

Openings and Retrospectives

DIVERSIFYING AFFECT

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The conceptualization of affect, even as a notion that invokes the non- or preconceptual, has arrived with genealogies. These are scholarly genealogies, overwhelmingly inspired by Western philosophies, especially anti-Enlightenment ones following Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari (Anderson and Harrison 2010; Connolly 2002; Massumi 2002; Thrift 2008). The emergence of the “affective turn” (Clough and Halley 2007) along the lines of this patriliney in the humanities and social sciences has been questioned by feminist geographers of the emotions, who have drawn attention to the feminist scholarly genealogy that predates recent theorizations of affect (see Boler and Zembylas 2016). But in spite of this critique, our toolboxes for the study and imagination of affect still remain predominantly Western in their crafting. Many recent engagements with affect theory have therefore inadvertently been repetitive, reiterating by now well-rehearsed analyses about the distinction between affect and the emotions, referring to the particularly nondiscursive qualities of the former and the linguistic embedment of the latter. It is worrisome when evocations of a theoretical notion close down on themselves.

In this article, I would like to invite more diverse, particularly non-Western inspirations for affect. Bracketing, for the moment, Western scholarly imaginaries of affect, as well as their genealogies, I would like to ask: What resonates as affect in the different geographies that we study as anthropologists? And what can be learned from these other evocations of affect, as well as their different ways of being understood in their specific historical conjunctures? Would it be pertinent to study these as ontologies of affect?

Rather than holding up multiple ontologies against Western epistemology (see [Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007](#); [Holbraad 2012](#); [Viveiros de Castro 2012](#)) or pretending that one could ever really step out of a historical embedment in Western concepts and their theorizations in a postcolonial world (see [Chakrabarty 2000](#)), my aim in pointing toward other inspirations for affect is to potentially break apart scholarly genealogies of affect that have become rather entrenched. After all, work on affect was supposed to engender a potentiality for the imagination, not to impoverish or limit it.

It is in this spirit that I invite here more diverse imaginations for affect. That is, if we can no longer classify anything as exclusively non-Western (taking colonialism and its enduring aftermath into account), I am interested in what resonates as akin to affect in other geographies and historical conjunctures that I will only heuristically call *non-Western*.¹ How can we trace and compose putatively non-Western inspirations for affect, ones that do not regurgitate by now well-established comprehensions of it? I think such a project would require another sort of excavation.

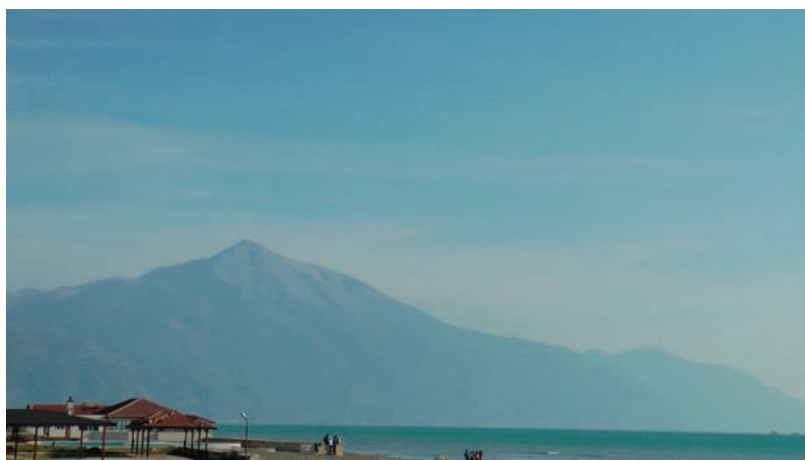


Figure 1. The shadow of Syria over the Turkish coast, summer 2015. Photo by Yael Navaro.

My recent fieldwork in Antakya, Turkey, a city that has stood in the shadow of the Syrian war for the past five years, has pushed me to draw out a different imaginary for affect. This is not about finding a culturally distinct, local term for affect, as would have been the project of cultural anthropologists of the emotions (Rosaldo 1980; Myers 1991). Nor is it similar to the ontological project of finding the truth in the radically *alter* existence of non-Western societies (Holbraad 2012). Both of the above projects have a tendency to sidetrack or underinterpret the historical conjunctures and political situations that engender new social forms, locating difference in disassociation or insularity. I take my cue neither from their synchronic approach nor from their self-purported essentialism,² but from their insistence on looking out for difference. It is in that spirit that I suggest that we attempt to actively diversify the inspirations for affect in ethnography.

I have been doing fieldwork in a city in southern Turkey one hour's drive from Aleppo, on the other side of the border, during one of history's most cataclysmic wars. In this radical shifting of grounds, I have studied affect not in the mass political gatherings, either pro- or anti-government, or in any other such emergent social form reflecting or reacting to the Syrian war, but in interstices—in the gaps, creaks, and crevices not entirely smothered by the bombastic politics at play nor flattened by the conflicting governmentalities in the region. What has been most curious to observe and experience in Antakya at this height of political tension—and during the incitements to divide along sectarian lines—is the social life that has endured in its mundanity, against all odds, reproducing bonds of reciprocity and affection across the local communities and engendering new ones with Syrian refugees. I study affect in these forms of sociality that have accentuated intimacy in relations across politically differentiated communities in the shadow of the war, attempting to contain tension while at the same time harboring it. The enduring attachments across the local communities of Antakya and the newly forged ones with Syrian refugees within fissures deepened through the conflict is where I have focused in particular. None of the political discourses currently thrown about in this earth-shattering conflict have quite been able to prevent or entirely extinguish the minute forms of generosity, affection, hospitality, and intimacy at play in the making of sociality across members of different communities. I observe these forms of cross-communitarian affect in the vicinity of war through several interconnected terms that have emerged from my fieldwork: the *remnant*, the *serendipitous*, and the *transcendent*—notions that I believe could potentially expand affect studies.

The remnant, in this scene of social relations, is that which endures in the form of attachments, intimacy, sociality out of habit, and interdependence across the local communities of Antakya now being pitted against one another along sectarian lines as an effect of the Syrian war, its ways of circulating in public discourse, and the Turkish state's divisive incitements. As a notion that emerges from the field, I conceptualize the remnant as that in affective social relations which is residually left over against all odds, resisting attempts to politically divide and regenerating itself in new encounters, at times with strangers. The remnant, in the way I construe it here as a residual, relational affect with the potential for re-creation, is like a bud that shoots again in fissures that have been carved on purpose.

The serendipitous is a related concept, referring to the unexpected, out-of-the-blue element in sociality that brings about unanticipated affects of empathy, generosity, and hospitality. Unlike the remnant, which refers to the memory of past social forms being reproduced or re-engendered, the serendipitous belongs to the temporal present. The serendipitous is coincidental and relies on the generation of unexpected affects of intimacy and attachment between strangers, *sui generis*, across and against augmenting political divides. It is more about social creativity than social reproduction. And it may escape or transcend political pressures and apparent hegemonies. It is in the serendipitous that I have observed forms of unforeseen encounter between Syrian refugees and Turkish citizens generating unexpected affections that have the power to create—even under bombastic conflict—new social forms such as friendship, romantic love, or fictive kinship.

Finally, the transcendent is yet another frame of affect I have observed as being accentuated at this historical conjuncture close to the Turkish–Syrian border at the height of war. Through this frame, I refer to forms of spiritual experience that have been pronounced at this time of elevated conflict and political tension. Both local Antakya residents and Syrian refugees have been referring to special spiritual experiences, sightings of divine light descending from the sky, dream visualizations of revered saints, and miraculous occurrences taking place in an emphasized manner since the start of war in Syria and related political tensions in Turkey. Communities gather to site the transcendent and mark the material space of its emergence. The transcendent, too, appears *sui generis*, against the grain, in interstices. It represents forms of spiritual affect emerging in crevices in spite of every attempt to curb or extinguish them.

Each of the three frames of affect that I have drawn out have emerged from my fieldwork in Antakya. As I conceptualize them here, they are suggestive of the sorts of nongenealogical imagination that anthropological fieldwork can engender. For although our fieldwork requires training in Western institutions (departments of social and cultural anthropology) and an immersion in their associated baggages of theory, the best of fieldwork is supposed to bring out surprise elements, frames, and concepts previously unconsidered in the anthropological heritage. It is unfortunate, therefore, that affect studies should have been so associated with theory when, if approached through fieldwork, more innovative frames emerge. I therefore here propose that we more actively embrace the fieldwork dimension of our work in further crafting affect studies; it is only through fieldwork that unexpected frames for the study of affect could possibly emerge, inspiring conceptualizations that carry us beyond now well-established theoretical patrilinies.

The three frames for affect that I have here brought out of my own fieldwork stress precisely this element of surprise. Looking out for “the unexpected” (see [Strathern 2005](#)) as a social form encourages us to perceive that which was previously uncaptured in scholarly framings, as well as that which survives against all odds and against the grain under extreme political pressures. The remnant, the serendipitous, and the transcendent that I have begun to unfold here as frames of affect are concepts that have emerged from my fieldwork precisely in that spirit. I therefore suggest that rather than reproducing imaginaries of affect descending down the genealogical scholarly line, ethnographic work on affect should push our observations far beyond, diversifying affect studies and crafting new trajectories for the scholarly imagination.

NOTES

1. See [Candea 2016](#) on the constructive uses of heuristics.
2. See [Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007](#) on radical essentialism.

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