

FIELDING AFFECT: SOME PROPOSITIONS



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. . . *O Horizon* alludes to the Tagorean horizon of soil and sky. It aims to situate people in times and scales in which soils and trees are not only grounds for education but figures of education.

—The Otolith group on their film, *O Horizon* (Butler 2018)

Capacious has wisely positioned itself as a journal for “emerging affect inquiry . . . across any and all academic disciplines”¹. Yet elsewhere we find something like an attempt to coalesce—occasionally even to delimit and police—a field of study. There is now—tentatively, at times argumentatively—something we call affect studies, or perhaps as often affect theory. How can the tensions involved, between disciplinary requirements and “emerging affect inquiry,” be thought? Is a field of study, however it might be formed, a good fit for work with affect? On the other hand, would such a field of study have any future, when “categories traditionally assigned to the arts, the humanities, and the sciences are now colliding, collapsing, and converging in manners that are confusing, complex, and incoherent” (Butler 2018)? Further, what relation does all of this have to a world in which “soils and trees are not only grounds for education but figures of education” (Butler 2018, n.p.).

Some short propositions:

1

Any possible affect studies would not suffer from “gaps in the field.” Affect itself is everywhere and long has been (other fields are all arguably a certain packaging/ delimiting/ policing of affect). It is no surprise that there has been and is a profusion of rich thinking and work with affect² (the history of Chinese philosophy, the I Ching or Book of Changes; Indian aesthetics; diverse ecological thinking; First Nations' complex affiliations and relations to country and earth; psychoanalysis, physics, sociology, a geography of emotions, cybernetics, behaviourism; art, music of all kinds; magic, ritual; politics of all kinds . . . the list is infinite). Affect itself is in everything, although it takes *things* to be *processes* or *events*. Viewed from a certain (processual) perspective, everything is, beginning, middle and end, a matter of affecting and being affected. Affect is therefore only impossibly an “object of study.”

2

Every methodology necessarily involves affecting and being affected. Yet this suggests that there is no particular methodological suite that would define a field of study for affect, unless this consisted of something like experiment with process, relation and event. When it comes to affect, technics in general—human, nonhuman, inorganic and multiple combinations of these—is an open question.

3

Yet somehow, we do have something like affect studies or theory. (If for no other reason, we know this from all those who so eagerly contest or reject it, in a return to....). Affect studies as it has arisen until now could be understood as a moving feast of somewhat *paradoxically* limited constitutions of the field, and of methodologies regarding affect (sometimes playfully engaged with work with affect as experiment with process, relation and event, and sometimes not). These paradoxical constitutions respond both to institutional demands and to the need to pull apart, often from within, longstanding and many would say Eurocentric

attempts to purify thought, will, and knowledge of affect. So, on the one hand, some recent narrower constitutions of affect studies have the world on their side even as they deny a great deal of it at times. On the other hand, any affect study is defying terrifying odds in terms of the politics of institutions, and indeed of 'Western thought'. William James (2008 [1912]) perhaps summed up the basis for what actually happens in affect studies long ago:

... 'is,' 'isn't,' 'then,' 'before,' 'in,' 'on,' 'beside,' 'between,' 'next,' 'like,' 'unlike,' 'as,' 'but,' flower out of the stream of pure experience, the stream of concretes or the sensational stream, . . . and they melt into it again as fluidly when we apply them to a new portion of the stream. (44)

4

Affect theory is in a different situation to affect studies. It does at times have its own narrower formulations, as part of affect studies. Yet, like affect, affect theory is everywhere, the abstract accompaniment of whatever it is that's going on. Which is to say that affect theory per se involves some kind of conceptual or abstract feeling about how affect works, with perhaps added premonition about what affect is going to do next. It is a constituting part of living affectively, which is to say, simply living. As such, affect theory itself is affective. It assembles a series of powers to affect and be affected, from within/as a part of affective events. All theory is therefore affect theory, though some, primarily some European and American rationalist theories, do considerable work to pretend that they are more or less than this. Affect theories would then include: "animism" (Arthur 2018); most Chinese philosophy from Confucianism and Taoism to dialectical materialism; the feel in music; all human and nonhuman embedded assumptions, conditionings and habits; etc. Even the like of gravity or sunshine could be said to carry affect theory as what was ground becomes also figure. Gravity—which is affecting and being affected par excellence—is a force that literally attracts or draws away, affecting and being affected between celestial bodies, animal bodies, other bodies, and all these together. We might thus say that gravity determines

both a practice and a theory—a speculative pragmatism that becomes the groundless ground zero of desire. Or, think of sunshine, another simultaneously simple and complex affective force. Sunshine, coming so clearly as it does from elsewhere, gives the basis not only for life (and for fossil fuels, industrial revolutions, or for that matter climate change and renewables) but, conceptually, for data, in Whitehead's sense of data as “the potential for feeling” (1978 [1929], 88).

5

The general nature of both affect and affect theory suggests that affect studies is perhaps not best pursued as the territorial quest for a delimited field (with a constitution of names and appropriate concepts, or appropriate delimiting tensions between a small set of competing concepts and objects of study). Affect studies might be better pursued, and indeed often is, in the more experimental mode I have suggested above; developing propositions and techniques for “fielding,” in order to participate in the “crystallisation of fields of potential movement” (Massumi 2015, 119). Indeed, fielding and feeling—whether in a blush or the movement of a wind through a forest, or the viral contagion of an idea—are very close. This fielding/feeling makes the world. As Whitehead (1978 [1929]) put it, the world is a “medium” for the “transmission of influences” or feeling (286). Affect studies understand that, within this, one does not know the world so much as attune to it. Fielding is as participatory, as affected as it is affecting. Erin Manning (2016) writes that “fieldings . . . before all else are a tuning of affective tonality” (217). This is a participation in the ongoing constellation of an affective cosmos. It is not based only on the question of the object—what is affect, or on our (completely necessary) development of a field of study of such an object. Affective politics is also more than a politics concerning what should happen according to these objects. What is true for those working with affect is:

[that] which most successfully dip[s] back into the finite stream of feeling and grow[s] most easily confluent with some particular wave or wavelet. Such confluence not only proves the intellectual operation to have been true . . . Only in so far as they lead us, successfully or unsuccessfully, back into sensible experience again, are our abstracts and universals true or false at all (James 2008 [1912], 46)

6

The tensions of affect studies are not then about, for example, feeling and emotion versus a broader affecting and being affected, and everything that falls out from this. The deeper tensions of affect studies are caught between two very different, if intertwined, formations of ecologies of practice and their formations of time. On the one hand, there is the need to accommodate standard academic practice—reading, writing, publishing, teaching, being cited, aligning oneself within the taxonomies and value-adding exchanges and orderings of certain names (or for that matter concepts, or valorisations of certain fields of study). On the other hand, there is affect studies' real work (though work that changes its nature within and between each moment): working to attune to what I will call the *immanence of the communicative event*.

7

I once stubbed my toe and could neither fall nor recover my upright position. I tumbled forward, windmilling my arms for perhaps seven or eight metres, and then fell through a plate glass window, as if in some cartoon. As I fell, my head positioned itself close to the ground, under the now falling glass. I thought it could be my last moments (it wasn't—aside from some stitches I was fine). Time really did slow down remarkably. There was a beautiful sound like hundreds of tinkling bells as little shards of glass, mixed with blood from my head, fell all around me like beautiful tiny, red and silver lights. The moment was, and has remained until this day, profound (lucky that I was). I think it was time slowing down that drew my attention to this as an immanently communicative event—and an event of the world as the transmission of influences or feeling in which affecting and being affected involved an immanent refolding of powers. One could of course discuss any event as communicative and affective in this immanent unfolding and refolding of powers, though it happens that it is a little odd—and perhaps more than a little disturbing—to pay attention to this when you might not want to. This would include those events we usually consider communicative in an everyday sense—conversations, giving papers at conferences, lecturing, teaching, discussing things over coffee, negotiating a handshake or a hug, or who goes through a door first ... simply speaking and/or listening (who does either, and how?). Yet we seldom discuss the immanence of the communicative

event, perhaps precisely because this might mean acknowledging that this is where the work of affect, communication and (im)mediation (Manning, Munster, and Stavning Thomsen 2018) is done, in and as the making of the moment. It is also where, more importantly, powers really do form, uniform, and play themselves out.

Paying closer attention to the immanence of the communicative event would change the world. Yet we tend to prefer our politics elsewhere. We are great on communication strategies and performances issues, and general theories about what's going on (this is something of an example of course). All this work is usually directed towards other places, other times, larger structures and infrastructures of feeling and power. In many ways, it is directed towards the constitution of fields of study, or activity, elsewhere. This can of course be important. It can at the same time involve self or group interests, as an investment in the future formations of powers.

8

Yet at the same time there is a way in which we always fully inhabit the immanence of the communicative event and its direct transmission of influences, and folding of powers. This is in what we could call simply, the real, immediate *feeling of power* as a constitutional part of each event. We always tend to know how much power we have (or more correctly, how much power—and the feeling of power—has us). Or rather we always *feel* this, even if we do not immediately 'know' it. (And no doubt part of the distribution of powers in the communicative event involves who feels what kinds of distribution of powers and how immediately.)

Asking questions of this has always been the real strength of work within affect studies, and a large part of its ethics. Experimenting with how this feeling of power might be differently gathered, speculative pragmatically, within the immanence of communicative events, might be just as important a part of the ethics of affect studies.

9

Affect Studies needs such an ethics. Yet it can perhaps (and indeed often does) juxtapose such inhabiting of the strange multiplicities of feelings of power in events with a careful noting and a reworking of the way the “history of the present” comes

into such events (Berlant 2016; Massumi 2015, 207ff; Foucault 1979, 31). In doing so it questions many core assumptions about how things work, and what's going on—assumptions about the distribution of powers to affect and be affected, and of feelings of power in any immanent event in constructions of race, gender, capital, etc.

10

Questioning the history of the present of the *neurotypical* distribution of powers within the immanence of the communicative event is important for many reasons. It is important not least because the neurotypical is so fundamental to the formations of the university, and research and education more generally. It is important more specifically because there are many traces of neurotypical concepts and formations of feeling within thinking, and working with feeling itself. All work with affect—formal or informal—involves an ongoing distribution of powers as to who gets to feel, or to be conceived to feel, in what ways, and how and in which situations. This is crucial to neurotypical (and in league with this, other) erasures of diversity. It is also crucial to the way that institutions such as universities (and many others) support fundamental underpinnings of power that are reduplicated, if differentially, within the communicative and affective *in situ*. This includes some troubling, if often assumed complex distributions of powers, and feelings of power, as to what will even count as communicative and/or affective, within the very conception, technical design, techniques and strategies of communication (including of course those aspects of communication so key to academic apportionings of the *feeling of power*). If there is a gap in the field at the moment, this might be it. As Manning writes, “It is still far too rare that we discuss neurotypicality as that which frames our ways of knowing, of presenting ourselves, of being bodies in the world” (Evans and Manning 2018, n.p.).³

Generally, it is perhaps no accident that so many find in affect studies a way of working towards new pathways through the constitution of powers in the immanence of the communicative event. This often involves a speculative empiricism. As autistic Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay (2015) writes in *What I Learned in Special-Ed*:

I created my own learning goals, which in turn created some very interesting situations. I analyzed the responses of people to these situations—what I call my social experiments. I became an empiricist. Why shouldn't the autistic study the neurotypical? Why shouldn't he make productive use of his time? By becoming a scientist and philosopher, I was able to master my boredom (9).

11

One of the obstacles to these new pathways is a peculiar conflation of so-called “theory of mind” (the idea that one can develop a working conception of the thoughts and feelings of others, in other words, of their 'mind') with something like a computational theory of mind (so that, we might say, due to our commonality, computers can have a working knowledge of our 'minds' and we of theirs). Or so that we can say, for example, that we can see ourselves, or others, in our or their data. Such conflations have been incredibly important to so much of post-cold war, cognitivist, and informational culture (and in turn to the educational, managerial, and other cultures they have infused). Melanie Yergeau (2013) has pointed to a certain constitution of powers, and feelings of power, around feeling itself as part of theory of mind. This produces, of course, an active and savage exclusion of the neurodiverse.

12

Perhaps for a theory of mind—general, computational, cognitivist, or otherwise—we could substitute the large variety of affect thinking that doubles attention to the multiplicity that is affective capacity immanent to a situation. Here there is much to learn from outside neurotypicality (even if such a thing as neurotypicality does not in fact exist beyond its formation as a key distribution of powers and feelings of power). In fact, there is much to learn about the immanence of the communicative event itself.

Anne Corwin speaks of neurotypicals as those who “chunk” experience: neurotypicals perceive by categorizing. Autistic perception, on the other hand, troubles categories, feeling-seeing the world coming into itself. Autistic perception is the direct perception of the forming of experience (Evans and Manning 2018, n.p.).

In other words, the non-neurotypical experience is often that of fielding rather than chunked fields.

13

Another task for affect studies has been to rethink the basics of representation, and of signs in terms of what we might call an *affective semiotics* (inspired by the work of Ana Ramos, forthcoming). This would make affect a semiotic of the moving, of the affecting and affected, of, as even Claude Shannon remarked, the ongoing “transformation of information” (in Horgan 2017), rather than the clear communication of information. It would not take signs or symbols as quasi-objects but rather as signaletic matter (Stavning Thomsen 2018). Subject and object would emerge from signal-semiotic fields rather than communicate through them. Affect would not become a contesting of the representational by the non-representational but rather a reconceiving of what representation, and mimesis, involve (Gibbs 2010). An affective semiotics would be close to what Whitehead (1978 [1929]) called “symbolic reference,” which concerns the immanent formation of perception as the world's basis for what is only the one special case of what we call signs and symbols among other instances of symbolic reference (121). Symbolic reference combines our immediate perception of a fielding with the very movement of fielding itself. In other words, it is a very affective and whole world notion of both the symbolic and reference.

14

Perhaps then, we can rethink what has become the very core of the materialist version of the cognitive and the rationalist—symbolic processing in the brain as thinking. To begin, we might think it as, first, *processing* which may or may not involve symbols as we usually think them. Second, we might think of it as signal processing (as part of the world as the transmission of influences). Thirdly, however, we might think of thinking itself not directly as the kind of binary logic that is the basis for many cognitive models, but instead as a kind of *proprioception within the brain*. Thinking itself involves an immanence of communicative/affective events. The brain literally has a kind of proprioceptive feeling of its own shifting state, as sense (that neuroscientists refer to as connection and different “weights” of connection and so on). Finally, we might then undo the figure of the brain in order to realise the full powers of working ecologies of mind into which an unfigured brain might participate. As Deleuze and Guattari (1994) write, “[N]ot every organism has a brain, and not all life is organic, but everywhere there are forces that constitute microbrains, or an inorganic life of things” (213).

15

Perhaps then we can begin to breakdown the longstanding division of matter (as that which is static) and process that still inhabits even affect studies. This breakdown would not work to favour either matter or process, but rather favour an emphasis on what affects and is affected.

16

And perhaps, then, affect studies would be even more prepared for what is no longer just a rhetorical 'changing world.' What new affects, powers of affecting, and being affected are arriving with climate change? What would be a way to think affective powers within the event encounters of the different speeds and formations of A.I.?

17

How are we to feel, to work within events, when we have to deal with so many changes, with both climate change and automation at once, for example?

18

None of this is to say that affect, per se, is in itself a wonderful thing and should in some impossible or contradictory way be "pursued." Rather, better means of attending to affect, and being able to experiment within affect's formation powers, may be the crucial contribution of affect studies, even after the dissolution of other disciplines and institutions.

Endnotes

1. Thanks, as always, to all at the Senselab in Montréal from where much of this thinking has emerged (although they are not to blame for glitches). Thanks especially to Mayra Morales for a workshop we ran on differential communication/differential movement.

2. See Nikitah Okembe-RA Imani's critique of Eurocentric notions of time (2018, 47), during which he in turn draws on Marimba Ani's critique of the Platonic bifurcation of reason and rationality, and desire and pleasure, in order to create a free will/predestination opposition within a linear and overarching concept of time (1994). See also Denise Ferreira Da Silva on Descartes' division of the interior and the exterior, the latter involving an 'affectability' to be avoided by "man, the subject of knowledge" (2007, 44). *Affect Studies* as a field perhaps only becomes possible, if at the same time the more necessary, in the shadow of such formations.

3. Manning also writes: "To engage with neurodiversity is to speak up about the extraordinary silence around neurotypicality and to acknowledge that we do not question ourselves enough as regards what kinds of bodies are welcomed and supported in education, and in social life more broadly" (Evans and Manning 2018, n.p.).

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