

Hashtag #Affect



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Affect theory has a reputation in some academic quarters for dealing with the intangible, slippery, and wishy-washy—of pursuing the suspect realm of feeling as opposed to hard fact or scientific knowledge. As such, it might readily seem to some as an unjustifiable scholarly indulgence given the pressing challenges of the 21st century. In November 2017, a buzz circulated around an article published in *Bioscience* in which 15,364 scientists from 180 countries signed off on an urgent warning that time is running out to avoid nothing less than whole scale environmental collapse (Ripple et al 2017). With the Anthropocene/Capitalocene (Moore 2016) upon us, and a myriad of sufferings, old and new, plaguing an unsustainable global population, the question of how the study of affect might make a viable contribution with “real world” effects is, perhaps, a fair one, but it's also reasonable to point out the central misunderstanding driving assumptions about affect theory's impotency and charges of theoretical navel gazing.

The historical casting of affect/intensity/emotion/feeling/ as amorphous and untrustworthy experience has traditionally been associated with the feminine, with the body, the relational, with private and domestic life, as opposed to public,

political, and institutional life, and correspondingly assigned lesser value. Such ideas have long dominated Western societies and the education sector at all levels. Successful and lively theoretical and creative engagements with affect therefore have a heightened potential to serve as feminist interventions in unsettling a patriarchal social order that thrives on privileging economic rationalism over empathy, and ethical commitment.

For many of us, drawn to the exploration of affect and its [inter-]subjective, collective, textual, historic, and/or contagious movements, the notion that affect shapes every human project and discourse (in the Foucaultian sense of the word) and informs all cultural practices and events is a given—the starting point from which to proceed. The opportunities for investigating the ways in which affect generates, binds, blinds, exacerbates, entangles, illuminates, and fuels human thought, art, and activities are manifold and seemingly inexhaustible. Affect is also a living, breathing membrane between the human and the nonhuman. Affect ghosts places, inanimate objects, and even—if you really want to get freaky—the solar system beyond our planet (“spooky action at a distance,” anyone?). We *feel* nature and the atmosphere. Affect animates the diversity of individual beings referred to as “animals.” Many (e.g. Bradshaw 2012, Brooks Pribac 2013) argue for the complexity of their agency and ties, and the devastating impact humanity often has on both. And developments in critical plant studies suggest previously unacknowledged affective capacities in plants.

The ubiquitous nature of affect is, in part, why intellectual enquiries into its operations have leaked into, and out of, so many disciplines, including literature, music, medicine, architecture, geography, and media studies. This goes some way to explaining why it so notably lends itself to interdisciplinary explorations, as *Capacious* Editor-in-Chief, Gregory J. Seigworth, gestured toward in his introduction to the first issue of *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* (July 2017). There is, quite simply, not a culture, community, or endeavour on earth in which affect isn't implicated, and yet, it is not and never can be universalized, because its circulations and manifestations are always tied to the specific cultural milieu of a particular individual, or group of beings, at a particular place and point in time. Add to this the complexities of gender, race, species, and the ways in which each have been socially and structurally constructed as categories that advantage certain bodies and collectives thereby disadvantaging and ravaging others, plus the established heteronormative and ablest orientation of most modern

societies, and the unevenness of the playing field becomes glaringly obvious. As Teresa Brennan stated, some subjects are set up to absorb more “negative” affect than others (2004). It follows then that while affect is something we all share, it would be blinkered folly to imagine we can speak of it in homogenous terms.

This is precisely why a journal like *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* makes such a vital and timely contribution. The openness of this venture is its greatest strength. Its commitment to giving platform to a “wide diversity of approaches and emerging voices to engage with ongoing conversations in and around affect studies” stretches across not only a range of issues, concerns, and perspectives but also a range of methodologies, fields, and possible intersections (*Capacious*, n.p.). The journal's mission to nurture early career scholars (who face ever more trying conditions in the increasingly competitive academic environment that dominates the tertiary sector in many regions across the globe) is a crucial one.

Such emergent theorizations of affect promise to produce an eclectic and sometimes surprising array of readings, ponderings, and investigations, for which there is no shortage of inspiration. We live daily amid affective contagions, affectively motivated actions and reactions around matters of social justice, and organizational denials and disorders of affect—even at the highest levels of office. We deal now with not one world, but two, or rather a new synergistic reality. The spheres of “IRL” (In Real Life) and networked ecosystems increasingly blur and synergise as lived experience meets significant viral phenomenon (e.g. the intimate impact of the #metoo moment for many). Anna Gibbs has referred to the media as “primarily affect” (2010), meaning that it functions as an amplification and modulator of affect via the imaging, recording, and transmitting of the face and voice, music, and other forms of sound (338). Digitalized media's “primary affect” saturates, leaving us chattering in its wake, one person's “new horizon”/next-President utopian protest-celebration is another person's classist corporatized-feminist Golden Globes colour-coded sham-spectacle. Trump's “Very Stable Genius” declaration was met by mass analysis and despairing mockery; but there was, too, everyday micro-pop-genius in the form of an impromptu e-dance of rhyme, meter, and affect-loaded humour on the Twitter thread initiated by “Bob.” While elsewhere on Twitter an uncommon display of compassion made news when US comedian, actor, and producer, Sarah Silverman, met an abusive sexist troll with sympathetic understanding and offers of support. This is the question I mean to get at: what do we *do* with affect, personally and conceptually, to make things better, and (how) can it be worked with to effect change, on scales big and small?

The exploration of what affect and emotion do was at the heart of Sara Ahmed's influential book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), and has been taken up by many others in various castings. The more explicit question that has occupied my theoretical and creative work these past few years is (how) might affect be used in service to revolution and to what ends?

In *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* (2017), I argue that certain kinds of literature and associated strategic practices can, working at the nexus of trauma and affect, testify to transgenerational trauma and its transmissions, not just in relation to the previous one or two generations, but farther back, revealing trauma as a social, and socially structured, force. This literary testimony, I proposed, is of political import regardless of its presenting genre or apparent story. But this is not the same as insisting that writing or affect are capable of bringing about political and material change in a simplistic cause and effect manner. Michael Hardt (2007) has referred to Spinoza as “the philosopher who has advanced furthest the theory of the affects and whose thought is the source, either directly or indirectly, of most of the contemporary work” (ix). If ever a time in which working with affect, both personally and conceptually, in the kind of life-affirming spirit espoused by Spinoza was called for it is now. Which is to say, it has always been that time and now that we are being warned we are running out of time it is more that time than it has ever been before.

In the same month that the aforementioned *Bioscience* story broke with its prediction of a dire future, failing immediate radical response, a workshop titled “Feelings for our Time” was held at the University of New South Wales. The workshop was convened by Michael Richardson (who has new work in this issue) and Lisa Slater, and they invited nine academics from different disciplines and institutional affiliations, many of who had not previously met. Participants were invited to bring work-in-progress to discuss the daunting, and exciting, task of “mapping feelings for our time.” In addition to considering the prospect of what “from feeling to action” might mean, we presented work at various stages of completion, ranging from early days to mature and robust pieces. Flounderings and frustrations were aired, inciting possibilities that percolated in the electrifying and confronting process of scholars coming together, each with the aim of making a difference.

You are about to enter a “bloom-space” in which feelings of and for our times are addressed and differences can be made. Maybe not the strident difference we're inclined to imagine when we speak about making a difference, but a difference nonetheless. Time's up, as they say. Chips will fall where they may. And in the meantime, here we are.

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