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Emotions and Affects of Convolution

Lisa Blackman

This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Lauren Berlant.

Introduction: Technologies of the non-rational

This chapter started with a deep sense of bewilderment and shock before it took form more explicitly as an investigation into technologies of the non-rational through emotions and affects of convolution. Emotions and affects of convolution traverse many different settings and are part and parcel of forms of power that link the military, colonial forms of power, media power, soft power, and the “grey areas” of non-physical abuse primarily associated with coercive control and narcissistic abuse. Narcissistic abuse is a term that recognizes common behaviour and communication patterns linked to abuse carried out by perpetrators who have either been diagnosed with personality disorders, such as narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), or who would likely meet the criteria. It is estimated that in the US alone there are 158 million victims of narcissistic abuse.¹ Narcissistic abuse has entered public consciousness and taken root within the context of Trumpism. There is a growing genre of accounts by survivors of this insidious form of emotional and psychological abuse, including Mary Trump’s autobiography *Too Much and Never Enough: How my family created the world’s most dangerous man* (2020), linking narcissism within family systems to cycles of abuse that have been played out on a very public world stage (see Honig 2021).

As well as bewilderment and shock, this chapter is written from a place of profound grief. Grief is capacious and, in my case, a series of events, the death of my mother and multiple traumatic episodes linked to her death, forced the issues that I consider here. It was hard during the period of writing to focus on anything else as I read endless newspaper articles detailing the latest victims of abuse, or the shocking statistics worldwide of those who die at the hands of their perpetrators. Abuse was everywhere, brutalizing my grieving process where a shocking event became the catalyst for the return of my past, and the ending to a

twisted script that I hadn't quite realised I had been living. This is what "narcissistic abuse" is likeⁱⁱ, where, in my case, over the period of eighteen months, I was forced to confront a strange and bizarre world of delusion, conning, facades, trickery, subterfuge, traps, scare tactics, isolation, shapeshifting, subliminal programming, pathological lying, false assertions, and alternative narratives, engulfed in an economy of affect and emotion – fear, panic, dread, anger, guilt, shame, confusion, disbelief, shock, puzzlement, as well as malevolent and malign atmospheres, paranoia, over-reactive immune and nervous systems and experiences which border on and have a close relationship to insanity.

The unreality and affective dissonance of this intense set of experiences also profoundly resonates with a political conjuncture equally marked by delusion, conning, facades, trickery, shapeshifting, pathological lying, confusion, chaos, indeterminacy, and a public feeling of scandalized disbelief at what has seemingly become a "new normal". At the heart of both the private and public feeling of disbelief lies an apparatus of communication, which embeds *counterfactual* strategies into sensemaking. Rather than "creative fabulations" (see Anderson 2010) – forms of future casting that imagine and pre-empt different future possibilities – counterfactual thinking is about alternatives to what happened that *feel* true, that have the ring of sense, or can circulate and retroactively reshape scenes, encounters, evidence, interpretation, relations, feelings, histories, reputations, and relationships. Truths, facts, and the reality of lived experience are replaced with alternative narratives, including the improbable, impossible, unimaginable, false, sometimes ridiculous, and often offensive.

Counterfactuals are deeply affective and emotional forms of sensemaking or *sensing*, fabrications of reality based on what might have been, could have been, if-only's, as-if's, WTF's and, in a more benign form, as "wishful thinking". They are genres of sensing which propagate disinformation, despite being a routine form of emotional reasoning recognised by psychologists and neuroscientists. Counterfactuals are an important element in the practice of coercive forms of power and can be found in different sites of power and abuse. They are probabilistic, speculative, and pre-emptive, attempting to retroactively change the past to reshape the future. They can also perpetuate cultures of inequality and oppression and are an important element of communication strategies based on deceit, deception, and manipulation. Other elements of this apparatus include the practices of plausible deniability, reverse projection, word-salad, perfidy, future faking, grandiosity, aggrandizement, confabulation, conceit, entitlement, reverse victimhood, false claims, and baiting.

At the same time as this apparatus of communication is recognised as reshaping democratic media and politics, it is often described through a psychologised language of disorder, mapping onto and giving meaning to events, political figures, trends, forms of decision-making, narratives, attachments, allegiances, beliefs, and communication styles described as narcissistic. Mary Trump, the niece of the former President Donald Trump, provided regular psychological analyses of Trumpism which have become part of a wider cultural fascination with narcissism and narcissistic leaders. Giving unique insights into Trump's character and psychology, she presaged the very likely possibility that we would see his destructive tendencies play out in vengeful and vindictive expressions of his inability to accept that he had not won a second term in the 2020 American election.ⁱⁱⁱ What were described as his narcissistic wounds, rage, lack of empathy and conscience, and a wilful intent to break and destroy values, communication practices, buildings, relationships, and political and media systems aligned to democracy, was born out by the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021.

Trump supporters led the insurrection known as "Stop the Steal" during the certification of the Electoral College vote-count to confirm Joe Biden's presidential win. This led to a second impeachment trial and a legal discussion which centered on the coercive power of specific words, slogans and phrases and their role in the incitement of the violence and riots: "we won it by a landslide", "stop the steal", "we will never give up", "we will never concede", "You don't concede when there's theft involved. Our country has had enough. We will not take it anymore", "if you don't fight like hell you're not going to have a country anymore".

In the aftermath of Trump's acquittal for a second time, what has remained as the dust settles are important questions relating to his "remarkable" capacities to exploit, coerce, manipulate, and frame reality such that conspiracy theories, lies, and other forms of mis- and disinformation become contagious and infectious. Analyses of Trump's affective styles and mediated persona reveal how political emotions and fantasies are part of his bellicose performances. In an essay in the online magazine of the journal *Society and Space*, Ben Anderson (2017) recognises the ambivalent mix of emotions that were produced and circulated among Trump's supporters and opponents, including resentments, hope, hostilities, rage, contempt, anger, incredulity, horror, anxieties, and the role of lies, exaggerations, and distortions in the fantasies and promises offered up. Making the important point that truth-based political critique and fact-checking were largely ineffectual in countering Trump's

appeals, Anderson suggests that this critical ineffectivity was partially linked to a particular form of “emotional authenticity” aligned to Trump’s sense of “fun” used to connote spontaneity and unpredictability. The ease of his performances and the consistency of his belief as he honed his “persona as winner” was in contrast to a range of identified “losers” (drawn from an already-existing economy of otherness based on longer histories, fears, fetishes and phobias).

There is no doubt that the questions Trumpism crystallised will preoccupy media and political scholars for decades to come. The focus of this chapter is on aspects of Trump’s affective style when considered in relation to the communication and conversational techniques that shape his persona, which produce affects and emotions of convolution. The chapter specifically explores the connections between what I call a social and political apparatus of narcissism and the particularity and genealogy of narcissistic abuse as a way of unpacking some of these issues. At the heart of this discussion are communication strategies based upon very strange and duplicitous forms of communication. They use methods that have largely been excised from reason or are only allowed to appear in certain sanitized forms, including techniques and practices related to: suggestion, priming, precognition, retrocausality, retroactivity, time travel, non-causality, cognitive reattribution, confabulation, anticipation, pre-emption, subliminal, non-conscious, and other paradoxical forms of communication, especially the case of counterfactuals. I explore how these paradoxical forms of communication are central to modern technologies of power by drawing on a range of strategies that are neither rational nor irrational, but more akin to what some affect scholars have called the “non-rational” (Berlant 2005). This includes forms of attachment that sidestep conscious deliberation or rational thought and in certain contexts might be recognised as deluded, self-defeating, abnormal, or anomalous.

In my previous writing that engages explicitly with the field of affect studies (see Blackman 2012, 2019), I have explored an archive of experiences that are often discounted as irrational, providing a rich tapestry of practices, experiences and technologies that extend our understandings of processes understood as affective. The primary archive is from the field of psychology, analysed genealogically as a science of population management rather than a science of the individual. Drawing on a long tradition of writing in this area (Henriques et al 1998; Walkerdine, 1990; Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001; Blackman, 2001; Blackman et al, 2008), we can see that, from psychology’s inception as discipline and set of knowledge

practices, it has been part of a wider set of social apparatuses for governing and managing populations in relation to specific regulatory images of the human that are sexed, raced, classed, ableist, and gendered, providing techniques for mapping, classifying, targeting and administering Otherness. Governing in the name of rationality, psychology has primarily focused on experiences considered outside of reason, including through fears of irrational, suggestible, over-sensitive “mass-minds” sick with contagion (Blackman and Walkerdine 2001).

As Valerie Walkerdine (1988) cogently analysed in her book, *The Mastery of Reason*, reason has been a central plank of liberal democracies, creating the fear that unreason lurks continually, presenting a danger to liberal governance. Perhaps the con in this cover-story is that, at the same time as unreason is delegitimated, psychology has developed more and more techniques that govern through the non-rational, including technologies of suggestion, contagion, and processes linked to psychic research in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These shapeshifting techniques in the present are linked to the controversial field of *weird science*, inviting a renewed focus on registers and modalities of attending to the world that exceed conscious rational thought and that are shared and distributed across the human and more-than-human.

The role that these techniques play in political communications that mobilise post-truth as a strategy of governance and in the “grey areas” of psychological abuse are the focus of my analysis here. My argument is that counterfactual reasoning has a close relationship to emotions and affects of convolution. I use the term convolution to refer to *strange affects* that disclose multiplications of reality characterised by twists, turns, multiplicities, complications, and confusions. The experiences of convolution are often described as torturous and difficult to understand, articulated primarily as forms of *unfeeling*. Convolution is often carried by the emotion of disbelief characterised by moments where we are stopped in our tracks, where eyebrows are raised, where we feel numb and don’t know what to think and are unable to feel. Next, I will explore the implications of disbelief as a political emotion for the field of affect studies, and our abilities to script and caption the multiplications of reality that are part of convolution.

Disbelief as Political Emotion

“Don't believe what you read, hear or see.

That's what the Trump White House and the pro-Trump media are relying upon: Disbelief. Story after story calls to mind the old Marx Brothers line "Who ya gonna believe, me or your own eyes?"^{iv}

“Disbelief can be a political emotion, but not in the usual sense, since it is not oriented toward opinion. It is, rather, the scene of stopping and looking around while full of unacted-on sensation related to refusing a consensual real: an emotional space-time for adjustment, adjudication.”^v

“The word disbelief doesn't really cover what people are feeling.”^{vi}

“The word disbelief doesn't really cover what people are feeling” is a refrain typically expressed when people are trying to make sense of complicated feelings and shocking events. In this instance the statement was made by a British Channel Four news journalist reporting on the killings carried out by Jake Davidson, a self-identified “incel” who shot and murdered his mother and five random members of the public before killing himself in 2021. Disbelief is an interesting political emotion, as Berlant captures in their 2005 reflections on “unfeeling” and disbelief and the convoluted emotions and affects that it puts into motion. Berlant's incisive reflections were made within the context of the failure of the Democrat candidate John Kerry to unseat George W. Bush for a second election term in the 2004 American presidential campaign. Rather than move to a swift analysis of the reasons for Kerry's failure, Berlant dwells in another register, mining disbelief as a way to open up a discussion of the importance of the “non-rational” in political attachments. As they argue, many political commentaries of the time, which have only increased since the time of this piece, are “too knowing,” too frank in their objections, rather than dwelling in the strangeness of certain political events and their significance. It is a strangeness that is often communicated through “not having the words for it” – bewilderment, puzzlement, hopelessness, helplessness and suspension, a space for and of feeling stunned, mystified, befuddled, confused, shocked, overwhelmed, baffled, bewildered, perplexed, puzzled, and motionless.

There is no doubt that disbelief as a political emotion, exercised in the conjuncture of writing this chapter, carries the contradictions, foreclosures and displacements that point to the

strange, and beyond what we *know*, challenging what Berlant calls a “need to know right away”. As with the John Kerry event that Berlant analyzes, opinions abound regarding Trumpism, post-truth and authoritarian populism, including the feminist criticism and analysis of Bonnie Honig (2021) in her book, *Shell-Shocked: Feminist Criticism After Trump*. Framing the primary affect of the Trump presidency as shock, Honig draws on the work of Naomi Klein and her concept of disaster capitalism developed in the book, *Shock Doctrine*, to analyse those techniques of “disaster patriarchy” (deprivation and saturation) which assault the senses and lead to exhaustion, fatigue, and chaos.

Shock is part of disbelief, which as Honig suggests, overwhelms, disorients, floods, desensitizes, and paralyzes. Shock causes us to doubt perception and interrupts sensemaking. Honig offers discernment, as a practice of understanding and critical reflection, as a strategy of resistance to shock, and as a way to bring ourselves back to our senses. In this formulation, shock prevents or stymies sense and our capacity to understand and process what is happening. However, the affective economies of disbelief as a political emotion are more convoluted than shock. Indeed, the dictionary definition of convolution refers to the bewildering aspects of the twisted and twisting multiplications of reality that are confusing, puzzling and dissociative. The convoluted processes of disbelief move in atmospheres and nervous states that include expressions and feelings of inexplicability and bafflement, as well as affective responses that are primarily associated with trauma reactions. Disbelief is not the opposite of belief and discernment but refers to some of the strangeness of convolution: to something and somewhere else, to incoherent processes, to vertigo, incongruities, strange indeterminacies, chaos, dissonance, and to the primary place of the non-rational in constructing and multiplying realities.

Berlant (2005) invokes the “consensual real” – those social fictions and fantasies that must remain unchanged, that are part of consensus or “commonsense” – as important in the operations of disbelief. Disbelief requires a shared commons or commonground that is radically disrupted, challenged, arrested, unseated, stopped, and shattered to take hold and be felt. Disbelief reveals the fragility of the consensual and the attachments that are necessary for it to propagate. As Berlant astutely argues, for example, “families are captioning machines whose frames we presume, until we don’t”.^{vii} Disbelief signals that the consensual is blocked, thwarted, that there is un-catheted affect and emotion swirling around that carries refusal, modulating dissonance and a sense of an impasse.^{viii} Disbelief is unknowing; it is

retroactive and interferes with what came before without offering an alternative. It is an opening to something else that exists in cracks, silences, interstices, foreclosures, and disavowals. Disbelief shows up in the frames and genres, revealing the counterfactual fantasies of the consensual for what they are: machines to caption and articulate the consensual that are strange and can be made stranger under particular circumstances and conditions. Sometimes they can break down altogether.

As with much of Berlant's work, they focus on the implications of disbelief for public intimacies, and the fantasy sites and objects of the family and sexuality through which intimacies and attachments are primarily shaped. As they cogently argue, the family and sexuality are what must remain unchanged, never to be made strange. I would add that in the context of narcissistic abuse, there are several related elements of the consensual real that must also remain unchanged for these processes of mattering to propagate. These include normative assumptions about mental health, rationality, sanity, the human, the psychological, violence, truth, and legal notions of capacity and consent. Disbelief is ambivalent, registering the centrality of convolution through what it reveals and keeps in place. It is not apathy, but it is a reaction, and a strong reaction at that. Disbelief has a momentum, a need to find or create a new object so the feeling(s) can be carried and shared with others. Disbelief requires a period of adjustment without foregoing what is strange. It requires a response which isn't just emotional reactivity but something else. Defensive reactions are one response, what Berlant describes as coolness or detachment, or stress, worry, dread and anxiety. As they argue, "the register of political affect I'm describing expresses mixed feelings, contradiction, ambivalence, and above all, incoherence. Not emotions of revolution, but convolution."^x

"If you ever find yourself in the wrong story, leave...."^x

Convolution is destabilizing not least when your own life is reflected back to you through its distortions and distractions. Although I am not explicitly focusing on the specificities of narcissistic abuse within this chapter, a brief example might help to indicate the central role of techniques of the non-rational and the convoluted communication structures that are part of what I am calling narcissistic storytelling (see Blackman 2022). In a book written as a survivor of narcissistic abuse, Adelyn Birch (2015) recounts the need for victims to acquire knowledge of some of the techniques to better protect themselves from their effects and affects. This includes knowledge of the use of "covert emotional manipulation" in an attempt

to shape thinking, feeling, conduct and behavior. As Birch says, “covert emotional manipulation operates under your level of conscious awareness” (28). This might include forms of behavioral conditioning (such as intermittent reinforcement), gaslighting (“a manipulator asserts something untrue with enough conviction and intensity that the victim believes it” [34]), empty words and ghosting (silent treatment). However, the gaps, cracks, silences and contradictions can be revealed through “incongruities” that the manipulator embodies, including contradicting themselves, inconsistencies, and emotional responses that feel “off-beat”. There are also breakthroughs such as “spaceship moments” (ibid), which are the felt experiences of odd statements or questions, red-flags, and inconsistencies, that reveal the perpetrator’s intent. Spaceship moments are statements or expressions that are “Out of place. Out of context. *Out of the blue*. Like an alien being who didn’t get humans or life on earth at all, but who was trying to understand”.^{xi}

These practices and their ubiquity in political communications are normalizing communication once only discussed in self-help manuals, workshops, blogs, and memoirs primarily written by and/or for victims and survivors of abuse. These connections have been severed from the public sphere and unmoored from their genealogical links with abuse and practices such as coercive control. Disbelief has entered the personal and political frame under many guises revealing the close connection among feeling, politics, and the ubiquity of technologies of the “non-rational” in governing psychological and affective life. Perhaps Brexit and the election of Trump were two events associated with post-truth communication strategies, which also marked the contours of public feeling that carried this range of mixed and troubling feelings. Arguably these feelings communicate and articulate the disbelief that makes the strangeness of the “consensual real” more familiar, whilst adding layers of disorientation and dissonance.

Gaslighting, Perfidy and Plausible Deniability

One of the more obvious and recognised communication structures that modulate and amplify convolution is gaslighting: a buzzword of 2018. In some commentary, gaslighting is seen as reflective of the toxicity of the political contexts we have been living through.^{xii} The Oxford English dictionary defines gaslighting as the intent or capacity to “manipulate (a person) by psychological means into questioning his or her own sanity”. The term now circulates widely in media cultures, providing a psychological language for apprehending power, inequalities, and social injustices, including amongst those who are more “woke”^{xiii} to the insidious nature

of political strategies and communications that work primarily through techniques of deceit and deception associated with the non-rational.^{xiv} These techniques are often aligned with narcissism and with disordered personalities and similarly disordered ways of thinking. In my view, some of the most astute writing about post-truth and narcissism and their common patterns of deceptive communication has appeared in publications like *TeenVogue*^{xv} and *MsMagazine*. These writings focus more on narcissist *tactics* as forms of abuse. They do not locate them primarily within the confines of a distinctly disordered personality or within understandings of narcissism as NPD (narcissistic personality disorder). Narcissism is aligned more to a political and social apparatus that has distinct histories and cultures. However, there is no doubt that one of the effects of this apparatus is a disordering of reality, perception, attention, memory and even sanity.

Gaslighting is very effective at cultivating atmospheres of disbelief, and emotions and affects of convulsion, sowing the seeds of doubt and confusion. It can operate in interpersonal dynamics as well as at institutional levels and is a key strategy of political communications within right wing populism. In her book *The Gaslight Effect*, Robin Stern (2018 xxv) identifies 2016 as a key moment within which gaslighting entered popular consciousness as a communication tool and political strategy. As she argues,

In March of that year, comedian and HBO host John Oliver claimed that Donald Trump had gaslighted him. At first glance the story seemed simple enough. Donald Trump announced that he had refused an invitation to appear on Oliver's program. 'John Oliver had his people call me to be on his very boring and low-rated show', Trump tweeted. 'I said "NO THANKS". Waste of time and energy!'

But here's the twist: Oliver never made that invitation. He had no interest in having Trump as a guest on his show (my emphasis).

What is interesting about Stern's recounting of this gaslighting tactic was the effect it had on Oliver, and how destabilising he found it to be on the end of a blatant lie. Here was a talk show host who to all intents and purposes was confident and had a grip on reality. He was not a woman isolated and subject to gaslighting within the confines of an abusive marriage, as in the 1940s film noir, *Gaslight*, which gave this strategy its name. What threw Oliver was Trump's conviction, his tone, which communicated an affect of righteous indignation in

relation to an event that clearly had not occurred. Trump was certain about his version of events, conveyed in his incongruous tweet. A spaceship moment no less. Was this a retaliation for a perceived slight at not being invited on the show? The tweet was out of place, wrong, strange, and destabilizing. It was a counterfactual statement that played with the “power of possibility”, retroactively changing the past to respond to a future that would never happen.

In other contexts, the strange affect communicated was linked to Trump’s *gusto*. The definition of *gusto* includes attacking something and developing a taste for something that is communicated with a sense of energy, enjoyment, and satisfaction. This conjures up a playful sense of baiting and provocation likening the exchange to a game. The term *gusto* was used in an article by Melissa Jeltsen, a senior reporter at the *Huffington Post*, that Stern refers to in her summary of what happened. Jeltsen covers domestic violence and related issues, and the archive of her published articles provides an important repository of the links between Trumpism, right wing authoritarianism, post-truth politics, and the roll-out of tactics and strategies that are part of coercive control. She also draws out the links between gun crime, mass shootings, and domestic violence, as well as the high proportion of Trump supporters and advisors who are known domestic abusers, including Steve Bannon, former chief executive of the Breitbart News and White House chief strategist for the first seven months of Trump’s presidency.^{xvi} Jeltsen’s John Oliver story runs with the headline, “Donald Trump is successfully conning the entire country”. The piece continues, “The GOP front-runner is gaslighting us – a technique that involves lying, then feigning outrage when caught.”

This form of psychological abuse typically plays out like so: The gaslighter states something false with such intensity and conviction that whoever is on the receiving end is confused and begins to doubt their own perspective ... When faced with their brazen lies, gaslighters deny their own statements, change the subject, lash out with insults (think "little" Rubio and "liar" Cruz), act indignant about the accusation, or turn on the messenger – which, for Trump, is often the national media.^{xvii}

The term gaslighting was regularly used to identify the erasure and rewriting of history that occurred on an almost daily basis during the pandemic under Trump’s presidency. His previous comments to the press and on social media, and decisions about the pandemic were

confabulated (see Vaknin 2020)^{xviii} such that reality was fabricated, distorted, and falsified. These confabulations, whether done with calculated intent to lie and mislead or as the messy result of disordered thinking were shared in videos, memes, and GIFs. This includes videos using comedic cataloguing and editing of these “errors”, such as the very funny video shared on *NowThisPolitics*, titled “Trump’s not a Doctor but he plays one on TV”.^{xix} The affective economy of disbelief that we find across social media helps to archive public feeling expressed through astonishment, humor, and inexplicability alongside expressions of the very real fear and danger of Trump’s convictions.

The technique of gaslighting disorients and destabilizes borders and boundaries between sanity and insanity, truth and falsehood, real and imaginary, self and other, fact and fiction, modulating the “power of possibility” shaped through the consensual real, including normative assumptions about family, intimate relationships, sanity, morality, and those infrastructures which shape what counts as true, just, and probable. In Honig’s analysis of the film *Gaslight*, as well as in novels such as *Jane Eyre* or Toni Morrison’s *Home*, gaslighting is a substantive focus as well as a structuring device for playing with the ambiguity of a plot. Somebody is a victim and somebody is a perpetrator: subject to techniques designed to undermine their apprehension of reality and, therefore, the reader’s capacity to make sense of the plot. Certainty and a reliable narrator or witness are replaced with a feeling that something is “off”, that all is not quite what it seems. Gaslighting as narrative device requires a plot resolution, which will re-establish firm distinctions between sanity and insanity, real and imaginary, villain and victim, self and other. Reading gaslighting as a text to be decoded, Honig frames the technique as a “device of disorientation” (2021, 17) that relies upon deprivation and an overwhelming shock to the senses, “until she [the victim] comes to doubt her own mind and abilities” (15). The plot resolution is a return to the senses and to an ordered and distinct sense of self.

We can learn a lot from film, media cultures, and literature that deploy gaslighting as a plot to be deciphered, as a dramatic narrative structure that carries normative scripts about sanity and insanity, rationality and irrationality and their gender normative scripts and plot resolutions. However, in my argument here, gaslighting is a capacious technique more than a technique of shock. Thus, gaslighting takes on different forms in different contexts, enhancing its capacities to convolute and multiply realities, leaving plot-resolutions open and ambiguous. Convoluting processes are characterised by infoldings, mis-directions, twists and turns,

crisscrossing, intervening, and overlapping realities, often in alien, jarring, incongruous and unfamiliar ways. Convolution also works best within the context of already existing structures of inequality and oppression, providing a purchase on racism and misogyny as technologies of affect long understood as working through the disordering of perception and reality (see Gomez 2015; Davis and Ernst 2019; Sweet 2019; Tobias and Joseph 2018). Gaslighting exists as part of an apparatus which carries technologies of the non-rational into the regulation of psychological and affective life, and is effective at modulating moral norms and assumptions that are part of the consensual real. This includes our inability to accept perfidy – being deceitful or untrustworthy – as routine and ordinary (as routine and ordinary as domestic abuse) rather than as an aberrant, exceptional phenomena.

Along with the interrelationships of counterfactual reasoning, coercion, convolution and plausible deniability, these tactics carry histories of state sponsorship that have embedded these techniques of deception as tools of non-linear warfare and as strategies to evade accountability. Plausible deniability is a central strategy of convolution that allows an abuser to deny their actions, through twisting, mining and exploiting the indeterminacy of evidence, feelings, perception, possibility, and memory, including normative assumptions of who is considered believable. It casts enough doubt to assuage claims of culpability. As Honig has cogently argued, “Believability is a structural privilege that comes with straight white manhood” (2021, 25). Plausible deniability operates within and exploits grey areas appealing to normative assumptions that are part of a shared commons. Playing with doubt and disbelief, it operates as a form of retroactive recall, which attempts to change the past by anticipating and reshaping events that have already happened. It is a technique, a close relation of perfidy, that like many other techniques that link narcissistic abuse with military and colonial forms of power, relates to a genre of psychological warfare tools that are primarily underhanded, dishonest, malicious, harmful and destructive. Their perfidious nature is located in those techniques that feign trustworthiness or authenticity by posing as innocuous when they are actually nefarious.

Gaslighting embeds perfidy within its storytelling structures, exploiting an assumption we might make that, while some people might lie, they don’t pathologically lie in order to deliberately deceive. *And* when they are caught in a lie, they surely wouldn’t blatantly deny it and blame the victim, particularly when they know it can be proven to not be the case. However, gaslighting reveals that perfidy – the normative assumption that a politician, a

partner or a parent, for example, would act in good faith in relation to those who depend upon them – is a *big lie* that is part of the “consensual real”. This big lie obscures the fact that technologies of the non-rational are routinely deployed to deliberately exploit this myth, reframing relational dynamics through an adversarial politics more akin to war and combat situations. Perfidy within the context of combat situations is defined as a deliberate and calculated violation and breach of trust. Perfidy is outlawed by Article 37 of the Geneva convention because it is seen to contravene certain moral assumptions about the integrity and rules of war. Attempts to feign and mislead combatants are considered war crimes. As Sean Watts (2014, 1) has argued,

Perfidy and treachery are among the gravest law-of-war accusations. The betrayals of good faith associated with perfidy threaten more than the immediate, tactical positions of the attacker and victim. Perfidious betrayals inflict systemic harm on the law of war as a guarantee of minimally humane interaction. Even a single instance of perfidy can permanently compromise the possibility of humanitarian exchange between belligerents.

Perfidy, as a legal and military concept, has a long history establishing the parameters for what is considered humane conduct, recognised in the UK through the term “perfidious albion”.^{xx} And yet, within the context of political and personal forms of abuse, the perfidious nature of gaslighting does not attract the same judicial attention. Gaslighting tends to work in more affective registers, carrying horror, incoherence and dissonance in relation to the breach of trust and even a disbelief that somebody might deliberately mislead *and* then deny the deception, drawing attention to the sinister undertones of pathological lying and its treacherous effects and affects. However, the grave dangers of gaslighting with its breach of even minimal customs and habits of respect and trust are barely recognised in domestic law due to the systemic failures in understanding and prosecuting non-physical abuse. Such practices are more likely to be dismissed and minimized, not achieving or attracting the same attention as the identification of isolated and discrete acts of violence. The ‘con’ in convolution reveals the deception integral to coercion and its links to forms of power that work through the modulation and convolution of realities resulting in the production of strange and torturous affects that act primarily as forms of mis-direction and suspension.

Conclusion

Although it offers but a brief introduction to the *strange affects* convolution entails, I hope this chapter introduces an area to the field of affect studies that identifies a range of feelings and experiences that largely challenge the consensual scripting of reality, reveal its strangeness, and exceed the scripts that we might typically bring to bear on them in analyses of psychological and emotional life (see Frank and Wilson 2020). Convolution includes dissonance and chaos, and profound attachments that are difficult to shake. It also includes paradoxical affective couplings:^{xxi} disbelief combined with righteous indignation, for example, twisting moral senses of injustice to congeal and confuse matters. Sianne Ngai (2005) utilizes the term, “ugly feelings” to focus on negative affects linked to “situations of passivity” or obstructed or restricted agency, thus identifying what she calls “unusually knotted or condensed emotions” that emerge in various predicaments. These are revealed through feelings such as envy, irritation, anxiety, and paranoia and so on. “That is, signs that not only render visible different registers of problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) but conjoin these problems in a distinctive manner” (3).

Ugly feelings is a good term to describe not only the troubled and troubling feelings cultivated through convolution, but the knotted emotions or feelings and the conditions of restricted agency, passivity and dissonance of convolution (including the torturous, complicated, and indeterminate nature of how abusive environments and atmospheres might feel as realities are multiplied). Although we might use the term ‘psychological’ to refer to these forms of abuse, the techniques of the non-rational central to convolution exceed psychological individualisms and have a closer, yet disavowed, relationship to many of the more public processes that have been identified as affective within affect studies, and which require closer attention. There has been a tendency in the field to overlook or obscure relations which exist in a socially displaced and foreclosed form, namely related techniques of deceit and deception that are common to different contexts of abuse, power, and control (see Boler and Davis 2020).

This is part of a much longer genealogy, which has shaped the political and social apparatuses of narcissism that are part of what I am calling “abuse assemblages” (see Blackman forthcoming). This genealogy encompasses a range of interconnected elements, practices, forms of knowledge and understanding, laws, communicative structures, policies, practices, habits, subjectivities, embodied realities, emotions, affects, atmospheres, nervous

states, forms of apprehension, and methods and techniques of duplicity and the non-rational that form the capaciousness of abuse assemblages. These elements are agile, indeterminate, can group and re-group, cross boundaries, and thresholds, and achieve certain forms of legibility, whilst in other contexts they are not recognised at all. Abuse assemblages are mobile, in-between, can telescope and transport whilst foreclosing and displacing. They appear and disappear, are in-formational, can entangle and be forced apart. They connect and cut, appear and disappear, are visible and hidden, are in movement and solidify. The term “abuse assemblages” recognises that abuse is not a single act or even set of practices. Abuse traverses many different settings, including politics, legal systems, families, sport, psychiatry and mental health systems, universities, schools, the workplace, on the streets, law enforcement agencies, the media including social media, appearing in a range of techniques of control and coercion that have become socially sanctioned and are part of normalcy and the consensual real.

Although we might think of coercion as a form of manipulation that we would seek to avoid, I hope to have demonstrated how the relationships between coercion and counterfactuals are an ordinary and routine part of framing and multiplying realities, again what I am calling *convolution*, drawing on Berlant’s (2005) reflections on disbelief as a political emotion. We are more used to focusing on the important concept of revolution as a means of examining and apprehending change processes and the intransigence and creative potential of habitual attachments (see Pedwell 2021), but convolution is a vital and overlooked aspect of modes of power which in different contexts are considered elements of PSYCHOpower (see Orr 2006). PSYCHOpower works in registers that sidestep distinctions between the rational and the irrational challenging many assumptions we make about self, the human, reason, emotion, sanity, habit, morality and more. Counterfactual reasoning has serious implications for the biopolitics of mental and physical health. A better understanding of the damage and harm counterfactual thinking and counterfactual communication structures can do will allow a greater apprehension of non-physical abuse, and the harms and injuries that are caused through these insidious forms of violence.

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Endnotes

ⁱ <https://psychcentral.com/lib/narcissistic-abuse-affects-over-158-million-people-in-the-u-s/>

ⁱⁱ <https://wnaad.com/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/08/mary-trump-on-the-end-of-uncle-donald-all-he-has-now-is-breaking-things>

^{iv} <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/04/media/donald-trump-disbelief-reliable-sources/index.html>

^v Berlant (2005).

^{vi} <https://www.channel4.com/news/plymouth-shooting-what-do-we-know-about-jake-davison>

^{vii} <https://supervalenthought.com/2016/04/28/i-went-back-2-the-violent-room-for-the-time-being/amp/>

^{viii} Berlant (2005).

^{ix} Berlant (2005).

^x <https://ayashehata85.com/narcissism-is-pure-evil/>

^{xi} <https://psychopathsandlove.com/spaceship-moments/> Also see, <https://granta.com/my-fathers-lover-was-never-the-stepdad-i-wanted-him-to-be/>

^{xii} <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/18/gaslighting-gammon-year-buzzwords-oxford-dictionaries>

^{xiii} <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woke>

^{xiv} see <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/donald-trump-is-gaslighting-america>

<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/donald-trump-still-gaslighting-america-i-really-care-do-u>

^{xv} See, for example, *TeenVogue's* article discussing necropolitics, "What is necropolitics? The Political Calculation of Life and Death" https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-is-necropolitics?fbclid=IwAR0RukvPUULAs9JWcd0zvMIL2Ts-J42Ata5qhIptnr42pCFscSrvi3_9_ss

^{xvi} <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/20/nyregion/steve-bannon-arrested-indicted.html>

^{xvii} https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/donald-trump-lies-gaslighting_n_56e95d21e4b065e2e3d7ee82?ri18n=true

^{xviii} <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confabulation>

Confabulation as a term has been identified as a pattern of disordered thinking within the context of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, for example (see Vaknin 2020). Also see, <http://samvak.tripod.com/journal75.html>.

^{xix} <https://www.facebook.com/NowThisPolitics/videos/1035913786792402/UzpfSTY0Mzg3MDIxMzoxMDE2MzEyODIxNTIxMDIxNA/>

https://twitter.com/BorisJohnson_MP/status/1253580486380748801

<https://twitter.com/ladyhaja/status/1253561734280904710>

^{xx} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perfidious_Albion

^{xxi} Not unlike Ngai's (2005) coining of the term *stuplimity*, which paradoxically couples shock with boredom.