

FORUM



Whiteness and the joys of cruelty

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I grew up in a country where religion did not exist. The so-called “opium of the people” was relegated to the Communist Party’s critique of the bourgeois excesses; the spirit of Providence haunting an occasional French novel or two; or a cautionary tale of a young pioneer who went to church at the bequest of a grandparent and was punished by public humiliation. I also grew up Jewish. Removed from its religious roots, Jewishness was treated by the Soviet Union as an ethnic identity. You were Russian, Ukrainian, or Jewish. Perhaps not surprising in a country that previously elevated pogroms to an art form, anti-Semitism permeated every aspect of institutional, social, and cultural life. Under the disguise of affirmative action, the universities had official quotas for Jewish admission, which hovered around one to two percent. It was widely believed that, if these quotas were not enforced, the education system would be taken over by the Jews, or “zhidy” – the ethnic slur deployed widely and passionately in the everyday vernacular.¹ As I argue elsewhere, the Soviet system was corrupt, and bribes, given to the right people, often ensured university admission.² But that privilege was only available to the well-connected and those with something to barter. My Mom was lucky—she was able to enroll in the accounting program at a local university because of the cholera epidemic, which led to the citywide quarantine and the subsequent university underenrollment. My father, a straight A student, was not that lucky and, betrayed by his last name and a line in the passport,³ was not able to attend a university.

Institutional cruelty permeated social and everyday life. The first time I heard the word “Jew,” spewed at me by a playmate, I was seven years old. Jarred by the violence of the action, but unsure of its meaning, I went home and asked my grandmother if I was indeed a Jew and what that meant. My grandmother, a Holocaust survivor, cried for what I am sure is one of the few times in her life. I learned a very unintentional lesson. If I was to protect my family, I must not let them know of these encounters.

The beatings started shortly after, when I was in the first grade. The bullying was relentless and accompanied by commentaries about my Jewishness. Each class had a grade journal, which, outside of grades and emergency contact information, also contained the same ethnic line as the passport. And, because the journal was readily accessible to students and teachers, it provided evidence of every way in which my body was suspect. The inaction and the frequent encouragement of teachers were heartbreaking. The beatings that took place in front of their eyes; sitting in a classroom with blood running down my face, not being excused to use the bathroom; grading based on what was written at the end of the grade journal—these acts of cruelty beat down an already shy kid. I retreated to the only place that was truly safe: the world of books. Even now, 30 years later, my body

still bears scars, which, as Sarah Ahmed astutely writes, “reminds us that recovering from injustice cannot be about covering over the injuries, which are effects of that injustice; signs of an unjust contact between our bodies and others.”⁴

The general apathy and encouragement of violence and discrimination were as much part of the institution as smelly lockers and disgusting lunches. That is not to say that there were not acts of kindness and support. One of my classmates, Oleg, a Ukrainian through and through, would get into fights with classmates and screaming matches with teachers over the treatment of his Jewish classmates. I still think about the righteous indignation of this 10-year-old with affection and nostalgia. We, however, learned to keep our head down, to keep track of our most violent bullies’ schedules, to absorb punches, and to hide our wounds from our families, for there was nothing, really, they could have done to stop this. Nothing, except to leave the country, which we were finally able to do in 1989, just six short months before the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

We came to the United States as refugees. I will not recount the long way we took to get to this country—that is a topic for another essay. But we came here with a legal status that offered a path to a green card and citizenship. We settled in Chicago among the Russian Jewish community. I excelled in school, and my parents found work. We bought a house. I went to some of the best universities in the country and found a rewarding career, something I would have never been allowed to do in the Soviet Union. The rest of the family followed us and settled nearby. I met a life partner, another Russian Jew who understood intimately the trauma of growing up while different. We had a kid, who is growing up celebrating Hanukkah, Christmas, and the Day of the Dead, and who is adored by her family without knowing any of the traumas her parents went through. We are the American success story. We can be considered lucky and hard-working immigrants, and we were and are that. But, we are also something we were never able to be in our motherland: we are white. Much has been written about Jewishness and whiteness, and it is not the purpose of this essay to recount the arguments so eloquently made by other scholars.⁵ However, in my specific case the passage to whiteness, which accompanied our particular refugee experience, came with a personal reckoning about the nature of cruelty and its intimate ties to whiteness.

Cruelty receives scant attention in academia. It is often evoked in connection to violence, but rarely theorized. It is not immediately clear what makes a particular action or statement cruel. Much like the Supreme Court’s opinion on pornography, we know it when we see it. Hannah Arendt, in her influential work on totalitarianism, spoke of cruelty as intimately tied to justifications for a totalitarian regime and the rise of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. She wrote of the post-First World War authors and intellectuals, that

to them violence, power, cruelty, were the supreme capacities of men who have definitely lost their place in the universe and were much too proud to long for power theory that would safely bring them back and reintegrate them into the world. They were satisfied with blind partisanship in anything that respectable society had banned ... and they elevated cruelty to a major virtue because it contradicted society’s humanitarian and liberal hypocrisy.⁶

The too obvious parallel to the cultural forces that brought upon the rise of Trump is perhaps one of the reasons why Arendt’s work sold out on Amazon in the weeks after the election. However, while Arendt importantly ties cruelty to certain cultural

disfranchisements and resentments—more on that later—she does not attempt to define or explain cruelty as an affective and social mechanism.

I argue here that to consider cruelty as an affective mechanism is to understand how it is born out of encounters with others. I understand affect here in Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth's terms as an accumulation "across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between bodies. . . . Affect marks a body's belonging to a world of encounters."⁷ As intensity, or an emotional force which acts upon the body, cruelty emerges out of an encounter between the self and the Other. It is in that encounter, or infliction, that cruelty is dependent on affective identification of a body as deserving cruelty. In other words, the process of "othering" is not only discursive, but also affective. As a Jewish person in the former Soviet Union, my body was marked as the "other" not only discursively through a line in the passport or a class journal, but more importantly, affectively, as a body to which cruelty could "stick." Here I draw upon Sara Ahmed's terminology of "stickiness," which she uses to explain how affects are characterized first and foremost by their attachments, which are felt by the body in concrete and material ways.⁸ In other words, an act of violence has to be experienced as cruel in order to be cruel. It is my argument, then, that cruelty is intimately tied to affects of power relations. Cruelty therefore makes us consider not only what power is, but also and even more importantly, what power *feels* like.

Often, it is argued that cruelty, as an exercise of power, constitutes what political theorist Shannon Sullivan calls "sad passions."⁹ She argues that cruelty, among other affects such as hate, fear, envy, and anger, is sad because it is largely reactive to the Other's existence. As such, according to Sullivan, people who are constituted solely by these passions experience

a kind of death-in-life that can occur when a body no longer actively strives to persevere in its being but allows itself to be constituted merely by reactions to others' *conatus*. The sad passions are what produce this kind of death.¹⁰

And Judith Shklar, in an influential essay on cruelty, argued that cruelty is ugly and that it disfigures, literally and metaphorically, the human character.¹¹ But as I think back to my childhood tormentors, I do not think of them as sad, or disempowered, or ugly in any sense of that word. I know that being cruel brought them joy—the glint in the eyes, the straightening of the posture, the smirk—the joy of the oppressor is what makes cruelty so effective as a tool of the oppression. Therefore, I argue that in order to understand cruelty, we need to consider that an exercise of power can often be joyful.

In her work on the topic, Lauren Berlant writes about cruel optimism as an attachment to a problematic object.¹² What is cruel about these attachments, she argues, is that

the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.¹³

Here, cruelty is experienced in terms of attachment, which, in itself, is poisonous to the subject's existence, but without which, the subject's way of being and sense of self is severely jeopardized. There is an implicit alliance in Berlant's argument between joy

and cruelty. The attachment to a joyful ideal, such as the American Dream, can be cruel insofar as the separation from the ideal would mean the loss of identity and sense of the world. I believe that connectedness to joy is essential for theorizing cruelty. It is not simply a state of “sad passions;” nor does joy always signify a positive or happy orientation toward the world.¹⁴ To push Berlant’s characterization further, the attachment can only be cruel if it is also joyful. If it was not joyful, then the subject would be able to separate from it and therefore the attachment would not be cruel.

The joy in the faces of my tormentors was similar to the joy I saw later in the Russian Jewish refugee population as they adjusted to life in the United States and, at dinner tables, discussed the laziness, violence, and general delinquency of black people. Yes, the Russian Jewish community is, by and large, cruel to people of color. The radio shows aimed at Russian Jews spew daily hatred toward black people, Muslims, and Latinx. The same circulates on email lists, Facebook feeds, and local newspapers. This cruelty is then repeated with glee and reasserted in all types of social settings. I would like to say that I was above it all from the start; that somehow I did not enact cruelty so expected of me in these social settings, but that would be a lie. The legitimacy granted to us by the United States—a legitimacy wrapped in conditions and practices of whiteness—was intoxicating, and it was some years before I grappled with the joys of cruelty as intimately tied to the joys of being finally rendered white. It is these experiences growing up as an oppressed nonwhite minority and being granted, through immigration, the status of whiteness and the privileges of cruelty, which come along with whiteness, that leads me to assert the main argument of this essay: *cruelty is the joy with which whiteness asserts itself*.

To talk about cruelty as intimately tied to the joys of whiteness is not to argue that only white people can be cruel. That is obviously not true. It is, however, to imply that joyful assertion of whiteness, as an affective attachment and orientation, is a necessary condition under which an act of symbolic or physical violence can be deemed as cruel. I reflect here on my experiences in a community that went from being an object of cruelty to joyful assertion of power over others. This was intimately tied to finally being considered white. There is an actual saying, common in the homes of Russian Jewish refugees: “finally, we can vacation like white people.” It usually means taking a nice vacation, but the meaning of joys associated with finally being able to relax into being white, and the accompanied cruelty that seems to always follow the assertion of whiteness, is important to consider. Here, whiteness is not a skin color, but rather, an affect; it is born out of encounter with a country and other people in that country. If whiteness is an affect, then it can attach itself to various bodies depending on historical, social, and cultural circumstances. It can definitely explain how the Jewish people become white in the United States, while not being treated as such elsewhere. Jews in America are allowed to be white, because there are others who are not. We were not allowed to be white in the Soviet Union, because there were no others who could bear that burden. Even more importantly, to consider whiteness as an affect is to consider its fleetingness. If it arises out of relatedness, then it could disappear as encounters, attachments, and orientations change. Everyone is at risk of losing whiteness as an affective orientation toward power. This is exactly what makes attachment to whiteness cruel.

Sara Ahmed, in her work on phenomenology of whiteness, writes that “whiteness could be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they ‘take up’ space.”¹⁵ It is through considering whiteness as

an orientation, or positioning toward some objects and away from others, according to Ahmed, that certain things are put within reach. She does not specify explicitly what these things are, but if I may be so bold as to extend this already brilliant argument, one of the objects that whiteness puts within reach—outside of wealth, privilege, and access—is the joy of asserting power. And it is that joy of asserting power that we think about when we think of cruelty. This theorization can explain how the people who lived through the cruelty of being less-than-white could then practice the same joys of asserting power once whiteness has been granted to them. To turn away from cruelty means to turn away from whiteness, which is a heartbreaking attachment to those who have experienced life on the other side.

How does this relate to the Trump administration? It is my contention that what makes Trump cruel is not just the discursive content of his policies, speeches, and tweets, but rather, the affective joy with which his administration seems to enact them. *USA Today* describes Trump's cruelty as "basically a 71-year-old kid cackling in delight as he melts ants under his magnifying glass."¹⁶ And a recent issue of the *New Yorker* states that "the national leadership seems not only determined to make things worse but weirdly excited about it."¹⁷ That weird excitement is exactly the joy of cruelty. It is that same weird excitement that filled anti-Semites in the Soviet Union and then the Russian Jews in the United States. It is the weird excitement of asserting whiteness over others. The same joyful enactment of whiteness permeates every cruel decision issued by the administration, from the repeal of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) to the deportation of 200,000 Salvadorian immigrants to the Muslim travel ban. Each of these acts was cruel *because* it aimed at an unproblematic assertion of whiteness. It is not until we reckon with the intimate and joyful connection between whiteness and cruelty that we can make political, cultural, and economic choices that lead us toward empathy.

Notes

1. "Zhid" was an ethnic slur equivalent to "kike" in English. A popular saying in the Soviet Union was "Beat up Zhidy, save Mother Russia."
2. Marina Levina, "Under Lenin's Watchful Eye: Growing Up in the Former Soviet Union," *Surveillance & Society* 15, no. 3/4 (2017): 529.
3. The fifth line in the Soviet passport was an ethnic identity line. It indicated whether you were Russian, Ukrainian, etc., or Jewish. Some people paid bribes to have their ethnicity officially changed—a practice my parents refused to embrace.
4. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 202.
5. David Moscovitz, *A Culture of Tough Jews: Rhetorical Regeneration and the Politics of Identity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014); Jon Stratton, *Coming Out Jewish* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
6. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973), 330–31.
7. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, ed., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.
8. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 2014.
9. Shannon Sullivan, "Sad versus Joyful Passions: Spinoza, Nietzsche, and the Transformation of Whiteness," *Philosophy Today* 55 (2011): 231.
10. Ibid.
11. Judith N. Shklar, "Putting Cruelty First," *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (1982): 17–27.

12. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
13. *Ibid.*, 24.
14. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
15. Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 150.
16. Christian Schneider, "Donald Trump has a Sickening Fetish for Cruelty," *USA Today*, August 5, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2017/08/05/trump-has-fetish-cruelty-christian-schneider-column/537483001/> (accessed January 20, 2018).
17. Louis Menand, "Words of the Year," *The New Yorker*, January 8, 2018 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/08/words-of-the-year> (accessed January 20, 2018).

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