CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Openings and Retrospectives

WHAT MATTERS

CATHERINE LUTZ
Brown University
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9369-5344

When anthropologists turned to the concepts of emotions, sentiments, and passions in the 1980s, they found them to be thoroughly centered in psychophysical frameworks. Charles Darwin, experimental psychology, and popular discourse more generally construed emotions as features of a universal human character, as primitive, natural, simple functions, and as more dominant in the dominated and more under control in those at the rational controls of the social order. Feelings were deficits of a sort, even as a human life could not be imagined without them.

The work that began in that decade (Abu-Lughod 1986; Lutz 1988; Myers 1986; Rosaldo 1980) reshaped these concepts into devices for identifying what comes to matter to people in diverse historical, cultural, and political contexts and for reimagining human psychology in less individual and more social, relational, and political terms. The concepts have continued to energize a remarkable and rich body of ethnographic work. Affect has joined these concepts more recently in anthropology. Sometimes affect is treated as a synonym of emotion, sometimes as a kind of master category that includes specific feelings and emo-

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, Vol. 32, Issue 2, pp. 181–191, ISSN 0886-7356, online ISSN 1548-1360. *DOI: 10.14506/ca32.2.02*

tions, and sometimes as an inchoate feeling or intensity that stands in contrast to emotions, which are then defined narrowly as objects of discrete and linguistically coded meanings. While attention to affect has both revived and expanded earlier work on emotions, it has also contested the premises of this work under the sign of affect theory (or a variety of affect theories). Rather than with psychology, this new work is mostly in conversation with philosophy, cultural, literary, feminist, and queer studies. Regardless of the key category used or the tradition invoked, these overlapping academic explorations concern themselves with what *moves* and *matters* in human life. Many see the overarching question as how historical social formations and change intersect with that mattering. How, in other words, are feelings deployed in governing social orders or in motivating change? What affective qualities or frames, like *song* (justifiable anger) on a Pacific island or cruel optimism under conditions of contemporary capitalism, shape the tones, the political possibilities, or the harms of everyday life?

The initial work on emotion criticized how then current understandings and uses of the concept tacitly resurrected the distinction between emotion and reason, between the unintended and the intended, the bodily self and the immaterial mind, and the private self and public sociality. The prompt to critique these distinctions came with the rise of several intellectual and social movements that identified the politics of those binaries. Those movements included feminism, which pointed to the devaluation of a capacity culturally associated with the female; of poststructuralism more broadly, led by key feminist thinkers, which asked for a deconstruction of master categories like objectivity and the psyche and for the recognition of the co-constitution of knower and known (e.g., Haraway 1989); and of postcolonial scholarship, which suggested that we might ask, for example, not for an experimental accounting of Papuans' facial expressions but for a more fully agentic, experience-based account of Papuan (socio-emotional) lives in a global context of power relations. Additionally, from within anthropology as well as feminist and postcolonial thought emerged sharp questions about the role of ethnographers, the kinds of emotional/affective/cultural understandings they brought with them into the field, and the workings of both affect and gender in colonial and postcolonial regimes previously viewed as rationalist, enlightened, and male projects (e.g., Stoler 2005).

The result was that anthropologists relativized, historicized, and contextualized both the emotions or emotionality and the Euro-American psychological science that asserted itself as at the helm of understanding emotion (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990). Researchers who have followed in this tradition have insisted

on seeing the study of affect and/or emotion (which I use here synonymously, even though affect theory insists on distinguishing them, as I will explore below) as an aspect of the study of political and ethical life.

Some scholars then began to worry that this work treated the force of emotions as if it were lodged in impassioned words more than in animated bodies. The call for studying embodied sentiments was energized by phenomenological thinking (Csordas 1994), but, perhaps ironically, it also resonated with the neurological turn (see Gopnik 2013) in the social and natural sciences. That turn was itself animated by a long-standing technophilia, by which today's MRIs and experimental devices for measuring, for example, whether preferences require inferences, have held pride of methodological place. In a related but more productive vein, the revolution in conceptualizing nature brought two new schools of thought that in a sense decolonized the body of emotions: some biocultural approaches helped shape new conceptualizations of biology that were more open or local (Hinton 1999), while Bruno Latour and his followers undermined the standard opposition between inert matter and active humanity. This has prompted serious questions about the usefulness of standard psychobiological frames, which assume the existence of a small set of basic, hard-wired, universal emotions that may be only superficially masked by cultural forms or combined in culturally specific ways. As Tom Boellstorff and Johan Lindquist (2004, 440) note, however, "'the body' has become a near-panacea for anthropology's ills," without attention to "the danger . . . that 'the body' can become an inadvertent rallying point for a reworked methodological individualism . . . unless its fundamentally social character, so often de-emphasized in 'Western' traditions, is foregrounded instead."

Like earlier work in the anthropology of emotion, much contemporary work on emotion/affect continues to focus on discourse and practice. It looks to discourses and practices not so much as signposts to a deep interiority but rather as themselves social activities. The notion of an interior self was not so much abandoned as reconceptualized. Interior selves became objects of the imagination—not places of origin, not primitive and/or authentic, not precultural places of universality and nature that could be contrasted to a civilized cultural outside. Scholars focused on emotional life as social life. The excitement came from discovering that we could study emotions through naturally occurring dialogue and through speech that did things in the world. Emotions did not have to be portrayed as private property, but could be seen as the very stuff of social relations. The earlier focus on language expanded to include interest in the exchange of gestures

Figure 1. A public demonstration of military skill, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Photo courtesy of Elin Slavick.

and in embodiment (Tapias 2006), and even in the emotional impact or nature of objects (Navaro-Yashin 2009), but the idea of emotional communication, exchange, or transfer has remained at the center of emotion study, both theoretically and methodologically.

Within ethnographic work of the past decade, these concepts of emotion/affect have been used to illuminate the ethical sensibilities and the overall complexity evident in Yapese forms of happiness (Throop 2015), the revalorization of romantic love and pride in new marriage practices in Nepal (Ahearn 2001), and the role of depression in shoring up fragmenting kin relations under pressure of commodification and monetarization among Hmong in Laos (Postert 2012). Much valuable and complex work (e.g., Klima 2004; Muehlebach 2011) uses emotion as a route to a grounded understanding of how political and economic changes affect communities of people living together (or, sometimes, in isolation from each other [Allison 2013]). Much of that work has been comprehensively and thoughtfully reviewed in an *Annual Review* essay by Bonnie McElhinny (2010).

Some of the most exciting new research has tried to expand what anthropology can do with emotions by going beyond translating disparate emotional worlds to focus on how a shared global predicament is emotionally and differentially construed. Alan Klima (2004) gives a compelling analysis of how this

works in his examination of a recently invented Thai public ritual in which citizens gift the nation with love and cash via Buddhist intermediaries as a way to manage the country's debt and financial crisis. He avoids treating the "passion for money" (Klima 2004, 447) as either natural, as rational-choice models do, or as constructed in local and perhaps fetishistic response to a global economic system, as other, more critical cultural models do. Klima instead argues that passion varies in groups differentiated by power and that it can be ethnographically analyzed as a way to understand globalization, rather than as an end itself. The nonuniversal character of globalization can be better understood, he argues, by attending to the emotional dimensions of the creation of value and of economic trauma, which allows us to see emotional formations that "contain both play and order . . . elements of both domination and liberation . . . [and] potentials for reproducing and extending . . . global capital power processes as well as disrupting and altering them" (Klima 2004, 447). Looking at emotions allows "insight into [the] multiple, rather than singular, possibilities for the ways in which the 'logic' of money has potential to play itself out" (Klima 2004, 460).

We find other astute contributions to the study of emotion/affect in the work of those who have examined the limits—self-imposed and otherwise—of ethnographic fieldwork methods and writing style. Andrew Beatty (2010) draws attention to the problem that Lila Abu-Lughod (1993) originally identified and countered in complicated narratives about the people in Egypt with whom she, like so many ethnographers, had come into loving relationship. These personal relationships are violated first when people are turned into ethnographic typifications—say, as sisters in an affectionate relationship in a matrilineal system or as exemplars of the power of neoliberal ideology to drive life into a distorted, depressive, or anxiously consuming shape—and, second, by overtheorization. Beatty calls this *depersonalization* and sees our understanding of emotions as correspondingly drained of the life-historical specifics and significance they have. Despite his return to the individual as the essence of the affective, Beatty's essay, like Abu-Lughod's book, offers an important reminder of the value of writing about events that we watched and participated in in less reductive ways than as examples of the culturally or historically emergent. Can we write those emotional events as richly moving, capturing the way they involve people-in-relationship as well as the contradictory and ambiguous outcomes of life's experiences? As has often been noted, this approach requires intricate, microcontextual narrative writing, longer periods of fieldwork, and more linguistic dexterity.

Theory, central to advances in understanding, can nonetheless get in the way of comprehending emotion when it is valorized over narrative and character development,[1] especially when handled in the manner that John Borneman and Abdellah Hammoudi (2009, 16) call "neo-scripturalist." In the case of some recent anthropological writing using affect theory, the scripture is the written word of Brian Massumi (2002) and a handful of others. Borneman and Hammoudi (2009, 16) argue that "to equate theory making with the illustration of specific philosophical trends is a travesty of the kinds of articulation possible between High Theory and anthropology, and it suggests inattention to the range of views and open questions about human consciousness and action." As Yael Navaro-Yashin (2009) has shown, theory can be misused when one mode of thinking about emotion/affect is treated as a necessary replacement for earlier modes and theory-building itself becomes a project of the ruination of other theories.

Feminist writing continues to work against the gendered hierarchy of reason and emotion, a distinction that distorts and divides understandings of human activity. Some important feminist work presses for a view of emotions as not defective in relation to reason, as not mere subjective impulses or microsociological details, but as having as much "simultaneity, reality, and social efficacy" (Muehlebach 2011, 75) as other social or economic phenomena. The feminist critique of the positivist modeling of human life reoriented attention to the everyday emotional relations of people, including the fieldworker. The emotions, in such literature, were treated as both passionate forms of reason and concepts that could bridge those cultural and gendered dualisms.

THE RISE OF AFFECT THEORY AND ITS CRITIQUES

Over the past couple of decades, new forms of affect theory have emerged that may offer anthropology a valuable theoretical apparatus. Many now firmly distinguish emotion from affect. The former is considered a "sociolinguistically fix[ed]" (Massumi 2002, 28) experience that comes to be known as personal experience; the latter is defined as a presubjective and asocial intensity that is nonetheless not presocial. Affect theory is less interested in subjectivity understood as disembodied content and more interested in the idea that we should be looking for a presubjective but somewhat smarter body, one whose *intensities* prove important in shaping human life and which bears the *traces* of social experience without itself being social; the intent is to break down the distinction between the material and the immaterial.

Much affect theory implicitly positions itself in distinction to earlier work on the emotions, which it imagines as overly focused on language and linguistically coded meanings rather than either the body or the inchoate. It also considers earlier work to be too focused on ferreting out power dynamics (Stewart 2007). Oddly, the earlier critical feminist and anthropological work that drew attention to the flaws in standard binaries of passion and reason and body and mind is ignored, as when Michael Hardt (2007, ix) asserts in his foreword to the influential volume *The Affective Turn* that affect theory has new value "in the first place, because affects refer equally to the body and the mind; and, in the second, because they involve both reason and the passions." This passage elides anthropological and feminist work in the first clause and, contrary to the second clause, re-erects the split between cognition and emotion elsewhere in his work, where Hardt builds a distinction between cognitive and affective labor.[2]

While affect theory has taken many forms, the analytic treatment of the body by some of its leading theorists is flawed, Karyn Ball (2015, 61) has charged, by a kind of scientism that it "poach[es] from scientific paradigms [e.g., that of the psychologist Silvan Tomkins] and flirt[s] with a vitalist characterization of . . . matter." Some versions of affect theory universalize the affective impact of capitalism and other social forces, paying far less attention to the unequal social distribution of feelings of weariness, for example, although a few critique precisely this failure of attention to difference and inequality. Finally, Ruth Leys (2011) has noted the standard Cartesian account of the mind as a mental state separate from the body in the dominant strain of affect theory.

These evaluations of affect theory come from a variety of perspectives, but perhaps most important for anthropology is Emily Martin's (2013). She sees the dominant strains of affect theory in the humanities as dismissing experience (a dismissal that also dominates in contemporary psychological science) and worries about their craving for generality, as well as for the politically energizing notions of potentiality, creativity, and transformation. Martin argues that these strains of theory misunderstand affect as something that belongs to an interior life fundamentally beyond social articulation. In this, she sees affect theory's "resistance to allowing the meaning of human acts to rest on social understandings all the way down" (Martin 2013, 156). Martin (2013, 157) detects an ideology of capitalism's productivity in this resistance: Is this kind of ineffable affect, she asks, a concept intolerant of "anything that limits the kind of commensurability that our markets and systems of governance demand?" As Vincanne Adams, Michelle Murphy, and Adele Clarke (2009) argue, the turn to affect could be seen as related to the rise

of regimes of anticipation, which direct emotional energy (especially hope and fear) toward the future, legitimating a sense of urgency to act today to minimize risk, and in ways that are especially gendered (as in national security rhetoric and practice [Masco 2014]).

Much affect theory appears to reproduce and celebrate the analytic utility of something akin to the dualism that feminism and other early work in anthropology first critiqued: strong traces of the opposition between body and mind can be found in the distinction between embodied intensity and discursive content, even as that body, so often made the realm of women and people of color, is at least rehabilitated as more social, sensual, and complex than it was in the earlier schemas. Some of the recent literature on affect rehearses work done in the 1980s. I see this as necessary, given that the projects are carried out with new ethnographic material and in a changing world, and because the study of emotion must continue to struggle against an intellectual heritage—embedded in words, things, and relations of power—that requires intense effort to withstand or think without. The study of emotion/affect has still not fully escaped the straitjackets of reason versus unreason, civilized versus primitive, (monadic) self versus society.

DIRECTIONS FOR STUDYING WHAT MATTERS

The unique insights that ethnographic fieldwork provides would advance theory-building in the study of affect by thickening the crucial but neglected mid-range below abstract theories about the nature of the human and the nature of nature and closer to the history of the present. We can take from affect theory the healthy reminder that human life is messier and more resistant to our efforts to make sense of it as social analysts than we might think, and we might consider returning to the strengths of earlier moments by writing rich narratives based in field conversation, observation, and reflexive self-critique. The longer history of anthropological research on emotions, especially that inspired by feminism, allows us to see emotions as labor whose value can be extracted or erased by the workings of power and legitimation. We could focus more on the work that emotion and emotions do as forms of sociality and embodied experience (Jones 2004; Martin 2013). Such mid-range projects might involve studying the emotional/affective aspects of reproductive labor, especially as it has become increasingly commodified (Constable 2009). Those insights are to be found in the silences, the dialogues and the monologues, the practices (from political meetings to singing competitions to paid and unpaid caregiving across generations) as well as the

materialities and objects of suffering and a variety of embodied human relationships.

Mid-range contributions to our understanding of emotions are diverse in current anthropology. They include attunement to cross-cultural differences through a singular case, such as when C. Jason Throop (2015, 47) concludes from fieldwork in Yap that we might appreciate that positive emotions like happiness or joy are "seldom experienced without some degree of ambivalence, ambiguity, and instability," or that suffering is often linked to hope in social discourse. They include insights into the nature of post-Fordist compassion as the form of affective labor to which citizens of many states are being summoned as so-called real work disappears (Muehlebach 2011). And they include research that alerts ethnographers working in current and former war zones to attend to the way people live with war's physical ruins and remnants and how these shape the social/emotional relations of everyday life, as Yael Navaro-Yashin (2009) does in her research on Cyprus.

What has the field of anthropology gained by a turn to the study of affective life? It has gained ways of talking about personhood as genuinely relational or transpersonal, beyond even what psychoanalytic theory offered. It has been able to track the ways that power is capillary in more aspects of sociality and object worlds than formerly recognized. It has produced a more consistent way to see the politics and moralities of everyday life as powerfully organized (and disorganized) through emotion discourses. And it has given new insight into the ways the institutions of knowledge production have reinforced a bifurcated self divided between reason and emotion along gender lines. Further, it has led us to think more about fieldwork itself as a complex emotional activity, in an extended relational and political sense. Finally, an orientation toward the affective or emotional has directed us to focus more intensely on what matters to the communities we study, what moves them through the day, and thus what makes the emergent material and social worlds in which we are immersed.

NOTES

1. The gendering of theory has also set up a hierarchy of value that has this result (Lutz 1995).
2. See Liljeström 2016 on this erasure, in the context of an overview of the varieties of feminist affect theory.

REFERENCES

Abu-Lughod, Lila
1986 *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
1993 *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Adams, Vincanne, Michelle Murphy, and Adele E. Clarke
2009 "Anticipation: Technoscience, Life, Affect, Temporality." *Subjectivity* 28, no. 1: 246–65. https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2009.18.

Ahearn, Laura
2001 *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change in Nepal*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Allison, Anne
2013 *Precarious Japan*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Ball, Karyn
2015 "Losing Steam After Marx and Freud: On Entropy as the Horizon of the Community to Come." *Angelaki* 20, no. 3: 55–78. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725x.2015.1065124.

Beatty, Andrew
2010 "How Did it Feel for You? Emotion, Narrative, and the Limits of Ethnography." *American Anthropologist* 112, no. 3: 430–43. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1433.2010.01250.x.

Boellstorff, Tom, and Johan Lindquist
2004 "Bodies of Emotion: Rethinking Culture and Emotion through Southeast Asia." *Ethnos* 69, no. 4: 437–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/0014184042000302290.

Borneman, John, and Abdellah Hammoudi, eds.
2009 *Being There: The Fieldwork Encounter and the Making of Truth*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Constable, Nicole
2009 "The Commodification of Intimacy: Marriage, Sex, and Reproductive Labor." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 38: 49–64. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.37.081407.085133.

Csordas, Thomas J., ed.
1994 *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Gopnik, Adam
2013 "Mindless." *New Yorker,* September 9. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/09/mindless.

Haraway, Donna
1989 *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. New York: Routledge.

Hardt, Michael
2007 "Foreword: What Affects are Good For." In *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, edited by Patricia Ticiento Clough, with Jean Halley, ix–xiii. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Hinton, Alexander Laban, ed.
1999 *Biocultural Approaches to Emotion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Jones, Carla
2004 "Whose Stress? Emotion Work in Middle-Class Javanese Homes." *Ethnos* 69, no. 4: 509–528. https://doi.org/10.1080/0014184042000302326.

Klima, Alan
2004 "Thai Love Thai: Financing Emotion in Post-Crash Thailand." *Ethnos* 69, no. 4: 445–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/0014184042000302335.

Leys, Ruth
2011 "The Turn to Affect: A Critique." *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3: 434–72. https://doi.org/10.1086/659353.

Liljeström, Marianne
2016 "Affect." In *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, edited by Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth, 16–38. New York: Oxford University Press.
Luhrmann, Tanya M.
2006 "Subjectivity." *Anthropological Theory* 6, no. 3: 345–61. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499606066892.
Lutz, Catherine A.
1988 *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll and Their Challenge to Western Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
1995 "The Gender of Theory." In *Women Writing Culture*, edited by Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, 249–66. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Lutz, Catherine A., and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds.
1990 *Language and the Politics of Emotion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Martin, Emily
2013 "The Potentiality of Ethnography and the Limits of Affect Theory." *Current Anthropology* 54, S7: S149–58. https://doi.org/10.1086/670388.
Masco, Joseph
2014 *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
Massumi, Brian
2002 *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
McElhinny, Bonnie
2010 "The Audacity of Affect: Gender, Race, and History in Linguistic Accounts of Legitimacy and Belonging." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39: 309–328. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-091908-164358.
Muehlebach, Andrea
2011 "On Affective Labor in Post-Fordist Italy." *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 1: 59–82. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01080.x.
Myers, Fred R.
1986 *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place, and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
Navaro-Yashin, Yael
2009 "Affective Space, Melancholic Objects: Ruination and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 1: 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2008.01527.x.
Postert, Christian
2012 "Emotion in Exchange: Situating Hmong Depressed Mood in Social Context." *Ethos* 40, no. 4: 453–75. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1352.2012.01270.x.
Rosaldo, Michelle Z.
1980 *Knowledge and Passion: Ilongot Notions of Self and Social Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Stewart, Kathleen
2007 *Ordinary Affects*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
Stoler, Ann Laura
2005 "Affective States." In *A Companion to the Anthropology of Politics*, edited by David Nugent and Joan Vincent, 4–20. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.
Tapias, Maria
2006 "Emotions and the Intergenerational Embodiment of Social Suffering in Rural Bolivia." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 20, no. 3: 399–415. https://doi.org/10.1525/maq.2006.20.3.399.
Throop, C. Jason
2015 "Ambivalent Happiness and Virtuous Suffering." *HAU* 5, no. 3: 45–68. https://doi.org/10.14318/hau5.3.004.