

# An Archive for Affect Theory

R U S S L E O

Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke University Press, 2010. 416 pp.

“There is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be” (3): Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth insist on this point, and *The Affect Theory Reader* demonstrates its critical import in contemporary debates concerning that most slippery term, “affect.” Seigworth and Gregg, under the artfully provocative heading “An Inventory of Shimmers,” attend in brief to a wide variety of theories of affect—from phenomenology, psychoanalysis, psychology, and post-Cartesian philosophies (read: Spinozism) to Marxism, feminism, science and technology studies, queer studies, and various histories of emotion. Their brief survey is by no means exhaustive, nor is it meant to be. Rather, from the beginning, the editors set out to complicate the concept “affect” across numerous contemporary permutations, where it takes various shapes:

as excess, as autonomous, as impersonal, as the ineffable, as the ongoingness of process, as pedagogic-aesthetic, as virtual, as shareable (mimetic), as sticky, as collective, as contingency, as threshold or conversion point, as immanence of potential (futuraity), as the open, as a vibrant incoherence that circulates about zones of cliché and convention, as the gathering place of accumulative dispositions (9).

Their inventory doubles as a litany, not without its patron saint: Baruch Spinoza. Indeed, the often-cited phrase from Spinoza’s *Ethics* (Book III, Proposition 2, Scholium) serves as a maxim for this cadre of writers: “nobody as yet has determined the limits of the body’s capabilities: that is, nobody as yet has learned from experience what the body can and cannot do” (Spinoza 280). *The Affect Theory Reader*, a collection of original essays, answers Spinoza’s challenge with great aplomb; the focus on affect enables contributors to probe the limits and capacities of situations, to produce more dynamic descriptions and prognoses, freed from the constraints of subjective and identitarian politics.

In this sense, *The Affect Theory Reader* registers the critical highlights of the recent

“affective turn.” It serves as an apt companion to book-length studies by several key contributors—namely, Brian Massumi’s *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), Lauren Berlant’s *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008), Sara Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), and Patricia Ticineto Clough’s earlier edited collection *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (with Jean Halley, 2007). Yet, despite the increase in the number of publications dealing specifically with affect in the past fifteen years, there has been no single work of this kind to treat the cross-disciplinary purchase of affect. The great value of *The Affect Theory Reader* is its ambition to bring together the most vocal proponents of this declaredly-new field in order to showcase scholarship that continues to negotiate the provinces and definitions of affect, but which takes these debates as a crucible for politics and philosophy.

Many essays in the collection use affect and the theoretical tools afforded by the affective turn to develop approaches to experience: questioning both the meaning of experience and the ways it might remain, or cease to be, a useful category of anthropological investigation. Specific affects are indices of experience, attempting to describe the sense of the world in detail, with sharper attention to the rich lived realities of seemingly sterile concepts. Ahmed, in “Happy Objects,” defines affect as “what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connections between ideas, values, and objects”—a determination which confronts “the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near” (29, 30). In “Writing Shame,” Elspeth Probyn praises Primo Levi’s writing on shame insofar as he “challenges the current practice of writing about affects and emotion in a generalized and abstract way” (89); here, in contrast, the affect of shame enables a more thorough and nuanced approach to experience and subjectivity.

For these writers, following Spinoza, affect points to the priority of experience, the extent to which concepts like identity and person take and lose shape in experience. Affect is impersonal, the very *stuff* of experience; it is prior to both subjectivity and objectivity. This is Berlant’s focus in “Cruel Optimism,” where affect mediates between identity and desire, enabling a more pointed understanding of the labor of subjectivity, the tiring work of “life-building” (112). Contributors seem to write in concert, coming together to wrest affect studies from abstraction, to situate affect and to demonstrate the utility of affect studies for precise investigation and (to borrow a phrase from an earlier milieu) thick description. In “Eff the Ineffable: Affect, Somatic Management, and Mental Health Service Users,” Steven D. Brown and Ian Tucker pursue this further, taking the heralds of the affective turn to task for their inability to address the demands of social scientists. Against such theorists as Gilles Deleuze and Massumi (and, by extension, most of their fellow contributors), Brown

and Tucker affirm a determination of affect that is more interested in subjectivity and its vicissitudes than in some abstract “experience beyond subjectivity” (249).

*The Affect Theory Reader* is in these respects a very valuable resource: it presents essays in conversation in such a way as to provoke further discussion, to hone various definitions and approaches to affect. Gregg and Seigworth frame the conversations in such a way as to draw out the differences between approaches, and their substantial introduction serves as an apt survey of current work. But there are more similarities across the essays than the *Reader* might immediately lead one to believe. While Gregg and Seigworth have assembled an outstanding collection of essays, the “Reader” in the title *Affect Theory Reader* is potentially misleading. Generally, one expects a reader to introduce a field and to survey current work—in this case, across disciplines. Here, we encounter a limited sample of conversations, mostly taking shape around a select group of thinkers: Spinoza, Deleuze, Massumi, Félix Guattari, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Silvan Tomkins. Massumi, for instance, contributes more than an essay to *The Affect Theory Reader*. His name and work are ubiquitous across the collection, particularly the announcement in his *Parables for the Virtual* that “Affect, like thought or reflection, could be extended to any or every level [of investigation], providing that the uniqueness of its functioning on that level is taken into account” (Massumi 37). Massumi heralds, after Spinoza, the autonomy of affect. This is neither a fault nor a liability—on the contrary, this particular approach to affect reflects the most advanced work done in the nascent field of affect theory, or affect studies.

Save for Brown and Tucker (and, for a brief moment, Lawrence Grossberg, to whom I turn momentarily), *The Affect Theory Reader* registers a consensus. The majority of contributors follow Massumi and trace affect as a force in a political economy of bodies and becomings, affirming the degree to which “thought’s approach cannot be phenomenological [but] must be unabashedly metaphysical” (66). This is Clough’s ambit in “The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine, and Bodies,” where Massumi’s chief interlocutors—Spinoza, Deleuze, Guattari, and Henri Bergson, all of whom recognize the economy of affect as a metaphysics—inform her detailed historical treatment of biopolitics through an invigorating study of the affective dimensions of the passage from formal to real subsumption in late capitalism. This is quite exciting, a real advancement in the use of affect in contemporary Marxism and political economy, and both Clough and the editors do well to serve the reader with essays of this quality and ingenuity. It is worth reminding the reader, however, that her work is as much in conversation with the archive of concepts and authors showcased in *The Affect Theory Reader* as it is with Marxist and feminist studies of affect that stand outside of the scope of the collection—for instance, Michael Perelman’s *The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation* (2000), J. K. Gibson-Graham’s *Postcapitalist Politics* (2006), Ann Cvetkovich’s *An*

*Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003),<sup>1</sup> or, more generally, the work of Raymond Williams, Michèle Barrett, and a lost generation of theorists which Lawrence Grossberg addresses in the splendid interview “Affect’s Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual.”<sup>2</sup> *The Affect Theory Reader*, however excellent, is less a survey of approaches and definitions as it is a concentrated effort, presenting a particular approach to affect, albeit from a number of standpoints. While I personally find the collection stronger for this focus, whether or not this is ultimately effective depends upon the reader’s expectations and the degree to which one is aware of the larger set of conversations on affect occurring across disciplines, many of which are not represented in the present collection.

Returning to the text itself, many contributors follow Spinoza/Massumi but nevertheless emphasize, first, that “affect” belongs to aesthetics and, second, how aesthetics, in turn, serves as a point of contact between the inextricable fields of politics and everyday life. Ben Highmore, in “Bitter After Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics,” poses taste and its sensory grammars as a field of experiment and investigation at the level of the everyday. In this sense, affect, aligned with taste and sensation, serves to refocus our attention on the everyday as a crucible of politics rather than a sphere of application, where pure politics is merely lived. Nigel Thrift covers similar territory, but with respect to style and glamour, in “Understanding the Material Practices of Grammar.” Bertelsen and Murphie also delve into aesthetic territory in their treatment of affect in the thought of Guattari, for whom affects compose and mobilize situations in aesthetic/artistic terms. Anna Gibbs, in “After Affect: Sympathy, Synchrony, and Mimetic Communication,” offers a tour of psychological and phenomenological approaches to facial recognition in an effort to develop a robust theory of affect and mimesis. In her focus on mimesis, Gibbs attends to subjectivity and affect in a manner recalling Deleuze and Massumi while at the same time importing psychological explanations of affect regulation and various ways of knowing (recalling the work of Silvan Tomkins). This is directly related to Megan Watkins’ project in “Desiring Recognition, Accumulating Affect,” where recognition and affect are dually important to pedagogy. Investments in pedagogy and aesthetics also inform Kathleen Stewart’s poetic contribution, “Worlding Refrains,” an extension of her earlier anthropological experiment, the challenging and captivating *Ordinary Affects* (2007). Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie, in “An Ethics of Everyday

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Stewart’s “Worlding Refrains” does enter into implicit conversation with Cvetkovich’s wonderful book, but one wishes for a more direct engagement with *An Archive of Feelings* by many of the other contributors.

<sup>2</sup> This other history of affect informs his own important collection *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (edited with Cary Nelson, 1988).

Infinites and Powers: Félix Guattari on Affect and the Refrain,” trace affects as impersonal or “pre-personal” forces, as elements which compose political situations prior to any discrete science of “politics.” The 2001 *Tampa* incident, where the Norwegian freighter *MV Tampa*, carrying Indonesians seeking asylum in Australia, was refused permission to enter the harbor, is exemplary. In a manner that recalls the work of Jacques Rancière (particularly his determination of aesthetics, “at the core of politics,” as the “distribution of the sensible” [Rancière 13]) as much as Guattari, Bertelsen and Murphie illustrate how affects, as abstract and impersonal forces, composed a political milieu wherein what was made visible—the red boat on the horizon—had a more immediate effect on viewers than any political abstraction (nation, belonging, citizenship, etc.). It was the work of the Howard government “to turn the powerful indetermination of affect to its advantage” (157). Ben Anderson takes a similar approach to affect and politics in his essay “Modulating the Excess of Affect: Morale in a State of ‘Total War,’” where forms or regimes of power traffic in affects, distributing intensities and impersonal qualities. Affect is here, declaredly, a form of excess—although it is certainly fair to ask, “In excess of what?”

Even when *The Affect Theory Reader* offers rich descriptions of various situations, politics, and works of art, we are still compelled to ask: Why affect? Why now? Gregg and Seigworth attempt to answer this as they frame the collection in such a way as to justify the new and exciting methods and experiments therein. They present the distinctions and dissensions between proponents of the affective turn, but what sits at the heart of the affect theory (and perhaps at the heart of the *Reader*) is a question regarding the efficacy and reach for said turn. What does an investigation of affect enable that a history of emotions does not? How is affect distinct from emotion, if at all? We have here an ontological rather than a cultural turn, yes, but how are the conclusions *really* any different? The limits of these essays—the challenges and provocations, as well as the difficulties and vagaries—tell us much about the problems of contemporary scholarship on affect, about the questions which these essays often eschew. In what strikes me as the most exciting and valuable contribution to *The Affect Theory Reader*, the interview “Affect’s Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual,” Grossberg says as much. We find here a subversive kernel, a comment on the affective turn which translates us back several generations, to the milieu of cultural studies and communications theory *à la* Marshall McLuhan: “Despite constant denials, I can’t escape the feeling that Brian Massumi’s recent work ... on the color-coding of terror alerts reduplicates a kind of old-fashioned media-effects model. ... Affect then becomes a magical way of bringing in the body” (316). Here a real dissent emerges, a concern that is seldom addressed in the varieties of writing on affect. Grossberg gives an oral history of affect studies, periodically pointing to the problematic assumptions undergirding current work in the field. His is the only substantive dissent from Massumi in the collection, however cautious his language. Grossberg,

with the editors, seems to pose the important question, “Why affect?” and, more pressing, the question that challenges *The Affect Theory Reader*, “Why is *this* tradition of scholarship, stretching from Spinoza forward to Massumi via Deleuze, *the* archive for affect theory?”

It is instructive to remember that other scholars have posed the same question, with much less sympathy for the nascent project of affect theory or the celebrated affective turn. Clare Hemmings, for instance, in her 2005 article “Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn,” takes proleptic aim at the assumptions which seem to buttress *The Affect Theory Reader*, or at least its chief intelligences, Spinoza and Massumi (and, although to a lesser extent, Tomkins and Sedgwick):

While many will concur with Massumi’s scepticism of quantitative research in its inability to attend to the particular, we are left with a riddle-like description of affect as something scientists can detect the loss of (in the anomaly), social scientists and cultural critics cannot interpret, but philosophers can imagine ... How then can we engage affect in light of the critical projects we are engaged in, or are we to abandon the social sciences entirely? In fact, both Massumi and Sedgwick are advocating a new academic attitude rather than a new method, an attitude or faith in something other than the social and cultural, a faith in the wonders that might emerge if we were not so attached to pragmatic negativity (Hemmings 563).

For Hemmings and a slew of skeptical readers, the affective turn ultimately risks obscuring politics and the investments of earlier generations of scholars—namely, feminism and Marxism (at least insofar as Marxism was part of a cultural studies purview). At best, the affective turn entails “a new academic attitude”; at worst, a mysticism, an apophaticism, a negative theology. With contributors Brown and Tucker, Hemmings seems to say “Eff the Ineffable,” or, at least, take the ontological thrust of affect theory, and the autonomy of affect, for what it is worth—an experiment and no more. An important caveat, Hemmings challenges us to read *The Affect Theory Reader* for what it obscures as well as what it makes clear, for the efficacy of the affective turn as well as its mere existence. As Nigel Thrift puts it, “The affective moment has passed in that it is no longer enough to observe that affect is important” (289). The next questions, which should guide our engagement with *Reader*, are “Why?” and “How?”

In the spirit of these questions, and despite the declared impossibility of any single, generalizable theory of affect, *The Affect Theory Reader* does present a controlled sample of cross-disciplinary work on the subject. Save for several bibliographical references and a handful of exempla, psychoanalysis is virtually absent from the collec-

tion—a frustrating lacuna given its rich archive of affects and theories of affect, from Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer (at the dawn of psychoanalysis) to André Green, Jacques Lacan, Adam Phillips, and Paul Verhaeghe. Psychology and psychiatry receive only marginally more attention. In 1995 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank proposed the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins as an alternative to the psychoanalytic preoccupations and pieties of their contemporaries; here, in *The Affect Theory Reader*, Tomkins is cited more often than Freud and with more authority on affects and their vicissitudes. While this is not necessarily wrong (I am certainly not arguing here for a particular mode or pedigree of psychoanalysis) it would be helpful to see how we arrived at this point. On this the editors and contributors alike are silent, eschewing Sedgwick and Frank’s thoughtful and stimulating question, “What does it mean to fall in love with a writer?” as well as their call to read Tomkins with Freud, to curate new histories and archives of affect as well as new applications (Sedgwick and Frank 23).

Where the absence of psychoanalysis is puzzling, the absence of *feminist* psychoanalysis from the collection deserves a harder look. Take, for instance, Julia Kristeva; both *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980) and *Tales of Love* (1983) oriented the work of two generations of scholars, laying bare the intersections between affect, feminist theory and political praxis.<sup>3</sup> And just as feminist thinkers like Kristeva disappear from the archive of affect theory, so do their interlocutors. Consider the important chapter from *Tales of Love* on Bernard of Clairvaux (“Ego Affectus Est. Bernard of Clairvaux: Affect, Desire, Love”), where Kristeva mines nonmodern archives to complicate contemporary assumptions about affects and their provinces (Kristeva, 151-169). Bernard’s writing affords Kristeva insight into later, psychoanalytic distinctions between love and desire and, in turn, enables a more thorough historical approach to modern subjectivity via nonmodern approaches to affect. There is no such work in *The Affect Theory Reader*. Not only are feminist psychoanalysis and feminism underrepresented, the collection is distinctly presentist. Except for the frequent citation of Spinoza, there is scarcely a reference to any writer or event prior to the twentieth century. This risks losing sight of the development of alternative theories and approaches to affect that have marked much of Western and Eastern—indeed, World—philosophy, aesthetics (in the broadest sense), religion, and therapeutic discourses.

Again, this is only a critique of *The Affect Studies Reader* insofar as one might expect a comprehensive and exhaustive survey of approaches to and definitions of affect and affect theory—an impossible task, both practically and theoretically.

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<sup>3</sup> One might say the same about Luce Irigaray (also absent) who, among other philosophers, figures prominently across Elizabeth Grosz’s feminist ontological determinations of affect—among the most exciting work emerging from the recent “affective turn.”

Gregg and Seigworth have assembled an impressive collection of essays and, in their introduction, certainly recognize the limits and scope of such a project. The work is impressive and will certainly catalyze further development in affect theory across disciplines. My hope is that it will also generate due responses from the exurbs and catacombs of affect theory, calling for revised histories of affect and its cross-disciplinary purchase—and, ultimately, making good on Gregg and Seigworth’s insightful promise that affect will never be reduced to a single narrative, archive, or theory, the auto-critical promise that marks the highest quality of *The Affect Theory Reader*.

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Calvin and Baruch Spinoza as well as the work of tragedians William Shakespeare, John Milton, and Fulke Greville, Leo traces the prehistory of Spinoza's autonomous theory of affect, an approach that endures to our contemporary occasion in a number of permutations. Leo is also currently at work on a series of articles on affect and its purchase in contemporary Marxist and psychoanalytic debates.