must be able to make their own decisions about it and that one-size-fits-all laws that ban abortion will not serve all people well.

Such studies suggest that ambivalence is an interpersonal capacity, rooted in an acknowledgment of the porous boundaries between self and other that allow one to remain open intellectually and emotionally, whether by means of empathy, humility, curiosity, or imagination; as such, it is key to ethical decision making (Hernandez, Guarana, and Owsik 2022). Because it derives from recognizing the other as also embedded within overlapping but incongruent systems of privilege and oppression, this interpersonal openness does not entail accepting or tolerating unjust attitudes or feelings. Rather, ambivalence holds open the space for resistance to them. It is precisely because of what we see as the structural role of ambivalence in today’s world—its function in sustaining systemic and disavowed contradictions—that we promote the work of ambivalence not only as an important analytic lens but as a crucial political tool.

### **Ambivalence at the collective level**

Just as the term “ambivalence” originated in the context of particular historical conditions, its current salience indexes the present. We speculate that the recent surge of expressions of ambivalence in feminist scholarship—its collective naming (of a feeling, an object, a method)—signals the fact that ambivalence is both a condition of neoliberal inequality and a response to it. Insofar as ambivalence names an experiential feeling about the social, material, and political conditions within which one lives, it also sheds light on the structures that shape those conditions. Within the current political climate, ambivalence references, while also illuminating, the everyday, often exhausting friction entailed by living within a sea of contradictions. This friction might include, for example, experiences of historical and ongoing inequity, which are routinely disavowed within neoliberalism, as well as the limited, often polarized, choices presented by people and systems for whom such limited choices and false dichotomies are useful. Ambivalence may surface because of the complicated pull of multiple forms of social identity and

affiliation, or by being simultaneously part of but also alienated from social or institutional power, or because of the compromised nature of political processes and actions.

Ambivalence is, we suspect, the affective climate and material condition of many people's lives. Without a way to reclaim this experience as analytically productive, however, it becomes a state that is marked by negative feelings alone. As Berlant puts it, "the conditions of ordinary life in the contemporary world . . . are conditions of the attrition or wearing out of the subject" (2011, 28). In Berlant's recent work, the state of ordinary life is not only limned with, but structured by, ambivalence.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, a project attuned to ambivalence is "one way to measure the impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment" (2011, 49).

We propose that the phenomenon described by Berlant could be seen as *structural ambivalence*; by this we mean the ambivalence experienced at the levels of the individual and interpersonal are often engendered and sustained by social structures that are lived collectively. Beyond the experience of feeling unsure or immobilized, structural ambivalence manifests not only in the pressure one feels under the weight of political and social systems (e.g., the overdetermined appeals of electoral politics or racial, gender, and sexual identity formations) but in problematic forms of attachment (e.g., enduring quotidian unacknowledged microaggressions). Our ability to intervene in the various manifestations of structural ambivalence begins, we suggest, precisely in recognizing our own ambivalence. Indeed, it is because our lives are built on structural ambivalences that feminist deployments of ambivalence offer strategies for surviving and navigating them. This involves recognition that the cultural and social investments in binaries, tensions, and the value of irresolution will land variably on different people and groups and entail different costs for them.

### Risks of ambivalence

A key part of outlining the purchase of ambivalence for feminist thinking is examining its limitations and sharpening adopters' capacities to evaluate and manage its risks. There are times, obviously, when ambivalence may be

<sup>11</sup> Situating ambivalence within an "infrastructural" analysis (2022, 20), Berlant argues that "the question of politics" is now "identical with the reinvention of infrastructures for managing the unevenness, ambivalence, violence, and ordinary contingency of contemporary existence" (25). To "use the structural productivity of ambivalence" (73), they approach ambivalence as a form of "incommensurate wants," so as to not associate their project with "the bad odor or Kleinian love/hate with which ambivalence has come to be associated" (9).

neither warranted nor helpful. One can certainly be ambivalent about ambivalence—we often are.

Below, we address two major areas for which we have identified potential limitations or misuse of ambivalence. First, considerations of the speaker's social position: what are the social and political perils of expressing ambivalence, and how are these perils shaped by one's proximity to power and privilege? Second, the role of ambivalence in contemporary politics: when does ambivalence undercut the need for non-ambivalent outrage?

Who is allowed to demonstrate ambivalence? This question marks our concern not only about how ambivalence might be weaponized in particular political situations but about how adopting ambivalence as a feminist analytic might replicate historical patterns of penalizing vulnerable people for exhibiting emotional conflict. In academia, as well as in movement organizing, some groups may be encouraged to express ambivalence and be rewarded for taking risks, compared to others whose ambivalence is labeled as uninformed, facile, or pathological. For example, white scholars with access to social and economic resources could be rewarded in both scholarship and political organizing for expressions of ambivalence that contribute to the long-standing attribution of their greater emotional dimensionality. Whereas their ambivalence could be admired as sophisticated complexity, that of nonwhite scholars could be judged as indecision or emotional weakness. These realities beg the questions: who gets to admit their ambivalence openly, and who is made more vulnerable by this confession? Indeed, the scholarly ambivalence we outline in this article may not be equally available to all researchers.

With these possibilities in mind, we are cautious about the implicit demand to perform ambivalence in a way that provides indexical value: after all, naming one's ambivalence can be painful, and revealing ambivalence can be risky. While we claim that the discomfort associated with ambivalence can be constructive, helping people to manage, navigate, and hold challenging contradictions, those individuals whose marginalized identities position them within conditions of structural disadvantage should not be expected to endure, much less confess, their mixed emotions in the name of feminist research or activism. Writing from an epistemological and cosmological orientation that eschews binary modes of thought, Gloria Anzaldúa, for instance, reacts to others' tendency to project ambivalence onto her: "Who, me confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me" (1981, 225). Anzaldúa's response of claiming and holding onto certainty is not only an act of resistance to the warring cultures—Chicana and white, hetero and queer—through which she moves but also an act of resistance to the racism that would elide her cultural traditions. On the one hand, to dismiss an individual's ambivalence is to ignore and therefore to fracture key parts of human experience; our reclamation of ambivalence

as a capacity is also a reclamation of the multifaceted nature of emotional lives that frequently escape representation. On the other hand, Anzaldúa's resistance to the term "ambivalence" is a reminder that demonstrating their certainty and wholeness can be an important political strategy for people whose ambivalence can be used against them. Those who seek to uphold ambivalence must be attuned to the ways in which some subjects, by virtue of their positionality vis-à-vis dominant cultural traditions, singular identity categories, traditional linear narratives, or firm institutional belonging, may face risks when expressing their own.

We are also concerned that our advocacy for ambivalence may be misused to justify a conservative political agenda. Specifically, we are concerned about the potential for ambivalence to create or endorse political apathy or inaction. Insofar as ambivalence might index an "attachment to compromised conditions of possibility" (Berlant 2011, 24), it could function as one of the "technologies of patience" or a form of "cruel optimism" that, as Berlant argues, help to keep conditions of inequality in place (2011, 28).<sup>12</sup> One can use ambivalence to avoid moving to a particular side long after it might be necessary. As the verbs we use to describe the experience of ambivalence (holding, sitting with, reflecting) suggest, ambivalence might be construed as a form of slow politics. We thus must ask: Is a politics of ambivalence too slow to meet the urgency of certain political moments? There is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question. For some people—particularly those primed to act or mobilize—quick action moves in the direction of urgently needed justice. For others, slowing down to consider multiple positions and arguments, even in urgent situations, may be a necessary precondition—insofar as it provides time to overcome gut-reaction hesitations or internalized biases—to act in more progressive ways (Hernandez, Guarana, and Owsik 2022).

Related to these dangers of temporality are those of scale: What role can ambivalence play when the needs surrounding us are so vast, the harms so omnipresent, and the need for change so great? Can communities facing the violent impacts of racism and colonialism afford to develop an ambivalent politics, or does state-sanctioned and extralegal violence against them leave no place for contradictory feelings? These questions are crucial when considering the importance of marshaling people's limited attention, fractured

<sup>12</sup> Berlant defines "cruel optimism" as "the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object," wherein the risks of such an attachment are suppressed (2011, 24). While not all ambivalence entails a psychic need for the continuity of the object relation analyzed by Berlant, ambivalence itself can certainly function as a "problematic object," the attachment to which could prevent our collective thriving.

energies, and overwhelmed commitments to advance social and political justice.<sup>13</sup>

### Conclusion

The concerns outlined above suggest that there is an endemic ambivalence to ambivalence, wherein the ethical and political risks it poses are coincident with the phenomena that generate it. The very limits of ambivalence, that is, underscore how it is produced by overlapping and contradictory affiliations and obligations, which reveal our positionality as proximate to some forms of power and distant from others. While attending to its risks and limits, we nevertheless find ambivalence to be a crucial resource that can bring greater nuance, dimensionality, and exactitude to feminist analyses. Ambivalence, as we have curated it here, is a capacious, traveling analytic that enables us to attend to the complex personal, intersubjective, and structural dynamics that impact people's lives. Rather than view ambivalence as an unfortunate distraction from or diluting of political energy, we assert that mobilizing ambivalence can permit such energy to grow.

Reconceptualizing ambivalence as a capacity to be leveraged and a structure to be analyzed encourages people to reflect on the discordant feelings, inconsistent beliefs, and experiences of friction that arise from this complex relationship to power; such conflicts are often deeply felt but not often acknowledged or affirmed. Yet, as a feminist analytic, ambivalence demands more than just the affirmation of fraught feelings. The risks that we have outlined here insist that we approach our production of knowledge about the value and limits of ambivalence as a form of accountability: to allies, as well as to unknown others affected by one's work; to incommensurate and variable affiliations and communities; and to power and subjection in their multiple dimensions. Such accountability speaks not only to the urgent needs of the present but to the ultimately unanswerable claims of the past and to our as-yet-unfulfilled hopes for the future—in short, to the ongoing project that is feminism.

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<sup>13</sup> In our online publication, "Ambivalence as an Opportunity for Social Change: A Messaging Guide for Progressive Organizers," we offer explicit strategies for leveraging ambivalence for political activism; see <https://goodwinsimon.com/ambivalence>.

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