I wish to thank Travis for organizing this roundtable, Koritha for moderating, my fellow panelists for sharing their work today, and you all for attending this session.

I should begin by saying, in response to the session title, “Critical Approaches to the Study of White Supremacy,” that I do not have a critical approach to the study of white supremacy. I have instead Adam Smith and William Hazlitt; I have John Keats and the Australian poet Henry Lawson. In one way or another they all presumed the inherent superiority of the White Man. In one way or another their presumptions outlived them. This is a talk about that outliving. It’s called “Fuck Your Feelings,” and it takes up the long eighteenth century discourse surrounding sympathy, which, I want to suggest was always a form of antipathy or hating. This is a talk about the hate that outlives.

In his 1759 Theory of Moral Sentiments (slide 2) Adam Smith describes sympathy as the spontaneous arousal of “analogous emotion” one experiences when they attend to the feelings of another, where their emotions correspond to the sentiments of the sufferer.

In my book, Brown Romantics, I discuss how Smith’s “fellow-feeling” influenced a range of Romantic authors—Keats and Shelley, for instance—for whom poetry was the privileged vehicle for transmitting sympathy from poet to reader, from reader to nation, from nation to the globe.

I focus in particular on how this model of sympathy shaped the rise of white supremacism in nineteenth-century Australia, demonstrating how the poet Henry Lawson offers a consistent politics of sympathetic identification across his career. From his early, nationalist poems of proletarian solidarity to his later pro-imperialist works, such as (slide 3) “The Song of Australia,” Lawson suggests that a fellow-feeling of racial pride will unite the white world. This is not just
white nationalism, then, but we might call a “white cosmopolitanism,” which makes visible the insidious operations of sympathetic identification: to continually discover its limits in the racialized other, even as it spreads ever outward from the feeling subject.

Moral philosophy of the long eighteenth century is fully aware of the coextension of sympathy and antipathy. We see this, for instance, when Adam Smith discusses (slide 4) “the furious behavior of the angry man,” which compels us to feel with those who may be exposed to his violence. They, the objects of his anger, become the subjects whose “fear or resentment” invite our fellow-feeling. Our antipathy toward the angry man serves as the condition for another sympathetic identification, one directed away from the angry man.

Hazlitt extends this discourse in his 1805 Essay on the Principles of Human Action, although it’s his less systematic writings of the 1820s where, in my opinion, things get really interesting. In (slide 5) “On the Pleasure of Hating” (1826) for instance, he suggests that antipathy necessarily sets off positive affect, as “the white streak in our own fortunes is brightened…by making all around it as dark as possible.” Darkness here is, of course, metaphorical, although we see this metaphor collapse into racialized xenophobia in his 1822 essay, “On going on a Journey,” where he imagines himself (slide 6) “in the deserts of Arabia,” feeling “an involuntary antipathy” to foreign manners and notions. In such a space, he tells us, one needs (slide 7) “instant fellowship and support.”

“Involuntary antipathy” on the one hand and fellow-feeling on the other; antipathy as sympathy; feeling against as feeling for—this is what moral philosophers and poets taught us two centuries ago, the gist of which is sloganized on the 2016 campaign t-shirt after which I titled this talk (slide 8): the charge against “feelings” is, of course, a feeling, an antipathy toward the overly sensitive liberal snowflake social justice warrior. This antipathy is at the same time a form of sympathy, a reaching outward, a grasping for that “instant fellowship and support” that Hazlitt describes.

A shirt, a slogan, a feeling, and a behavior, the “furious behaviour of an angry man,” here employed deliberately “to exasperate,” to infuriate, to cultivate antipathy.
But what, I want to ask by way of conclusion, what happens if we work to arrest the movement of sympathy, which, as we see in Lawson’s work, is at the same time the movement of antipathy? What happens if we halt the endlessly repeating cycle of feeling theorized by western moral philosophy and advocated by Romantic poets from England to Australia and beyond? What would such a suspension of affect look like?

I ask this question of all of us, but also of the long-eighteenth century, and it is there where I glimpse an answer. I look to Keats (slide 9) who looks to the trees in winter and the frozen brook and concludes with an uncharacteristic lack of affect: “the feel of not to feel it, where there is none to heal it, nor numbed sense to steel it, was never said in rhyme.”

A not-feeling that is also not numbness. A non-affective being that at the same time refuses to check out, to shut down, to anesthetize. Non-anesthetic being, which is also to say aesthetic being. Being in the senses as an act of refusal.

There is an almost Levinasian ethics to Keats’s aesthetic being, a refusal to colonize difference through feeling. For Levinas (slide 9) this possibility emerges in the face-to-face encounter (slide 10). It emerges from facing. And so this is what I offer, in lieu of a critical approach to the study of white supremacy, a call to face (slide 11) white supremacy, to meet its eyes (slide 11) to feel its sensory being without its affective sway—to feel without feeling.
“fuck your feelings”
sympathy, antipathy & the cosmopolitics of white supremacy

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“Whatever is the passion which arises from any object in the person principally concerned, an analogous emotion springs up, at the thought of his situation, in the breast of every attentive spectator. Our joy for the deliverance of those heroes of tragedy or romance who interest us, is as sincere as our grief for their distress, and our fellow-feeling with their misery is not more real than that with their happiness. We enter into their gratitude towards those faithful friends who did not desert them in their difficulties; and we heartily go along with their resentment against those perfidious traitors who injured, abandoned, or deceived them. In every passion of which the mind of man is susceptible, the emotions of the by-stander always correspond to what, by bringing the case home to himself, he imagines should be the sentiments of the sufferer.”

(Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759)
Henry Lawson, “The Song of Australia” (1908)

The centuries found me to nations unknown –
My people have crowned me and made me a throne;
My royal regalia is love, truth, and light –
A girl called Australia – I’ve come to my right.

Though no fields of conquest grew red at my birth,
My dead were the noblest and bravest on earth;
Their strong sons are worthy to stand with the best –
My brave Overlanders ride west of the west.

My cities are seeking the clean and the right;
My Statesmen are speaking in London to-night;
The voice of my Bushmen is heard oversea;
My army and navy are coming to me.

By all my grim headlands my flag is unfurled,
My artists and singers are charming the world;
The White world shall know its young outpost with pride;
The fame of my poets goes ever more wide.

By old tow'r and steeple of nation grown grey
The name of my people is spreading to-day;
Through all the old nations my learners go forth;
My youthful inventors are startling the north.

In spite of all Asia, and safe from her yet,
Through wide Australasia my standards I'll set;
A grand world and bright world to rise in an hour –
The Wings of the White world, the Balance of Power.

Through storm, or serenely – whate'er I go through –
God grant I be queenly! God grant I be true!
To suffer in silence, and strike at a sign,
Till all the fair islands of these seas are mine.
“There are some passions of which the expressions excite no sort of sympathy, but before we are acquainted with what gave occasion to them, serve rather to disgust and provoke us against them. The furious behaviour of an angry man is more likely to exasperate us against himself than against his enemies. As we are unacquainted with his provocation, we cannot bring his case home to ourselves, nor conceive any thing like the passions which it excites. But we plainly see what is the situation of those with whom he is angry, and to what violence they may be exposed from so enraged an adversary. We readily, therefore, sympathize with their fear or resentment, and are immediately disposed to take part against the man from whom they appear to be in so much danger.”

(Adam Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments, 1759)
Nature seems (the more we look into it) made up of antipathies: without something to hate, we should lose the very spring of thought and action. Life would turn to a stagnant pool, were it not ruffled by the jarring interests, the unruly passions, of men. The white streak in our own fortunes is brightened (or just rendered visible) by making all around it as dark as possible; so the rainbow paints its form upon the cloud.

I should not feel confident in venturing on a journey in a foreign country without a companion. I should want at intervals to hear the sound of my own language. There is an involuntary antipathy in the mind of an Englishman to foreign manners and notions that requires the assistance of social sympathy to carry it off. As the distance from home increases, this relief, which was at first a luxury, becomes a passion and an appetite. A person would almost feel stifled to find himself in the deserts of Arabia without friends and countrymen. [...] In such situations, so opposite to all one's ordinary train of ideas, one seems a species by one's-self, a limb torn off from society, unless one can meet with instant fellowship and support.

Ah! would 'twere so with many
A gentle girl and boy—
But were there ever any
Writh'd not of passed joy?

The feel of not to feel it,
When there is none to heal it
Nor numbed sense to steel it,
Was never said in rhyme.

(John Keats, “In a drear-nighted December,” 1819)