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After or beyond feeling? A consideration of affect and emotion in geography

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Introduction

Recently, geographical work on affect has made a small but noticeable emergence (e.g. McCormack 2003; Thrift 2004). In the context of diverse and emergent geographies of emotion (e.g. Anderson and Smith 2001; Wood 2002; Bennett 2004; Davidson and Bondi 2004; Thien 2005; Bondi forthcoming), this work on affect has a distinctive, intentional bent towards the ‘transhuman’ – a state of being after or beyond human. This political move to get after or beyond humanity seeks to surpass a ‘simple romanticism of somehow maximising individual emotions’ (Thrift 2004, 68). This model of affect discourages an engagement with everyday emotional subjectivities, falling into a familiar pattern of distancing emotion from ‘reasonable’ scholarship and simultaneously implying that the emotion of the individual, that is, the realm of ‘personal’ feelings, is distinct from wider (public) agendas and desirably so. In contrast, placing emotion in the context of our always intersubjective relations offers more promise for politically relevant, emphatically human, geographies.

Affect has arguably been on the philosophical register for many centuries; however, as the academies of the twenty-first century take shape, an increasing attention to emotion is rippling through the forefront of critical thought, bringing questions of affect to the forefront. Social, cultural and feminist geographers (Bondi 1999 forthcoming; Wood 2002; Airey 2003; Bondi and Fewell 2003; Callard 2003; Thrift 2004), cultural and gender theorists (Chodorow 1999; Ahmed 2002 2004; Harding and Pribram 2002; Sedgwick 2003), philosophers (Nussbaum 2001), sociologists (Jamieson 1998; Hochschild 2000 2003; Williams 2001; Fortier 2003); those in the psychological disciplines (Matthis 2000; Blackman 2004) and neuroscientists (Damasio 2000) are all turning their attention to emotion. Sociologist Simon Williams offers several reasons for the current increase in a scholarly interest in the emotions: the influence of critical and feminist debates about rationality and critiques of master narratives; a greater interest in the body as discursive (following Foucault), as phenomenological (Merleau-Ponty) or hyperreal (Baudrillard); an increasing consumer culture and the resulting commercialization of emotions; a therapeutic culture within which we are advised to manage our emotions (emotional health); and a set of political debates about emotions, democracy and life (emotion as communication with or commitment to others) (Williams 2001). Williams’ summary is not exhaustive; nonetheless, his outline gives shape to a rich and diverse emerging field.

This affective turn in social and critical thought is challenging the ‘residual cultural Cartesianism’ (Thrift 2004, 57) which keeps emotion out of place within academic research and practice. While Descartes’ legacy is apparent across the social sciences, within geography it has held particular sway (Rose 1993). Emotional geographies encompasses a growing interdisciplinary scholarship that combines the insights of geography, gender studies, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology and other disciplines to
understand how the world is mediated by feeling. Collectively, this still nascent work carries forward poststructuralist challenges to a strictly ‘rational’ and masculinist social science (Rose 1993) by addressing the spatialities of emotions. Geographers Kay Anderson and Sue Smith make a case for furthering research on the emotions, suggesting we are in need of work that acknowledges the emotions as ways of knowing, being and doing in the broadest sense; and using this to take geographical knowledges... beyond their more usual visual, textual and linguistic domains. (2001, 8)

They call for a ‘sharper “geographical sensibility”’, so that we might better understand what is currently half-hidden, if not invisible in some research: emotion as a fundamental aspect of human experience (Anderson and Smith 2001, 9).

**Affect**

‘Affect’ is a term with a distinctly psychological pedigree. In the standard English translation of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, ‘affect’ is used, at times loosely, in relationship to instincts, drives and emotions. Thus in his early work on the unconscious, Freud speaks of ‘an affective or emotional impulse’ (Freud 1991 [1915], 180). Irene Matthis (2000) draws on a close reading of Freud’s later work, and specifically his paper, ‘An Outline of Psycho-Analysis’ (Freud 1949 [1940]), to develop the notion of affect. She suggests that ‘affect’ is a matrix that encompasses both feelings and emotions, and as such that it is a ‘higher order’ level of organization.

More recently, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that affect is an ‘immediate instrumentality’, the defining orientation toward a specified aim and end different from itself, that finally distinguishes the drives from the affects’ (Sedgwick 2003, 19, emphasis in the original). In this rendering, in contrast to drives, affects have ‘greater freedom’ as regards time, aim and object and can be ‘attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects’ (Sedgwick 2003, 19). These definitions vary in the varying degrees of (conscious or unconscious) intent which they ascribe to processes of affect – the *why* of affect. What each of these definitions – impulse, mode of organization, instrumentality – has in common is the sense that affect is the *how* of emotion. That is, affect is used to describe (in both the communicative and literal sense) the motion of emotion.

**Geographies of affect**

The emerging geographies of affect continue to reach for the ‘how’ of affect. Thrift (2004, 64) offers a wide-ranging examination of ‘affect’ as it is employed theoretically, noting that disparate theoretical starting points for understanding affect are united by a dependency on ‘a sense of push in the world’. In particular, Thrift focuses on affect as ‘always emergent’ which he argues is best described by Brian Massumi: ‘Affects are virtual synesthetic perspectives anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them’ (Massumi 2002, 35–6, quoted in Thrift 2004, 63). McCormack (2003) also draws from Massumi and is similarly excited by the potential of the virtual: ‘Affect, for Massumi, is unqualified intensity, implicated in the sensible materiality of corporeality, but in a way that opens up the actuality of experience to what Massumi, following, Deleuze, calls the virtual’. For Massumi (2002), as quoted in McCormack, the virtual refers to ‘the pressing crowd of incipiencies and tendencies...a realm of potential’ (McCormack 2003, 495).

In describing his research encounters with Dance Movement Therapy, McCormack argues that emotion is a limiting concept, one that ‘refuses to grant sensibility and sensation the freedom of a movement and force that exists prior to such economies of meaning’ (2003, 495). He describes an adherence to ‘a grammar of affective relations that divides the world up into “the space of my feeling” and the inaccessible affect of another’ (McCormack 2003, 500). Affect, however, ‘while it is implicated in corporeal sensibility... is never reducible to the personal quality of emotion’ (McCormack 2003, 501). Furthermore, McCormack argues that the ‘creative potential of affect is arrested when one attempts to quantify or qualify its position as personal’ (2003, 496). In a related move, Thrift indicates his desire to separate his discussion of affect from anything perceived as ‘nice and cuddly’: ‘one all too common interpretation of what adding affect will contribute’ (Thrift 2004, 58). The effort to avoid ‘touchy-feely’ versions of emotion and any ‘absurd’, ‘silly’ or ‘wrongheaded’ ideas (Thrift 2004) perhaps unsurprisingly results in a concentration on the transhuman and the virtual (McCormack 2003; Thrift 2004). The ‘inhuman’ or ‘transhuman’ framework Thrift argues, is one ‘in which individuals are generally understood as effects of the events to which their body parts (broadly understood) respond and in which they participate’ (Thrift 2004, 60).
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The disavowal of a feminized ‘personal’ is a definitive aspect of the transhuman vision as articulated in these geographies of affect. Emotion as a ‘personal quality’ is perceived as a discrete, contained and containing space. The jettisoning of the term ‘emotion’ in favour of the term ‘affect’ seems compelled by an underlying revisiting, if in a more theoretically sophisticated register, of the binary trope of emotion as negatively positioned in opposition to reason, as objectionably soft and implicitly feminized. In this conceptual positioning, these transhuman geographies re-draw yet again not only the demarcation between masculinist reason and feminized emotion, but also the false distinction between ‘personal’ and ‘political’ which feminist scholars have extensively critiqued. Instead, affective geographies should draw our attention exactly because they dissolve such public/private boundaries (Harding and Pribram 2002).

More than or less than human?

Affects that are virtual are ‘almost’, they are potential, they are syn(es)thetic, they are by McCormack’s definition, impersonal. The particular ‘things’ that embody affects are perceived as a limitation, an anchor, literally a drag. Seeking a way to work with these (perceived to be limiting and disorienting) structures, Thrift is preoccupied throughout his essay on affect with the metaphor of engineering:

affect is more and more likely to be actively engineered with the result that it is becoming something more akin to the networks of pipes and cables that are of such importance in providing the basic mechanics and root textures of urban life . . . a set of constantly performing relays and junctions that are laying down all manner of new emotional histories and geographies. (Thrift 2004, 58)

Thrift further suggests his paper constructs ‘the foundations of a new kind of cultural engineering . . . upon which and with which new forms of political practice that value democracy as a functional disunity will be able to be built’ (Thrift 2004, 75).

This ethical, even moral, framing is key to Thrift’s reading of affect. Thrift suggests there is a danger in the corporate and state efforts to control affect and thus those who are worried by such developments must produce alternative interpretations and analyses: ‘what is being aimed for is a navigation of feeling which goes beyond the simple romanticism of somehow maximising individual emotions’ (Thrift 2004, 68). One crucial move on his agenda is to seek out a positive engagement with the world: ‘rather than make private bargains with misery, a politics of hope’ (Thrift 2004, 68). McCormack also seeks an ethical agenda in his participant observation with a Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) group, but is explicit that his goal is not to seek to delve behind the aesthetic surface of the corporeal, for example to expose the hidden relations of power that underpin it. Indeed the moment at which such an imperative takes over is precisely the moment at which an encounter with a practice like DMT ceases to become ethical (McCormack 2003, 502, emphasis in the original).

Other modes of feeling

The emphasis on seeking to positively engage with and to honour what is on the surface – or perhaps more accurately, to dissolve such spatial distinctions – signals a politics of intent and a concern, more broadly, with an ethical research process (a concern previously reflected on in this venue – see Bailey 2001). Each of these aims, in and of themselves, is I would argue desirable. My concern is not, then, with evoking a politics of intent, but rather with valorizing a politics which is intent on moving beyond or past the state of being human (a politics which leads inevitably to questions of which human states are to be abandoned – by contrast, see Conradson and Latham (2005) who advocate careful attention to the everyday practices and mobilities of translocal subjects). In the case of Thrift and McCormack’s use of Massumi’s theorizations to ‘charge the actual with the animating potential of the virtual’ (McCormack 2003, 501), the prescriptions for a politics of change seem to be founded on an unreal and apolitical basis: on a ‘virtual’ world where an undifferentiated people have the power to make bargains with their fortunes, and where an acknowledgement of power relations must be left behind precisely as an unethical movement. These moves can surely only be made when and where power is already (with)held.

In the desire to push past the humanity of emotional experience, the valorization of affect through mechanistic metaphors of pipes and cables builds over a rich field of potential understanding. ‘Affect’ as a term and a concept is employed here in masculinist, technocratic and distancing ways. An alternative to the modes of distancing offered by these geographies of affect can be found in a feminist
attention to relational spaces – Probyn has called this the ‘spatial imperative of subjectivity’ in her eponymous essay (Probyn 2003). I have elaborated elsewhere on how Luce Irigaray’s philosophies of sexual difference convey this agenda (Thien 2004). Irigaray’s work seeks to find difference, not through distancing, but through acknowledging the highly subjective and necessarily incomplete constitution of our psychic, interpersonal, political and ethical spaces. While Irigaray also draws on metaphor, her political project is to rework the symbolic (language, speech) that has cast women oppositionally (as purely biological, emotional and weak): ‘[I]nstead of remaining a different gender, the feminine has become, in our languages, the non-masculine, that is to say an abstract nonexistent reality’ (Irigaray 1993, 20). Irigaray, instead, seeks to re-articulate the relationship between women and language in order that women may acquire a positivity, a place from which to be ‘heard as women’ (1993, 20).

In seeking to find a metaphor of ‘positivity’, the figuring of an ‘emotional subject’ or an ‘emotional self’ offers a more satisfactory alternative to the mechanistic visions springing from the work on affect. Considering the production and reproduction of an ‘emotional subject’ (Harding and Pribram 2002) informs our understanding of the relationship between the self and the places of our (en)actions. Cultural theorists, Jennifer Harding and E. Deirdre Pribram argue that the ways in which the subject acts emotionally are also part and parcel of the reproduction of . . . specific categories of subjects and the power relations that constitute them. (Harding and Pribram 2002, 421)

Following Judith Butler, they assert: ‘The produced subject, whose production is ongoing and never complete, acts within horizons that constitute the very potential for acting’ (Harding and Pribram 2002, 421). The mutual constitution of selves and spaces is encompassed in this figure. Sociologist Deborah Lupton argues similarly for attention to an emotional self. We use emotional concepts, Lupton notes, to give meaning and provide explanation for our lives, for why we respond to life events, other people, material artefacts and places in certain ways, why we might tend to follow patterns of behaviour throughout our lives. (Lupton 1998, 6)

An emotional subject offers an intersubjective means to negotiating our place in the world, co-produced in cultural discourses of emotion as well as through psycho-social narratives. An attention to emotional geographies is an attention to relationality, intersubjectivity, and an always incomplete being (Bondi 1999, 19). Similarly, Irigaray builds her ethical/political agenda on the knowledge that we are only autonomous vis-à-vis our relationships.

Conclusion

The recent analyses of affect direct attention to the virtual and transhuman. This move to get after or beyond humanity in all our diversity also pushes us past the emotional landscapes of daily life. It is my feeling that such a focus is insufficient for addressing the issues of relationality which are so profoundly embedded in our everyday emotional lives. Turning away from a technocratic and distancing perspective on affect, a revisioning of emotion as part of an intersubjective process, as emphasized by some feminist and cultural scholars, acknowledges that distances between ‘us’ are always relational, and indeed that we are intimately subjected by emotion.

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Notes

1 The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud translates Freud’s German texts into English under the general editorship of James Strachey. The accuracy of this translation is not without debate (i.e. Bettelheim 1984; see also Ricoeur 1970).

2 They suggest gender, class, sexuality and race as such categories (Harding and Pribram 2002, 421).

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