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Clare Hemmings

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Cultural theory and the ontological turn

This article interrogates the contemporary emergence of affect as critical object and perspective through which to understand the social world and our place within it. Emphasising the unexpected, the singular or the quirky over the generally applicable, the turn to affect builds on important work in cultural studies on the pitfalls of writing the body out of theory. More importantly for this article, the contemporary interest in affect evidences a dissatisfaction with poststructuralist approaches to power, framed as hegemonic in their negativity and insistence of social structures rather than interpersonal relationships as formative of the subject. The article focuses on the recent contributions of Brian Massumi and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in particular, unpacking their celebration of the difference that affect makes. The author's critique of the affective turn focuses on both the illusion of choice that it offers the cultural critic, and its rewriting of the recent history of cultural theory to position affect as 'the new cutting edge'. While affect may constitute a valuable critical focus in context, it frequently emerges through a circular logic designed to persuade 'paranoid theorists' into a more productive frame of mind – for who would not prefer affective freedom to social determinism? Yet it remains unclear what role affect may have once this rhetoric has worked its persuasive magic. In addition, and more worryingly, affective rewriting flattens out poststructuralist inquiry by ignoring the counter-hegemonic contributions of postcolonial and feminist theorists, only thereby positioning affect as 'the answer' to contemporary problems of cultural theory.

Keywords affect; cultural theory; epistemology; ontology; feminist theory; postcolonial theory

There is no denying, or deferring, affects. They are what make up life, and art . . . Affects are . . . the stuff that goes on beneath, beyond, even parallel to signification. But what can one say about affects? Indeed, what

needs to be said about them? . . . You cannot read affects, you can only experience them.

(O'Sullivan 2001, p. 126)

Introduction

In the article from which the above quotation is taken, Simon O'Sullivan celebrates affects' capacity to defy deconstruction, and the deconstructionist. O'Sullivan is writing within the context of art history, where which he claims that semiotic and deconstructivist approaches have become hegemonic, but he is far from alone in embracing affect as offering a new critical trajectory for cultural theory. While not really a school as such, a significant number of disciplinary and interdisciplinary theorists are currently citing affect as the privileged 'way out' of the perceived impasse in cultural studies. The impasse needing to be resolved is by now a familiar one, which the attentions of affect theorists have reshaped into three predominant concerns.

Firstly, post deconstruction we doubt the capacity of constructivist models of the subject to account fully for our place in the world as individuals or groups. In a general sense, this concern is indicated by the intensity of current critical interest in psychoanalytic accounts of the subject, and in particular Judith Butler's development of psychoanalysis through her focus on subjection (1997a). Theorists of affect argue that constructivist models leave out the residue or excess that is not socially produced, and that constitutes the very fabric of our being. Thus Brian Massumi (1996) insists that affect is important to the extent that it is autonomous and outside social signification, and John Bruns (2000) suggests that affect, and in particular laughter, foregrounds the unexpected that throws us off balance, that unsettles us into becoming someone other than who we currently are. Secondly, post deconstruction we doubt the capacity of both quantitative empirical approaches and textual analysis to account for the fullest resonance of the social world we wish to understand. Advocates of affect offer it up as a way of deepening our vision of the terrain we are studying, of allowing for and prioritizing its 'texture', in Eve Sedgwick's words (2003, p. 17). This texture refers to our qualitative experience of the social world, to embodied experience that has the capacity to transform as well as exceed social subjection. Queer theorists in particular have taken up Sedgwick and Adam Frank's (1995) emphasis on the transformative capacities of *shame*, insisting that it should not be something we strive simply to overcome by turning to its dependent opposite, pride. Shame itself, as David Halperin (2002), Sally Munt (2000) and Elspeth Probyn (2000) have all argued, has a resonance well beyond its homophobic generation, enabling queer subjects both to identify the bodily resonances of

a heterosexual status quo, and to create community through empathy and shared experience. Thirdly, post deconstruction we doubt that the oppositions of power/resistance or public/private can fully account for the political process. In this context, affective ties have been theorized as offering an alternative model of subject formation. In the work of Adriana Cavarero (2000), for example, how those we are closest to view us is central to our self-narration and therefore our way of being in the world. And Michael Hardt (1999) argues that while affective labour is the hidden centre of capitalist accumulation, since it remains unremunerated yet is what bestows qualitative value, it also produces emotional connections that threaten to disrupt that accumulation. In a similar vein, and following Franz Fanon's (1952) insistence that social relations at both the macro and the micro level are based on *unreasonable* ties, critical race theorists argue that affect plays a role in both cementing sexed and raced relations of domination, and in providing the local investments necessary to counter those relations (e.g. Spivak 1993, Bhabha 1994, Hill Collins 2000).¹

The approaches I have mentioned share an interest in exploring *analogue* rather than *digital* modes of power and community, which is to say connected and relational over oppositional modes. They emphasize the unexpected, the singular, or indeed the quirky, over the generally applicable, where the latter becomes associated with the pessimism of social determinist perspectives, and the former with the hope of freedom from social constraint. In making this move, affect theorists build on the important work within feminist theory and Sociology on the pitfalls of writing the body out of theory (e.g. Shilling 1993, Grosz 1994), and offer a different world-view than the rather narrow one governed by a repressive/subversive dichotomy. The affective critique is not simply one that highlights omission, however, or one that simply stresses the devaluing of certain practices and experiences in general paradigms. For affect theorists, these exclusions matter because of their capacity to transform the world we live in, and contemporary critical theorists should ignore them at their peril.

While appreciative of a critical focus on the unusual, which is to say the non-socially-determined, not as a bid for group rights, but a bid for social transformation, I remain sceptical of what is often a theoretical celebration of affect as uniquely situated to achieve this end. This article explores my scepticism of such affective celebration through close engagement with Sedgwick's (2003) and Massumi's (2002) work on the subject. Both authors are well-respected contributors to contemporary cultural theory, and both have recently published monographs invoking affect as *the way forward* within that arena. For both authors it is affect's difference from social structures that means it possesses, in itself, the capacity to restructure social meaning. But both authors are thereby presented with something of a problem. As prominent cultural theorists, they cannot fail to be aware of the myriad

ways that affect manifests precisely not as difference, but as a central mechanism of social reproduction in the most glaring ways. The delights of consumerism, feelings of belonging attending fundamentalism or fascism, to suggest just several contexts, are affective responses that strengthen rather than challenge a dominant social order (Berlant 1997). Sedgwick and Massumi do both acknowledge this characteristic of affect in their work, but do not pursue it, interested instead as they both are in that ‘other affect’, the good affect that undoes the bad. It is difficult to maintain such an affective dichotomy of course, particularly in light of their own professed irritation with cultural theorists’ tendency to divide the world up into good and bad, repressive or subversive and so on, as I discuss in more detail below. But unfortunately neither author offers any explanation as to the relationship between these ‘two kinds’ of affect, which means the relationship remains dyadic.

Instead, both authors negotiate a way out of their own uncomfortable critical position by turning the question of affective freedom back onto the cultural critic, leaving it up to her or him to decide whether the direction they wish to pursue is one of the pessimism of social determinism (including bad affect) or the optimism of affective freedom (good affect). Two points come to mind at this point. Firstly, this question to the critic is hardly an open one. ‘Wouldn’t you rather be free?’ can hardly elicit a negative response in anyone but the most hardened cultural theorist, whose hardness is indeed evidenced by that response. Secondly, as part of persuading the critic that the question is a valid one, both the ills of cultural theory to date and the restorative power of affect need to be overstated. My overarching contention in this article, then, is that while affect may be an interesting and valuable critical focus *in context*, it often emerges as a rhetorical device whose ultimate goal is to persuade ‘paranoid theorists’ into a more productive frame of mind.

Affective territories

I began research for this article as a result of my frustration at seeing affect mentioned or celebrated but rarely fully explained as either critical tool or object. So I want to spend some time discussing what is actually meant by affect. Affect broadly refers to states of being, rather than to their manifestation or interpretation as emotions. For psychoanalysis affects are ‘the qualitative expression of our drives’ energy and variations’ (Giardini 1999, p. 150), are what enable drives to be satisfied and what tie us to the world. Unlike drives, affects can be transferred to a range of objects in order to be satisfied (love may have many objects, for example), which makes them adaptable in a way that drives are not. So, affect can enable the satisfaction of a drive (excitement might prepare the body for the satisfaction of hunger) or interrupt it (so that disgust might interrupt that satisfaction if you were served

a rotten egg to eat). Discontented by the way affects had been theorized only in respect to drives, the influential psychologist Silvan Tomkins (1963) was the first to suggest that they have a singularity that creates its own circuitry. Thus affects may be autotelic (love being its own reward), or insatiable (where jealousy or desire for revenge may last minutes or a lifetime). Tomkins' work suggests that affects have a complex, self-referential life that gives depth to human existence through our relations with others and with ourselves.

In terms of our relations with others, Tomkins asked us to think of the contagious nature of a yawn, smile or blush. It is transferred to others and doubles back, increasing its original intensity. Affect can thus be said to place the individual in a *circuit* of feeling and response, rather than opposition to others. Further, Tomkins argues that we all develop complex *affect theories* as a way of negotiating the social world as unique individuals. An affect theory is all of our affective experiences to date that are remembered (or better, perhaps, registered) in the moment of responding to a new situation, such that we keep 'a trace, within [our] constitution' of those experiences (Al-Saji 2000, p. 56). For Tomkins, then, affect connects us to others, and provides the individual with a way of narrating their own inner life (likes, dislikes, desires and revulsions) to themselves and others. Thus one of the main reasons affect has been taken up as the hopeful alternative to social determinism is its positioning of the individual as possessing a degree of control over their future, rather than as raw material responding rather passively to cognitive or learned phenomena.

Tomkins is joined by Gilles Deleuze to form an unlikely couple dominating the contemporary affective imaginary of cultural theory. Deleuze (1997) proposes affect as distinct from emotion, as bodily meaning that pierces social interpretation, confounding its logic, and scrambling its expectations. In contrast to Tomkins, who breaks down affect into a topography of myriad, distinct parts, Deleuze understands affect as describing the passage from one state to another, as an *intensity* characterized by an increase or decrease in power (1997, p. 181). Deleuze takes two examples from his reading of T. E. Lawrence's experiences in the desert to illustrate the body's capacity to interrupt social logic. In both examples, he paraphrases Lawrence's description of violent events in the desert. The first is the grisly spectacle of 'the gestures of the dying, that attempt at raising their hands that makes all the agonizing Turks ripple together, as if they had practiced the same theatrical gesture, provoking Lawrence's mad laughter' (1997, p. 123). The second is Deleuze's account of Lawrence's experience of being gang raped: 'in the midst of his tortures, an erection; even in the state of sludge, there are convulsions that jolt the body' (1997: 123). For Deleuze, both instances index the unpredictable autonomy of the body's encounter with the event, its shattering ability to go its own way. In Deleuze's account, Lawrence does experience shame, but not in alignment with social prohibition, rather as a judgement on his body's response to rape: it is his erection that gives rise to shame. For Deleuze, one cannot do

justice to Lawrence's unruly body by reducing it to its social organization. To do so would be to miss the dramatic significance of the body's own asocial trace. Instead, Deleuze proposes a cartographic approach to the body and its affects where the critical focus is on bodily displacement, the movement between bodily states that is its intensity (1997, p. 63), its refrain. For many theorists of affect Deleuze's approach provides insight into thinking through the body in a non-essentialist way that remains faithful to many different levels and modes of bodily experience (e.g. Spinks 2001). As inheritors of this affective legacy, contemporary critical theorists tend to prefer either Tomkins' pragmatism or Deleuze's imaginative flights.

Eve Sedgwick's new work takes up Tomkins' suggestion that a focus on affect sidesteps a myopic attention to structural prohibition. While Tomkins is concerned with differentiating affect from drives, however, Sedgwick is interested in using affect theory to challenge what Probyn calls 'the twinned problematics of discipline or transgression' (2000, p. 13), which anchor poststructuralist critical inquiry. Sedgwick believes that the central problem facing Theory today is its own critical paranoia, where the project of a poststructuralist critical imaginary has become reduced to the search for, and deadening (re)discovery of, prohibition everywhere: prohibition where it appeared there was freedom, prohibition in a space we had not, until now, thought to look. Sedgwick argues that such paranoia makes cultural investigation protectionist instead of expansive, as theorists ward off other critical imaginaries as duped unless they too come to the same conspiratorial conclusions, unless they too find violence where there had appeared to be possibility (2003, pp. 123–51). For Sedgwick such a 'hermeneutics of suspicion and exposure' that is at once smug and sour, is not merely an unattractive trait in a critical theorist, it also makes her or him ill equipped for analysing contemporary social formations 'in which visibility itself constitutes much of the violence' (2003, p. 140). In current global contexts where violence is anything but hidden, is disconcertingly proud rather than covert, Sedgwick asks 'what use is paranoid theory?' Part of what makes critical theory so uninventive for Sedgwick is its privileging of the epistemological, since a relentless attention to the structures of truth and knowledge obscures our experience of those structures. She advocates instead a reparative return to the ontological and intersubjective, to the surprising and enlivening texture of individuality and community (2003, p. 17). Again following Tomkins, Sedgwick rather provocatively invites us to consider affect as the key to that texture, because of its capacity to link us creatively to others. I say provocatively, because throughout her text, Sedgwick acknowledges that our learned instinct as cultural theorists is to reject Tomkins for his insistence on affect as innate. Indeed, this is precisely Sedgwick's challenge – do cultural theorists shy away from affect *à la* Tomkins for any other reasons than its essentialism? For Sedgwick, if the answer is 'no', as she assumes it is, the

rejection of Tomkins' model is itself evidence of paranoid cultural theorists' characteristic disposal of both baby and bathwater.

Brian Massumi similarly intervenes in the contemporary terrain of cultural theory to propose affect as a new way out of the pernicious reign of signification that dominates the field. Mirroring Sedgwick, Massumi's irritation is chiefly reserved for the cultural theorist whose ability for 'critical thinking' has become reduced to identifying points on a stable map of the always already known (Massumi 2002, p. 12). Interpretation through the overlaying of this map can only capture certain moments and certain experiences, which will invariably reflect the framework they are interpreted through. For Massumi, such critical impoverishment means that cultural theorists consistently miss both the matter of bodies and, since his framework is Deleuzian rather than Tomkinsian, the unceasing movement that constitutes the process of becoming. And without this investment in movement between states and bodies, Massumi asks, how do we account for let alone encourage, change (2002, p. 3)? Affect attracts Massumi, then, since it is part of a different order of experience to the epistemological (as defined by Sedgwick): it is 'the unassimilable' (2002, p. 3). His point is that in order to study the unknowable, cultural theorists will have to abandon the certainty that has come to characterize the field.

What is clear then, is that Sedgwick and Massumi emerge as champions of affect in a more general context of the critique of what is usually understood as the 'cultural turn'. The particular form of these arguments is often discipline-specific, but what all critiques share is a lamenting of the turn to language represented by poststructuralism. Within the context I am most familiar with, of feminist debate, this turn to language is usually critiqued for one of two reasons that are somewhat at odds with one another. The first laments the increasing theoretical abstraction of feminist writing, associating it with an increase in professionalization and a concomitant decrease in political accountability (Gubar 1998, Stanley and Wise 2000, Jackson 2001). Poststructuralist feminist writing is often aggressively damned for its inaccessibility, and for its perceived lack of attention to what is often invoked as 'the material'. These arguments have been raging within feminist academic and political contexts for a long time, but cross over into more mainstream critical terrain through the debates between Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser in the late 1990s (Butler 1997b, Fraser 1997). In the second critique of the 'cultural turn' within feminism, poststructuralism is understood in contrast to have *over-emphasized* power-relations and their framing of both what we do and who we are, to the extent that there appears to be no hope of liberation. We are effectively caught in culture. Critics viewing poststructuralism in this way advocate not a material return but an ontological one, a revaluing of individual difference and capacity for change over time (Prosser 1998, Mitchell 2000). A number of theorists – most notably, perhaps, Rosi Braidotti (2002) –

combine these two critiques in their focus on the lived materiality of bodies. Sedgwick and Massumi's interest in affect must therefore be seen within the context of broader challenges to poststructuralist approaches to language, power and subjectivity, and particularly in line with the second trajectory detailed here.

Critical chronologies

The critical narrative laid out above is not simply an abstract one; it takes material form in academic and institutional contexts. In my own institutional context, where I teach graduate students gender studies, the narrative is precisely borne out. Each year it seems students grapple with poststructuralist approaches only to return to the question of how this turn to language is political. As with both critiques presented above, students identify the political in an empirically available real world or in the body. Instead of deconstruction, students are finding themselves drawn to social policy, development theory and practice, or to psychoanalytic or affective approaches that reframe questions of sexual and racial difference. What is of interest here, however, and challenges a simple acceptance of this critical narrative, is that too frequently such material or ontological judgement is made on the basis of secondary reading – that rejects poststructuralism as entirely rarefied and apolitical – not primary reading. This is of course a familiar pattern. As a masters student in women's studies in the early 1990s my secondary reading convinced me of the essentialist ills of early second wave Western feminist texts, most of which I did not read until much later. That lack of direct textual engagement did not stop me writing damning critiques of an 'earlier generation' of feminists, however, and nor did it stop that work being published, because this view was a generally held one. Opinion of what became crudely termed 1970s feminism has begun to shift, in part because of an insistence that a decade of proliferating feminist texts and political action cannot be represented by the handful of theorists most commonly cited as essentialist (Stacey 1997, Graham *et al.* 2002). But my argument here is not that these 'earlier generation' are beyond critique, or innocent of essentialism or abstraction in turn, but that a narrative that posits a contemporary critical break with their characteristics has a vested interest in reading for generality instead of complexity. In my own, and my students' cases, such narratives mitigate against careful critical reading, tend to the dismissive, and celebrate 'the new' as untouched by whatever we find ourselves currently transcending. In the search for 'the new' that bears no resemblance to the past, the identifying features of that past are inevitably overstated, and the claims for that new embellished in ways that must at the very least fall short of rigorous.

In positing affect as the critical new for the noughts, both Sedgwick and Massumi invariably overstate the problems of poststructuralism, as well as and in order to herald affect's unique capacity to resolve contemporary critical dilemmas, much as advocates of poststructuralism overstated the ills of the seventies and early eighties. In *Touching Feeling*, the weight of Sedgwick's dismissal of poststructuralist epistemology is carried by her reading of only two texts: Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police*. Published in 1990 and 1988 respectively, despite the fact that both arguments are ones that their authors have subsequently developed in different directions. It seems odd to rest the case for needing new theoretical frameworks on texts that have already prompted just such revisions from their authors, and indeed that are either side of fifteen years old. Surely if the need for affect is so urgently felt, the problem could be found in more contemporary texts? Massumi's dismissal of cultural theory rests on more slender evidence still. At no point in *Parables For the Virtual* does Massumi engage directly with any of the theorists responsible for what he insists is theory's terrible state of critical affairs, although the scattered but persistent references to 'performance' could be taken as similarly implicating Butler. Instead of critical dialogue, Massumi persuades his reader of the need for restorative attention to affect by positioning him or her as a co-conspirator who already knows what the problems of cultural theory are but just needs a little coaxing. Rather than tracing the thinking of particular authors, Massumi objectifies critical thinking, referring to it in the third person throughout. The following passage is typical:

Critical thinking disavows its own inventiveness as much as possible. Because it sees itself as uncovering something it desires to subtract from the world, it clings to a basically descriptive and justificatory modus operandi. However strenuously it might debunk concepts like 'representation,' it carries on as if it mirrored something outside of itself and with which it had no complicity, no unmediated processual involvement, and thus could justifiably oppose.

(2002, p. 12)

'Critical thinking' is unreflexive, childish, stubborn, arrogant and, as suggested, unauthored. Presumably, the reader can be expected to want to be an adult, for who among us would want to 'cling to a . . . descriptive . . . modus operandi', let alone 'disavow[. . . our] own inventiveness'. Our rejection of such juvenile attachment to the theoretical status quo is in the end all just part of growing up. As the wise father, Massumi counsels that this has 'nothing to do with morals or moralizing. [It is] just pragmatic' (2002, p. 13). In both Sedgwick and Massumi, I want to stress that these citation issues are more than simply omission. They construct a critical history at the same time as they dismiss it. Positing affect as a 'way out' requires that

poststructuralist epistemology have ignored embodiment, investment and emotion, and that the academic reader recognize their own prior complicity and current boredom with Theory's straight-jacketing of thought.

If poststructuralist epistemology is the problem, it is perhaps not enormously surprising that a post-deconstructivist ontology is offered as the solution. Both Sedgwick and Massumi progress from asserting the absolutely flawed nature of epistemology to insisting on the unequivocal good of ontology. For Sedgwick, it is self-evidently horrific that critical thought is dominated by epistemological approaches that consider 'the quality of affect . . . of [no] more consequence than the color of the airplane used to speed a person to a destination' (2003, p. 18). This horror underwrites her conviction that only a turn to ontology can redress the over-emphasis of truth and knowledge at the expense of individual experience. In Massumi, signification is (passive) death, and ontology is (active) life. Even where theorists stress multiplicity of social location, for Massumi (2002, p. 3) this continues to fix difference: 'The sites, it is true, are multiple. But aren't they still combinatorial permutations on an overarching definitional framework?' While all social meaning is already fully known, already '[nothing] more than a local embodiment of ideology' (2002, p. 3), ontology on the other hand heroically carries the very difference that ideology, and cultural theory, would minimize or ignore (2002, p. 5). The epistemological past is grey, flat and predictable, the ontological future is bright, many-faceted and surprising. That future could be ours too (again, who would not want it to be?), if . . . and only if . . . we break free of our paranoid attachment to unfreedom and turn towards the possibilities offered by feeling. It may seem perverse to resist, but as with the issues of citation discussed above, the 'problem of epistemology' only materializes in the moment that it is chronologically and intellectually separated from ontology. Ontology thus resolves the problem its advocates invent.

Both authors' chronologies of the past and future of critical theory need to ignore the range of poststructuralist work that does not follow this pattern; epistemological work that is neither poststructuralist, nor opposed to consideration of ontology. As neither theorist can afford to acknowledge, there is a vast range of epistemological work that attends to emotional investments, political connectivity and the possibility of change. To briefly trace one example, feminist standpoint epistemology might be said to constitute an established body of inquiry into the relationship *between* the ontological, epistemological and transformative. Feminist standpoint is a useful example in considering the turn to affect because its genealogical resonances echo back and forth across the last few decades, countering an affective chronology whose advocates prioritize grand shifts in ways that promote rather than caution against generalization. In standpoint, epistemology and ontology are never separated and opposed, and its key proponents range across Marxist

feminism, critical race theory, sexual difference theory, as well as poststructuralism (Harding 1986, Haraway 1991, Braidotti 1994, Hartsock 1999, Hill Collins 2000). In addition, all feminist standpoint work, while enormously divergent, does share the following: firstly, a commitment to political accountability, community and the importance of positive affect for both belonging and change. Secondly, against paranoia, all the feminist standpoint work I can think of posits a different, historical and community validated standard of evidence for the knowledges that it wishes to produce. Or, to take a different tack, postcolonial theorists, among others, have attended to the ways that marginal social location is not simply 'pre-coded into the ideological master structure' as Massumi (2002, p. 3) suggests. Such theorists have argued that to be marginal in relation to the dominant is to inhabit *ambivalence*, not simply additive or oppositional multiplicity (Fanon 1952, Said 1979, Bhabha 1994, Kandyoti 1994, Spivak 1999). To be 'other' is not only to be the object of another's gaze within the dominant; it also precipitates community that is historically resonant, that draws on and creates alternative signification of the same actions and events. Thus, social difference is not only opposite, but knowing and inflecting, and the social world is always crosscut with fissures that have a social and political history that *signifies otherwise*.

When I first read both Massumi and Sedgwick on affect, I was genuinely confused. Both theorists are of course familiar with the kind of work on epistemology or signification that does not reduce experience to a place on a grid of immutable power relations. Sedgwick herself paradigmatically complicated questions of knowledge and the subject formed by its perverse logics in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and refused to reduce what one could call queer standpoint to a fixed position on a homophobic map. But in fact this failure to attend to the fault lines in a chronology charting cultural theory's progressive myopia is *central* to the positioning of affect as panacea for Theory's hypochondria. Such broad oversights and lack of citational evidence, if not deliberate, are at least necessary to both authors' critical location in their work on affect. Only through these 'oversights' can non-paranoid theory belong to the future rather than to the present and past. A reader could well respond that some oversight and generalization is inevitable in the development of new critical trajectories, and that if Massumi and Sedgwick are wrong in some respects, they are also right in others. But what is overlooked in this particular authorship of history is instructive. It is consistently theory written from the margins (I just mentioned standpoint and postcolonial theory here) that refuses both dominant prescription and simple oppositional location, and values continuity of difference over time. To refuse to cite in order to dismiss, it is politically invested perspectives of difference, rather than abstract epistemologists who disappear from the critical record. I would argue then that affect theorists' error lies in the evacuation of this theoretical and political

complexity from critical theory's development; but this 'error' is precisely what allows complexity to be hijacked for recuperation in the future.

Affective freedoms

As contemporary cultural theorists, both Sedgwick and Massumi know that they cannot simply propose a return to ontological *certainty* in order to alleviate the epistemological myopia they identify. For the critical chronology I have been indicating to remain intact, affect must be both post biological essentialism and post-epistemology. In this vein, Sedgwick and Massumi use the notion of affect as free and autonomous respectively, to persuade cultural theorists of the value of the untrammelled ontological. Sedgwick's 'reparative return' to the singularity of the ontological hinges on her argument that affect is free from the constraints of both drives and social meaning. Following Tomkins, Sedgwick (2003, p. 19) asserts that 'affects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects. Thus one can be excited by anger, disgusted by shame, or surprised by joy'. On the one hand, then, attention to affect will always be attention to everyday experience rather than macro abstractions, and even more importantly for Sedgwick, affective attachments will be *unpredictable*. Since affect is a 'free radical' that can attach itself to anything, and since we create associations between feelings and contexts that are unpredictable, 'anyone's character . . . is . . . a record of the highly individual histories by which . . . fleeting emotion . . . has instituted far more durable, structured changes' (2003, p. 62) in the self and in relationships. Sedgwick's conclusion is that to collect these records would be a cure of sorts for critical paranoia, creating both a different archive of experience as well as a different theoretical paradigm. This freedom of affect combines with its contagious nature, resulting in what Sedgwick understands as its capacity to transform the self in relation to others.

It is certainly true that affect attaches all over the place. As Sedgwick suggests, it is hard to think of an arena of life that is not suffused with affect. However, there is a slippage here, too. Affect's freedom of attachment, its ability to attach to any object, becomes evidence, for Sedgwick, of *our* critical freedom, should we but attend to its unfolding drama. For affective freedom to equal critical freedom Sedgwick must insist that affect attaches *randomly* to any object, despite the fact that even for her guide, Silvan Tomkins, affective attachment frequently serves to satisfy drives or social norms. Sedgwick's argument (2002, p. 19) is that because affect can be surprising in its attachments, as cultural theorists we have a duty to attend to the patterns and effects of such surprise, rather than to the social frameworks that we already know. The critique of Sedgwick's insistence here takes two directions: firstly,

what might still be gained by a (healthy?) critical paranoia in tracing affect; and secondly, which critics are able to turn their location into such celebratory responsibility?

Let us pursue the example of disgust–shame that Sedgwick takes as exemplary of affective freedom. It attaches itself to many different objects, and can arise unexpectedly in relation to an object previously favoured. Yet, it is clear that there are certain things that unquestionably authenticate disgust as response in human beings in the first place. In a scene from *The Negative Affects*, Tomkins suggests that we learn disgust as a primary negative affect when a parent smells our faeces and reacts with the affect disgust–contempt:

It may be that the anal character, whose primary affect is disgust, is an anal character because humans are innately disgusted by the odor of their feces. If the human feces were not innately disgusting, however, it would still be relatively easy to teach the child to be disgusted by his own feces, by identification with the parent who lifted his lip and drew his head away from the child's feces.

(1963, p. 132)

Tomkins continues the story: the child realizes that it is *him* that the parent is disgusted with and through identification with the parent, he becomes ashamed of himself. So the child finds other objects to be disgusted of, the better to reduce the likelihood of shame doubling back on him. But the possibility of shit not being recoiled from if it were not innately disgusting, is only imagined momentarily in this passage to be summarily dismissed by the insistence that 'it would still be relatively easy' to teach this disgust anyway. Disgust at shit is thus either innate or inevitable – its randomness resides only in which object its displacement will settle on. The scene is profoundly homosocial in that it is the father's recoil from the son here (all Tomkins' children are little 'heroes') that forms the pedagogic site. A father teaches his son by example that his inevitable recoil from shit is natural. Indeed Tomkins' book of negative affect is bursting with children whose affective responses are bound by the early contexts in which they learn the codes and practices of gender and sexuality. In Tomkins' shame-filled world, boys are instructed specifically not to cry like girls, mumble, gesticulate when speaking, demonstrate enthusiasm in public or eat like birds; in ways that suggest that no matter how expansive our capacity to substitute objects of disgust at a later date, the primary affect these refer to is either learned – or if innate, reinforced – in heteronormative scenes (Berlant 1997). My point here is not that Sedgwick misses the heteronormative regulation of affect, but that her awareness of this inattention is central to how her affective logic functions. This logic is governed by three phrases: a. *Of course shame can be normative, but it can also be transformative*; b. *Shouldn't we attend to those transformative possibilities over and above normative ones?* c. *It is*

simply churlish to make a fuss. This grammar only works because of our prior knowledge of Sedgwick's work in a central rather than passing way – we can trust that Sedgwick of all theorists has already factored power into the equation. Thus in our own expectations, as in the critical chronology discussed in the previous section, power belongs to the past, to the already dealt with, allowing the future to emerge as the epoch of individual difference.

Against this teleology of old power versus new freedom of choice I want to continue by suggesting that only for certain subjects can affect be thought of as attaching in an open way; others are so over-associated with affect that they themselves are the object of affective transfer. In this vein, Jennifer Biddle (1997, p. 231) insists that in matters of sexuality it is the woman who carries the shame of gendered impropriety, and marks its limits: 'It is, after all, the prostitute who is shameless, but the gentleman, let us not forget, who is discreet'. Such transferred affective attachments do not only pertain to gender and sexuality, but also suffuse critical accounts of the process of affective racialization. I am thinking here of Franz Fanon and Audre Lorde's often cited descriptions of *other people's* affective response to their blackness. Fanon remembers:

My body was given to me sprawled out, distorted, recoloured, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger, it's cold, the nigger is shivering, the nigger is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up.

(1952, p. 80)

While the white boy's fear, learned within a racist familial and social order, can attach to an unknown black object, Fanon's body is precisely not his own, but is 'sprawled out' and 'distorted', presented to him via the white boy's affective response. Lorde similarly recalls her realization that it is *her body* that is disgusting to a white woman sitting next to her on the bus:

When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly I realise that there is nothing crawling up the seat between us; it is me she doesn't want her coat to touch. The fur brushes past my face as she stands with a shudder and holds on to a strap in the speeding train . . . Something's going on here I do not understand, but I will never forget it. Her eyes. The flared nostrils. The hate.

(1984, pp. 147–8)

In discussing the same passage, Sara Ahmed argues that affect thus places bodies in spatial relation along racially defined lines (2000, p. 85–6). In both of these examples, it is the black body that carries the weight of, and is suffused with, racial affect, as it is the female body that carries the burden of the affects that maintain sexual difference in Biddle's example above.

Biddle, Fanon and Lorde's narratives testify to the argument that some bodies are captured and held by affect's structured precision. Not only, then, is affect itself not random, nor is the ability to choose to imagine affect otherwise. My concerns about the centring of the critic in affective discourse come full circle. In the first instance, the need for a new theory of the ontological requires displacing marginal theory and histories from a chronology of cultural theory. Furthermore, the cultural critic has to evidence their desire to move away from that imagined chronology by choosing choice. Yet, as I have suggested, the autonomy of the critic to make such a choice is dependent upon their being the subject rather than object of affective displacement. The failure of some critics to 'choose choice' paradoxically becomes evidence of their concomitant failure to relinquish an imagined history that they may already have been erased from.

Affective autonomy

Placing affective attachment in the context of social narratives and power relations as I have done above similarly runs counter to Massumi's claim that affect is critically useful because of its autonomy. For Massumi, the moment that we 'make sense' of a state of being, or more properly becoming, we freeze it, evacuating it of the very intensity that offered the capacity for change. Thus:

Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is. Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage, are the capture and closure of affect. Emotion is the intensest (most contracted) expression of that capture-and of the fact that something has always and again escaped.

(1996, p. 228)

As for Sedgwick, then, affect is interesting insofar as it resists or runs counter to the causal linearity through which we make sense of the world. Yet, where for Sedgwick affective freedom of attachment becomes a mark of the critic's freedom, for Massumi the affective autonomy places it outside the reach of critical interpretation. Affect is thus valuable to the extent that it is not susceptible to the vagaries of theoretical whim. In Simon O'Sullivan's words

that I began this article with, ‘you cannot read affects, you can only experience them’ (2001, p. 126).

Massumi’s invocation to cultural critics to open themselves up to something that cannot be read may strike us as odd. 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 (2002, p. 17). 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. Massumi is thus suggesting not that we *look for* something outside culture, but that we *trust that* there is something outside culture. This is a useful proposition only if one’s academic project is to herald the death of the cultural turn, and a return to the rigour of disciplinarity – the visionary sciences, imaginative philosophy, but precisely not the miserable social sciences or defeatist cultural studies.

Much seems to rest on Massumi’s understanding of affect as autonomous. As befits his participation in a critical chronology departing from biological essentialism in the first instance, Massumi is careful to note that affect ‘*includes* social elements, but mixes them with elements according to different logic’ (1996, p. 223), taking them up as unfinished ‘*tendencies . . . pastnesses* opening onto a future, but with no present to speak of’ (1996, p. 224). In making this claim for affect – its movement between past and future, never fixed in the present – Massumi is extending Deleuze’s chronology of body and mind in *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Following his description of Lawrence’s unexpected bodily response to being raped mentioned earlier, Deleuze suggests that we might therefore conceptualize the relationship between body and mind as follows:

The mind begins by coldly and curiously regarding what the body does, it is first of all a witness; then it is affected, it becomes an impassioned witness, that is, it experiences for itself affects that are not simply effects of the body, but veritable *critical entities* that hover over the body and judge it.

(1997, p. 124)

Body and mind are thus linked but detached, potentially developing in different directions, differently affected. But the mind is the witness to the body, thus needing the body, while the reverse is not the case, and it is in that sense that the body and the affects that it distributes are ‘asocial, but not presocial’ for Massumi (1996, p. 223).

To conclude this essay on a slightly different note, I want to develop Deleuze's description of the relationship between body and mind here, to argue that extrapolating from its logic that affect is autonomous, as Massumi does, is a misreading. Deleuze is not critiquing linearity per se, but what we understand as the components of linearity. If judgement is always secondary to bodily response, poised above it, but crucially tied to it, the intensity of that response must also presumably be curtailed or extended by that judgement, forming an affective cycle in which each element has the capacity to affect (intensify or diminish) the other. Deleuze has offered us a snapshot of frozen time, a single moment of judgement, but this is a moment only, and one that does in fact take place within a larger passage of time. Judgement links the body and the social and gives both interpretative meaning. The 'maps of intensity' that Deleuze would have us draw up in our desire to understand the individual are the shifts from one component to the next, one affective cycle to the next (1997, p. 64). Thus, 'maps of intensity' are maps of individual life and meaning *in time*, perhaps even constituting time. They are certainly not outside time. To pursue this interpretation of Deleuze further, these affective cycles form *patterns* that are subject to reflective or political, rather than momentary or arbitrary judgement. Such affective cycles might be described not as a series of repeated moments – body–affect–emotion – a self-contained phrase repeated in time, but as an ongoing, incrementally altering chain – body–affect–emotion–affect–body – doubling back upon the body and influencing the individual's capacity to act in the world. In this context, reflective or political judgment provides an alternative to dominant social norms, but not because of affective autonomy. This reading indicates a return to Tomkins' *affect theory* too, where it is the reinvigoration of previous affective states and their effects, rather than affective freedom, that allow us to make our bodies mean something that we recognize and value.

To return to my discussion of Fanon and Lorde, it is clear that racially marked subject are not simply 'sprawled out' and 'distorted' (Fanon 1952, p. 80), but have a critical and affective life that resonates differently. So that over time, Audre Lorde's critical judgement of the ongoing spiral of smaller cycles of shame in response to her body and to racism is of such intensity that she is able to remake the relationship between her body, affect and judgement to inflect the social world with other meanings. In *The Cancer Journals*, for example, a text that is almost definitional in tracing maps of intensity that fashion the individual other in relation to an other social world (1980), Lorde does not need to think of affect as asocial in order for her investments in survival to provide a different affective trajectory than the one that would deny her subjectivity. Lorde reinvents her body as hers not theirs, a body connected to other bodies by shared judgements of the social. Those judgements constitute a political history that reshapes social meaning, creating recognizable and intelligible alternatives to dominant signification. My critical response to

Massumi and Sedgwick's work on affect, then, is not one that rejects the importance of affect for cultural theory. It is one that rejects the contemporary fascination with affect as outside social meaning, as providing a break in both the social and in critics' engagements with the nature of the social. The problems in Massumi and Sedgwick discussed in this article do not require a wholesale rejection of affect's relevance to cultural theory. Instead, affect might in fact be valuable precisely to the extent that it is not autonomous.

Note

- 1 Richard Langston (2005) takes up this capacity of affect to re-embed or unsettle cultural stereotypes and investments in the context of the foreign language classroom, to illustrate how affect might usefully be pedagogically investigated.

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