

Openings and Retrospectives

AFFECT: An Introduction

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This Retrospectives collection offers a look at what the concept of affect has contributed to anthropology in the recent past and where it might take us in the near future. Although the practice of retrospection suggests its own affective character of being a bit pensive and passive, a bit slow and solemn, I hope to dial up the intensity some. Why? Because lately I get the sense that affect is escaping our theoretical grasp. Sure, this was one of the fundamental points of the affective turn (Clough and Halley 2007): if anthropologists of emotion throughout the 1970s and 1980s had shown how feelings variously fix and stick through different compositions of language and discourse, anthropologists of affect shortly thereafter sought to show how some feelings slip, evade, and overflow capture. This proved incredibly stimulating for scholars who took this distinction between emotion and affect seriously, as it meant finding creative methods to collect evidence of environments making and shaping bodies in ways more complex than and ontologically distinct from the poetics on hand to describe it. This held especially true for those working in and sometimes against the wake of the *Writing Culture* moment who understood that while poetics may quite possibly be all that we have,

it certainly isn't all that we are. So when I say that affect is escaping our grasp, I am not only acknowledging affect's methodological challenges and its ontological spirit, so to speak, but also how both of these are inextricably entangled with its political relevance. I make this point not to suggest that an anthropology of affect should more actively engage with politics, though activists would surely find inspiration there. Rather, I make it because politics as the permutations of evolving power relations and our reflexive attempts to negotiate and manage them seems to have played an important role in creating and enabling the very world that affect theory saw most apt to address. Or, as Kathleen Stewart's contribution to this collection has it, the world that affect *proposed*.¹

One task of this collection, then, is to seek in good anthropological fashion an understanding of the rise of affect theory as an effect of the world as much as a frame for viewing it. Indicative of affect's contemporary relevance to the discipline are examples of its proliferation outside it. Consider that while we pause to reflect on theorizations of affect in anthropology, others working on affect adjacent to us in industry push confidently ahead, operationalizing their own idiosyncratic theories of affect toward the manufacturing of new regimes of technological knowledge on how bodies feel. In early 2016, for example, tech giant Apple purchased the company Emotient, a startup specializing in artificial intelligence (AI) that is developing software to more sophisticatedly interpret emotions by analyzing facial expressions. Paul Ekman, the famous psychologist of cross-cultural emotions as measured in facial expressions and associate of psychologist Silvan Tomkins (a common reference for affect theorists) has served—with mixed feelings—as an advisor to the company (Dwoskin and Rusli 2015; Winkler, Wakabayashi, and Dwoskin 2016; Paul Ekman, pers. comm.). In robotics, the Japanese mobile giant SoftBank released what it called the world's first emotional robot, Pepper, an android companion said to be able to understand and even learn human emotion by comparing the data collected from single-user interactions—a smile, an elevated pitch of the voice—with thousands of others stored in a collective AI cloud to which other SoftBank robots are connected (SoftBank Corp. 2015; Montaqim 2015). Finally, in the political world proper, services such as those offered by the company Affectiva hint at an increasing role for affect-sensitive technologies in telling us the effects candidates have on the electorate, not through the individual opinions and narratives of voters gathered through polling, but through blood-flow and heart-rate variability of bodies watching a presidential debate (Bosker 2013). Indeed, as populist anti-establishment sentiments continue to spread, I suspect that few need much convincing of affect's power in public culture

today, as feelings increasingly become the primary field for strategizing, measuring, and more generally experiencing politics with global precarity stoking anger on the right, fear on the left, and anxiety at large.

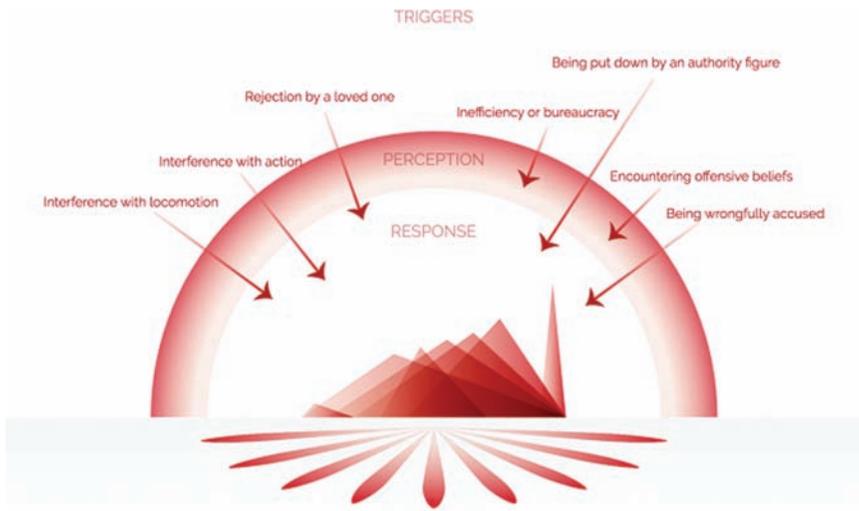


Figure 1. Triggers of anger, from the *Atlas of Emotions*, <http://atlasofemotions.org/#triggers:anger>. Figure courtesy of the Paul Ekman Group.

Even in their anecdotal nature, these examples reveal that the epistemological gap between how bodies feel and how subjects make sense of how they feel serves as an enormously productive site for intellectual, economic, technological, and most of all political investment. It is this mutually constitutive entanglement of theoretical promise and political propagation that makes what might be called the *affect-emotion gap* equally appealing for both affect theorists and those seeking to capitalize on its generative power.² Affect theory's reliance on Brian Massumi's (2002) positing of *affect* as nonconscious intensities variously activating and deactivating bodies, among other things, and of *emotion* as those feelings that fix into place through a variety of discursive practices, has asserted a seemingly irreconcilable gap between what happens in the world and what we can know of it as that happening. The impossibility of entirely accounting for one side of the affect-emotion gap via the other underscores the gap's fecundity, as active projects of knowing affect generate the potential to, in turn, transform emotion. This line of inquiry poses methods of mining feeling as fundamentally political problems: projects of knowing become projects of power as narratives seeking to close the affect-emotion gap, and the varying analytical, ethical, religious, and scientific

methods mobilized to that end, are applied to institutional and political gain. From this perspective, one can see how affect alone is not independently capable of power, but that its capacity is realized through methodological attempts to render it knowable through particular kinds of data, some more powerful than others.³

Some critics have questioned what they see as an overly polarized model of feeling that divides emotion from affect. Scholars like [Sara Ahmed \(2004\)](#), [Sianne Ngai \(2005\)](#), [Emily Martin \(2013\)](#), as well as the contributors to this collection, address this concern while offering various alternatives. Even so, the question of affect's role as an intensity that variously energizes, contradicts, deconstructs, and overwhelms the narratives through which we live nonetheless serves as a driving force in much of their work. However they approach the concept and however they proceed to debate it, theorists of affect share an affinity in the courageous claim that there is much to be learned (and much yet undiscovered) about motivation experienced not as a story—as, for example, a goal, a personal pep talk, a collective call to arms—but rather as momentum and force. Despite a tendency to sometimes underplay its sociality in emphasizing its materiality, the best accounts of affect acknowledge that its cultural underpinnings are as deep as the political stakes for understanding it are high.⁴ Precarity, violence, a passionate citizen casting a ballot, a nervous police officer shooting someone dead: this is culture in the brutal happening of it, effect as affect's long history breaking on a shore. While anthropologists have eloquently drawn attention to the interpretation and reintegration of that happening via representation after the fact—as one might, for example, trace how embodied experiences engender narratives of identity politics with themes like migration, ethnic conflict, electoral politics, or community policing—the anthropologist of affect attentive to both the coefficient and the countervailing forces of sense and story seeks more. He or she strives to show something of affect's sheer momentum—of the welling up of energies that often, despite warnings, consequences, facts, or one's best intentions, make possible and then real the nervous departure, the violent blow, the landslide vote, the trigger pulled.

The purpose of this collection, then, is not primarily to pause, to collect, or to capture memory in a moment.⁵ Again, if we have learned anything from recent theorizations of affect, it is surely that affect renders capture implausible. Instead, this collection seeks to inspire a sense of critical urgency—to activate curatorship in order to generate from the contributors multiple trajectories for reapplying theory to emerging horizons of affect's evolving arisings and appro-

priations. In this spirit, the contributors to this collection do not only reflect on affect theory but also situate its genealogy within the social world itself, reminding us that theory is *of* the world it so describes, and that affect and affect theory are here, now, for good reason.

NOTES

1. That affect is fundamentally political in its ontology as well as in the problems it poses for a method of representation, whether of subjects or of things, has been well documented. Brian Massumi (2015, vii) calls affect not a field of study but a “dimension of life . . . which directly carries a political valence.” Sara Ahmed (2004, 117) argues that affects and emotions are “crucial to the delineation of the bodies of individual subjects and the body of the nation.” Finally, Kathleen Stewart (2007), with characteristic elegance, has demonstrated how projects of knowing affect are inextricably tied to our motivations for and modes of writing about it.
2. Although many have identified this seemingly irreconcilable space between affect and emotion, the term *affect-emotion gap* owes some credit to Sara Ahmed’s discussion of René Descartes’s observation that objects seeming to inspire love or hate actually depend on how we interpret those objects as beneficial or harmful to us. For Ahmed (2004, 6), “this dependence opens up a gap in the determination of feeling: whether something is beneficial or harmful involves thought and evaluation, at the same time that it is ‘felt’ by the body.” For further discussions of the affect-emotion gap, see Martin 2013, Mazarella 2009, and White 2011.
3. I thank Valerie Olson and Kathleen Stewart for their assistance in crystallizing this point. A collective indebtedness to Michel Foucault’s (1978) formulation of power-knowledge is, I think, clear.
4. Again, I seek to draw attention to the always already politically determined underpinnings of understanding as that which is not isolated from power in a kind of ethically sympathetic *Verstehen* (Weber 1978, 4–22), but rather always enabled by and enabling power through an act of transmuting feeling into data.
5. In his discussion of different kinds of memory, Brian Massumi (2015, 61–62) distinguishes between conscious memory, which is “retrospective, going from the present to reactivate the past,” active memory, a nonconscious process of the “past actively contracted into the cut of the present instant,” and a felt memory of future, which he describes as “the quasi-causal force of tendency taking effect.” While retrospection most literally enacts conscious memory toward a kind of canonization, it can also be understood as playing the more active role of intervention, galvanizing the past for a particular direction of future action. It is in this spirit that I hope the essays in this collection will be read.

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