

## 8

# Affect: A Wrong Turn?

Affect Theory, as its advocates call it, has emerged as a new research programme in a range of disciplines – cultural studies, human geography, feminist theory, sociology, and, latterly, anthropology. The meaning of the word ‘affect’ in this new endeavour diverges markedly from both ordinary and scientific usages. Drawing on the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, and before him Spinoza, Affect Theory returns to the etymological roots of ‘affect’ in reconnecting the meaning of the word as a *verb* (to affect, have an effect on) and as a *noun* (from the Latin *affectus*, ‘affection’, bodily affect). As geographer Steve Pile puts it in a useful overview, in the new paradigm, ‘affect describ[es] both a capacity to be affected, and to affect, and also specific flows of affect that lie beyond cognition’ (2010: 12). Writers in this vein evidently intend something quite different from the concept of affect as understood in mainstream emotion theory. What they mean – and what they mean for anthropology – we shall come to. But first, what of the standard, semi-technical usages in psychology and Anglo-American philosophy?

## Affect in Psychology and Philosophy

It is encouraging, and unusual in our overspecialized world, that emotion researchers in psychology, analytic philosophy, psycholinguistics, history, and cognitive science talk to each other and debate one another’s theories and findings. A community of interest has blossomed in international conferences,

learned societies, and thriving interdisciplinary journals. What has emerged from decades of debate is a broad field of emotion studies in which participants from the humanities and the 'affective sciences' speak a common theoretical language. Naturally, several of the key terms are hotly contested – including 'emotion' itself. Others have a rather ad hoc designation. In particular, the usage of 'affect' has been quite loose and variable, as some examples will illustrate. A psychology textbook gives the following gloss: 'general, slightly old-fashioned term used to include emotions, moods, and preferences' (Oatley, Keltner & Jenkins 2006: 412). A recent special issue of *Emotion Review* on 'affect dynamics' uses 'affect' and 'emotion' interchangeably (Kuppens 2015). A reader in social psychology assigns *affect* or *affective states* to the broadest category of 'emotional feelings': "Affect" refers to any psychological state that is felt and in some way is evaluative or valenced (positive or negative). Indeed, the range of phenomena encompassed by the term "affect" includes not only moods, emotions, and emotional episodes, but also pleasures, pains, likes, and dislikes' (Parrott 2001: 4). In contrast, the cognitive psychologist Frijda (1994: 61) uses the term more narrowly to refer to 'pleasant or unpleasant feeling', a sense also signalled in the term 'experienced affect' (Niedenthal 2008). Likewise, in discussions of components or dimensions (two rival approaches to emotional phenomena), 'affect' usually has this narrower denotation. Although the sense is usually stipulated in context, the designation varies in scope. Inconsistency has made general discussion more difficult, leading Solomon to question 'the vague, general (and technical) notion of "affect" and its cognates ("affective tone")', and to wonder whether it merely substitutes for 'feeling' (2008: 10).

Anthropological usage is similarly wayward. Blurring important differences, the older studies of socialization employ 'affect' as a synonym of 'feeling', 'emotion', and 'attitude' (H. Geertz 1959; Harkness & Kilbride 1983). As in psychology, when a narrower sense is intended, 'affect' tends to mean the feeling-tone or valenced subjective response, the 'feeling good' or 'bad' about something; as such, an element in a larger process of evaluation and action. Once again, designation is usually clear from context; ambiguity arises only when generalizations are proposed. When Michelle Rosaldo claims that 'affects, whatever their similarities, are no more similar than the societies in which we live' (1984: 145), it is not clear whether she is referring to feelings, emotion episodes, or vague mental states. The intention is to defend cultural relativism; but to what does it apply?

In a bibliographic review of 'language and affect' in anthropology, Niko Besnier applied 'affect' inclusively to feelings, emotions, and '*affect*, the subjective states that observers ascribe to a person on the basis of the person's conduct' (1990: 421). Besnier eschews definitional concerns in order to widen the scope of enquiry, a sound anthropological principle. But as Louis Charland notes: 'an important feature of domain names of this sort is that their precise theoretical meaning depends on research in the very fields they are supposed to delimit. In the case of 'affect' this has led to an intriguing situation where both the term and the domain have been called into question' (Charland 2009: 9). If you want to have your cake and eat it, it helps to know what counts as cake.

A central debate about affect in emotion theory has hinged on how it relates to cognition – how it is triggered, how modified in conscious experience

(Clore & Ortony 2008, Scherer 2005). A celebrated mid-century experiment by Schachter and Singer seemed to show that both affect and cognition were necessarily involved in fully-fledged emotion – the ‘two-factor’ theory. To simplify, a feeling of nervous agitation caused by an injection of adrenaline was experienced as ‘emotion’ only when a motivating context was supplied to the injectee. Then the disturbance was felt as *anger* (offensive scenario) or *joy* (humorous scenario) (see Cornelius 1996 for a review). Since then, and notwithstanding the continued catch-all usage, the accumulation of evidence has driven a trend towards a sharper distinction between *affect* as an undifferentiated process of arousal and *emotion* as, variously, a syndrome of components (including affect), an Anglo folk category unrecognized in other traditions, or an emergent state that arises from a combination of biological, social, and cultural inputs – to name only some of the options (Clore & Ortony 2008).

Recent work on affect in neuroscience and cognitive psychology is difficult for non-scientists to assess, although plenty have weighed in with opinions, backing favoured theorists like prizefighters in the ring. Unlike the bitter culture wars of the humanities, however, debate is increasingly collaborative across party lines, as shown by new interdisciplinary journals like *Emotion Review* (I declare an interest here). *ER*'s founding editor, James Russell, himself sceptical of the scientific utility of the emotion concept, puts the case for a big tent approach to theoretical discussion as follows:

In much the same way that the concept of thought is treated by cognitive psychologists, emotion is treated here as a constitutional monarch: The word *emotion* remains as a name for

the general topic of discussion but is denied any real power, such as the power to determine borders. Thus the scope of the proposed framework [discussed below] is broader than emotion (including states such as comfort, serenity, drowsiness, and lethargy). Gone is the assumption that all events called *emotion* or *fear* or *anger* can be accounted for in the same way. These concepts are not abandoned but are put in their proper place as folk rather than as scientific concepts, and their role limited to whatever role folk concepts actually play in emotion (and in the perception of emotion in others). (Russell 2003: 146)

Boundary anxieties are a perennial problem in anthropological discussions of emotion. How does emotion relate to context? Where does affect belong? Is emotion different from thought? What is essential, what peripheral? So Russell's strategic ecumenism ought to work for us too. It casts the net wide and opens up enquiry to the unexpected, a precondition of good fieldwork.

Perhaps surprisingly, and in contrast to older theories, recent work in cognitive psychology leaves the anthropologist considerable freedom in an enlarged field, gates thrown open. Basic emotions theories like that of Ekman had limited cultural variation to 'display rules' – cultural rules modifying facial expression and what to feel. In cognitive approaches, the workings of the nervous system are seen to be in dynamic relation to situation, categorization, action, and felt experience – all of which cry out for ethnographic attention (Barrett & Russell 2015; Parkinson, Fischer & Manstead 2005, Scherer 2004). A focus on components and their contingent interrelations therefore leaves everything to play for. You might, for example, place the emphasis on *situation* rather than affect or category. Ortony and Clore (2008: 631–632) argue that 'the distinctiveness of an emotion may lie in the nature of the situation it represents, not in a stored pattern of latent emotional potential'. To which the anthropologist would add: show me a situation and I will show you *many*

emotions, situation itself being a construct depending on point of view, biography and 'narrative'.

## James Russell: Core Affect and Psychological Constructionism

Russell's inclusive approach to the data, trailed above, is compatible with several characterizations of emotion, but it differs from some in dealing *not* in notional wholes like 'emotion' or 'emotional episode' but in more primitive building blocks. On his account (but in my non-scientific words), 'core affect' is the fluctuating current of feeling prior to cognition and action, the hum of interior life, the purring of the engine: 'Core affect is a pre-conceptual primitive process, a neurophysiological state, accessible to consciousness as a simple non-reflective feeling: feeling good or bad, feeling lethargic or energised.' (Russell 2009: 1264)

It has two dimensions, each a continuum: activation/deactivation (i.e. level of arousal) and pleasure/displeasure (i.e. valence), corresponding to two independent neurophysiological systems. What English speakers call 'rage' corresponds to a state of core affect high in both arousal and displeasure; 'depressed' corresponds to low arousal/high displeasure; 'joy' to high arousal/high pleasure; 'contented' to moderate pleasure/low arousal. As challenges and opportunities arise and fade, core affect swims in and out of consciousness, making itself felt with greater or lesser urgency. Fear and disgust might be similar in intensity and unpleasantness, but their subjective experience as fear or disgust is the result of a process that unfolds *after* the alerting change in core affect. In this respect, Russell follows William James. Relevant changes in

the internal or external environment (a sudden memory, a strong coffee, an insult, a charging bull) activate a change in core affect which prompts an automatic search for an object congruent with the feeling, a process of 'attribution'. One can feel pleurably energized and attribute the feeling to an achieved goal (hence 'satisfaction', 'pride'), a lover ('love', 'lust'), or an event ('excitement'). One can feel bad and attribute the feeling to a foe ('hate') or misattribute it to an innocent target ('Now look what you've made me do!'). The cause need not be the formal object.

The object hit upon has an 'affective quality', a propensity to affect the subject that depends on a range of factors, cultural, social, and biographical. A pig possesses different affective qualities for a Niha feastgiver, a Muslim, and a child hearing bedtime stories. These affective qualities are not intrinsic, but derive from cultural values, social position, and experience. Without discussing them – his framework is strictly psychological – Russell fully acknowledges the importance of social, cultural, and idiosyncratic factors in emotional experience. They are our entry point, the ethnographer's meat and drink.

In Russell's theory, which refers to 'psychological construction', words like 'anger' and 'fear' denote concepts with associated scripts that are culturally specific. In the process of appraisal of the 'object' (the thing to which affect is attributed), the subject categorizes the experience with a relevant concept, 'anger' or whatever. This in turn shapes the experience. Feeling 'angry', I am motivated to behave in a certain way – with aggression, say. If I categorize my agitation differently (thanks to upbringing) as 'indignation', I will respond differently. We have seen how Utku and Javanese, having different emotion

concepts, respond in ways sometimes puzzling to us. Even the dictionary equivalents of 'anger' in Javanese and Niasan possess slightly different scripts, different models of context, feeling and behaviour. Russell calls these *categorized* experiences 'meta-emotions' – psychological constructions that correspond to what emotion realists (e.g. basic emotions theorists) call 'emotions'. Tomkins (1984), for example, defines affects as 'innate mechanisms', but uses English words like 'terror' and 'contempt', which have distinctive cultural profiles. In Russell's terms, once Tomkins applies such labels to biological processes, he is talking of meta-emotions. Meta-emotions serve to organize subjective experience according to cultural scripts; they are not natural kinds.

The theory has much more to it, and the elaboration of the detail – building on half a century of work by an army of researchers – is fascinating, though in essence the framework is beautifully simple (see Barrett & Russell 2015 for the current state of debate). The bald summary above is directed by my concerns and limited by a layman's understanding. But it shows where anthropology retains an interest and a foothold in cross-disciplinary emotion research. It also serves as a baseline from which to assess the new paradigm of Affect Theory, which seems to deal with some of the same elements.

Readers who have followed the examples – literary and ethnographic – in this book will see how closely they match Russell's theory. (And they were not pre-cooked or retrofitted: I have had them in mind for years.) Such examples also underline the necessity, at least for the anthropologist, of going well beyond immediate situation (minimally conceived in Russell, both in timespan and



complexity). So, let me end this section with a final example from Tolstoy – who else? – that descends from the abstract to glorious particulars.

The following scene from *Anna Karenina* offers a striking instance of the interplay of core affect, unfolding context, feeling, and meaning – all within a narrative rich in character and plot. The lovestruck Levin – presented with the gentlest irony as a thinker pitched into life, a Hamlet who says Yes – is on his way to find Kitty and propose to her. The passage begins in a manner Tolstoy’s contemporary, William James, would approve: ‘At four o’clock, conscious of his throbbing heart, Levin stepped out of a hired sledge.’ (The Maudes’ translation has the hyper-Jamesian ‘feeling his heart beating’.) Levin’s agitation is increased by the fact that his proposal will come as a surprise – more, in fact, than he realizes – and may be rejected: ‘He walked along the path toward the skating-ground, and kept saying to himself: “You mustn’t be excited, you must be calm. What’s the matter with you? What do you want? Be quiet, stupid,” he conjured his heart. And the more he tried to compose himself, the more breathless he found himself.’ (2001/1877: 34) We might call this love compounded by hope and fear, but would gain nothing by naming the emotions other than pointing out that within a single sequence, itself within a larger emotional frame (‘in love’), different, even contrary, emotions (Russell’s meta-emotions) are intermixed. And then, in a remarkable passage that captures point of view, affective transformation of perception, affective quality of object, attribution, and bodily feedback: ‘He walked on a few steps and the skating-ground lay open before his eyes, and at once, amidst all the skaters, he knew her. He knew she was there by the rapture and the terror that seized on his heart.’ (*ibid.*) What Tolstoy lays out

is a unitary experience that comprehends perception, all-over disturbance (not to limit it to the body), feeling, and thinking. To feel the rapture of love is not merely to judge someone as loveable and feel accordingly, as Solomon (1993) would have it, but to see, feel, and know in a certain way: 'for Levin she was as easy to find in that crowd as a rose among nettles. Everything was made bright.'

The ingredients of the narrative are instantly recognizable: it is a portrait taken from life. But as always with Tolstoy the greater narrative context brings to the episode other dimensions – the contrast with the unhappy Anna–Vronsky–Karenin triangle, a sense of the springs of life, the pivotal moment of self-discovery, the beauty of the ordinary – which is what gives a simple human story, fodder for many a soap opera, its emotional reach. The scene is affecting because affect is given its proper narrative place.

## Affect Theory

How different from all this is the brave new world of 'affect theory'! So different that the two bodies of thought hardly touch, their leading lights inhabiting different intellectual spheres. Which of these spheres, we might wonder, pertains to *our* world? To ask that question is to assume a shared or – at least in principle – shareable world that includes the broad field of scholarly enquiry and science. But that cannot be taken for granted. We come abruptly to a paradox. Affect theory draws freely, if haphazardly, on biology and neuroscience, but its practitioners are not scientists, they are mostly unaware of – or show no interest in – the range of what I have loosely called emotion theory, and their line of

argument is often hostile, or at least orthogonal, to scientific methods and reasoning.<sup>1</sup>

Still, there are points of contact. The favoured emotion scientists – among the few cited – are in the Tomkins–Ekman–Izard tradition of biologically-based explanation, of which Antonio Damasio is the current distinguished standard-bearer. But affect theorists diverge in which biological systems they prefer. Some go for the central nervous system (Massumi 2002); others look for affect in the recesses of the brain, the endocrine glands, or even in the vapours of emotional contagion (Brennan 2004). The irony of mixing outré *post*-poststructuralist rhetoric with wide-eyed scientism is inescapable. It is as if the New Atheists – Dawkins, Hitchens, and Grayling – had adopted Mother Teresa as their mascot.

Why this should be the case is an interesting byway of intellectual history. In their parallel reviews, Papoulis and Callard (2010) and Leys (2011) argue that the movement's proponents found the separation of affect from cognition espoused by basic emotions theorists convenient to their larger project, which is to recognize and celebrate the bodily energies that escape intention, meaning, consciousness, and therefore ideology. The mind imprisons; the body liberates.

So how should we grasp this other mode of being moved? Here's how the historian Ruth Leys characterizes the field: 'For the theorists in question, affects are "inhuman," "pre-subjective," "visceral" forces and intensities that influence

---

<sup>1</sup> Good discussions can be found in Hemmings (2005), Leys (2011), Pile (2010), and Wetherell (2012). Leys' critique – which gives more importance than I would to 'basic emotions' theory as the 'dominant paradigm' in emotion theory generally (2011: 437) – includes a painstaking demolition of Massumi's influential speculative reading of neuroscience. Gregg & Seigworth (2010) offers a representative sample of writing.

our thinking and judgments but are separate from these ... affects must be noncognitive, corporeal processes or states' (2011: 437). *Pre-, in-, non-*: easier to say what affects are not than what they are, or *where* they are. But the general aim is clear enough: to get away from individuating, conscious, interior, verbally articulated, and culturally formulated emotions to something *prior*. Affect is an inchoate energy that emerges from the body, or is generated between bodies by contagion or collision. Hence the link – never satisfactorily explained, but implied by the double meaning – between affect as sensation or energy and affect as 'capacity to affect or be affected'. Out of mind, affect eludes representation and manipulation. Once verbalised, tamed or domesticated, it runs out of steam and becomes something else. As Leys points out, this characterization of affect is not altogether different from what certain emotion theorists have argued and demonstrated experimentally; though it is much closer to Russell's 'core affect' than to Tomkins or Ekman, whose fixation is on the face.

What chiefly distinguishes new-style affect theory from old-style affective sciences, however, is the grander agenda, which is to reshape cultural and social theory rather than merely understand human functioning. Like 'embodiment' before it, affect theory aspires to paradigm status, a new broom that will sweep away the cobwebs. And behind the urgent 'theorizing' burns a hunger for something new: a millennial vision that will overthrow the tyranny of language and banish the old warhorses of positive science, social constructionism (the very words sound tired), deconstructionism, and humanism.

As commentators note, affect theory frequently gets drafted into an emancipatory agenda, as in the work of the literary/queer theorist Eve Kosofsky

Sedgwick for whom the determinism of social constructionism is a strait-jacket to be cast off. Without evidence of follow-through, however, one is hard pressed to know what an affect-powered reformist project would entail. ‘The goal is a kind of “emotional liberty” ... a politics of hope’, wrote Nigel Thrift (2004: 68) – not yet the powerful university vice-chancellor he was to become. In a more playful mood, affect theory brings an air of celebration, a delirious flouting of grammar and logic akin to the surrealists’ automatic writing. There is fun to be had, but also nuggets of insight.

On the whole, though, the preferred manner is oracular and declamatory. The editor of a volume called *The Affective Turn* introduces the central concept as follows: ‘Affect constitutes a nonlinear complexity out of which the narration of conscious states such as emotion are subtracted, but always with “a never-to-be-conscious autonomic remainder”’ (Clough 2007: 2). What are we to make of this? Does affect *constitute* anything? Who is the narrator? Does the arithmetic of subtraction and remainders add up? When a film theorist (quoted in Leys 2011: 442) declares that affect is a ‘non-conscious experience of intensity; a moment of unstructured potential’, it sounds vaguely like Russell’s core affect; but where Russell stipulates meaning, here the terms remain undefined.

One persistent side-effect of the evasive manner is to distract attention away from concepts, arguments, and evidence onto the words themselves. Definitional logorrhea is symptomatic, as if the need to communicate overflows the ability to formulate. Content is smothered in style:

Affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacity to act and be acted upon. Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation *as well*

as the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities. That is, affect is found in the intensities that pass body to body (human, non-human, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between those resonances themselves ... Affect is persistent proof of a body's never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world's obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations. Affect is in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter* ... affect need not be especially forceful (although sometimes, as in the psychoanalytic study of trauma, it is.) In fact, it is quite likely that affect more often transpires within and across the the subtlest shuttling intensities: all the miniscule or molecular events of the unnoticed. The ordinary and its extra-. Affect is born in *in-between-ness* and resides as accumulative *beside-ness*. Affect can be understood as...

(Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 1-2; not my italics)

What comes to mind is Louis Armstrong's witty, if unfair, putdown of bebop – 'one long search for the right note'. (As a Monk fan, I protest.) But the quoted passage, in its dizzy effervescence, seems closer to glossolalia than to Dizzy Gillespie: a speaking in tongues, a vivid instance of the phenomenon it seeks in vain to define. In the Great Repentance, Niha penitents broke into streams of affect-laden God-speech when they could not say what they meant. No one could doubt their sincerity, but no one could understand.

Sympathetic critics, anxious not to be wallflowers or intimidated by the intellectual heavies standing in the wings, strain to understand and incorporate. Mostly they back off, letting quotations speak for themselves. 'When quoting Massumi', writes Margaret Wetherell of a key figure, 'it is almost impossible to stop. His words are so evocative and dizzying. What he is suggesting is so vague, breathless and escaping' (2012: 56). As long as you stay inside the terminology, the incantatory repetitions have a self-confirming, hypnotic effect. And there are

many tangled tendrils and backstories that complicate interpretation and provide cover. Easier to dig up a root than a rhizome.

Rather than get sucked into the infinite regress of who-meant-what-about-whom, in this chapter I am concerned with what affect theory can offer anthropology, whether it overlaps with or supersedes big tent emotion theory, and whether it is adaptable to ethnography in both senses of the word, the fieldwork and the writing.

How best to approach the task? The fizzing diversity of the affect enterprise is part of its appeal; but its disparateness makes it hard to engage. In earlier chapters I developed a narrative approach to emotion through a discussion of what academic managers (irritatingly) call 'best practice', with some negative examples thrown in. Without a cohesive 'affect theory' to unpack, it makes even more sense to structure a critique around discussion of a few exemplars, which I shall now do. My points could be applied to affect theorists more widely; but a general discussion would quickly get lost. The strongest critique will be one that deals in depth with the best representatives.

I begin with an example that conveys the breathless plethoric style and thesauric overkill of the new school before moving on to a more straightforward work of anthropology, one that draws on affect theory but that departs from the house style while offering challenges to conventional thinking on emotion, ethnography, and much else.

## Ordinary Affects

Reviews and commentaries encourage us to read Kathleen Stewart's book as a pioneering work, flagbearer for a new paradigm (Blackman & Venn 2010, Martin 2013, White 2017). 'The appearance of *Ordinary Affects* augurs well for new and productive forms of ethnographic enquiry and cultural study,' wrote one reviewer in *American Ethnologist* (Staples 2008). 'It pushes ethnography to the brink and beyond, scoring high in poetics and resonant voice,' says another (Krause 2010). 'Affect theory is emerging as a, if not the, dominant mode of critical discourse in the humanities and social sciences ... Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* serves as a paradigmatic example of this re-emergent field': thus, a contributor to *Feminist Theory* (Warner 2009). Evidently, affect theory is an important, boundary-bursting venture, and – for the anthropologist – *Ordinary Affects* is as good a place as any to see what it is all about.

So what *is* it about? To misquote an old song:

*What is this thing called affect?  
Just who can solve its mys-ter-ee?  
Why should it make a fool of me?*

Sometimes affect is very like emotion, or feelings available to emotion:

Free-floating affects lodge in the surface tensions of low-level stress, loneliness, dread, yearning, a sense of innocence, backed up anger, the ins and outs of love.

Stewart 2007: 94

The imprecision of the sentence—can something lodge in a tension? does loneliness have a *surface* tension? – signals the oblique approach, an effort to capture the inchoate. You could paraphrase: 'vague feelings and background moods find expression, or objects, in yearning, dread, etc.'. But that would presuppose an affect/feeling equivalence, and 'feel' – something quite concrete, a



conceptual and linguistic universal (Wierbicka 1999) – would commit to a different kind of argument. Stewart is not sure what she means by affect, so she circles round it, evoking it in short scenes. A keyword in this evocation is ‘something’. Affect is something, perhaps something happening. ‘For some, the everyday is a process of going on until something happens, and then back to the going on’ (10). ‘Everyday life is a life on the level of surging affects, impacts suffered or barely avoided. It takes everything we have. But it also spawns a series of little somethings dreamed up in the course of things’ (9). As a sympathetic critic notes, “‘Or something’ does a lot of critical work in Stewart’s project’ (Vogel 2009: 257).

‘Somethings’ are different from ‘things’. Things just are, whereas somethings happen or surge, just like affects. ‘Something surges into view like a snapped live wire’ (9). (Do wires snap? Do they surge into view?) Everyday life contains the potential of something happening, hence ‘the ongoing vibrancy of the ordinary’ (21). However, ‘the ongoing’ is different from ‘the going on’, which is not vibrant until something happens. Daily life is quivery, and you never know what may happen next. ‘Matter can shimmer with undetermined potential and the weight of received meaning’ (23). We have to be alert to this potential: ‘Things happen! Here’s something that might be for you! It’s the paying attention that matters – a kind of attention immersed in the forms of the ordinary but noticing things too’ (27). Here *things* seem very like *somethings*. But this paying attention permits insights, such as when the author comes upon people floating in a hotel pool: ‘A fantasy tentacle floating in the stormy placidity of the nowhere

of dully compelling force peppered by dreams of getting out or *something*' (24, original emphasis).

As the image reveals, we are at several removes from standard academese, and not too close to the world described: the reader struggles to see past the words to the reality conjured. To be sure, the language is intended to be performative, evocative, not analytic or discursive. But if the action is happening on the page, not in the field, the proper response – at least the initial response – must be aesthetic.

What, then, are the hallmarks of the house style? Like the fantasy tentacle, the tone hovers between the vaguely powerful and the powerfully vague. As is standard among affect theorists, nouns are mercilessly pluralized ('banalities', 'knowledges', 'somethings') – probably justifiable with reference to Deleuze's multiplicities and connections. Lists of plurals proliferate: 'Little undulations are felt as pleasures and warning signs, as intoxications and repetitions in daily routine' (28). Social science abstractions alternate with concrete observations and vignettes of the kind endorsed by creative writing tutors.

Sentences are short.  
Often one to a line.  
A kind of pseudo-  
Poetry

Verbs are imprecise: 'Ideologies happen. Power snaps into place ... Identities take place. Ways of knowing become habitual at the drop of a hat. But it's ordinary affects that give things the quality of a *something* to inhabit and animate.' (15)

The pathetic fallacy rules, partly a matter of projection (shimmering reality, bubbling with potential), partly of metaphor, usually mixed metaphor. ‘The animate surface of ordinary affects rests its laurels in the banality of built environments and corporate clichés.’ (29) Do affects have surfaces? Do surfaces have laurels? Do they *rest* their laurels (a non-corporate cliché that)? The prose is less a window onto a world than a verbal vision, a hallucination of disturbed objects and prepositions that recalls the effect of magic mushrooms: ‘Weirdly collective sensibilities seem to pulse in plain sight.’ (28) But the idioms – wires sparking, charges, circuits, forces, ‘vibratory motion, or resonance’ – are from *Popular Electronics* magazine, not The Doors psychedelia: ‘The potential stored in ordinary things is a network of transfers and relays.’ (21) If Stewart could specify what these networks, forces, and relays were, that really might be *something*.

Sometimes it all comes together – the ordinary, the energy flows, the plurals, the potential, the random lists, the pathetic fallacy, the choppy sentences and cod-verse:

The ordinary throws itself together out of forms, flows, powers, pleasures, encounters, distractions, drudgery, denials, practical solutions, shape-shifting forms of violence, daydreams, and opportunities lost or found.

Or it falters, fails.

But either way we feel its pull. 29

A quotation from Alphonso Lingis comes from the same manual:

Trust is a break, a cut in the extending map of certainties and probabilities. The force that breaks with the cohesions of doubts and deliberations is an upsurge, a birth, a commencement. (Lingis, quoted [Stewart 2007](#): 119).

What of the vignettes, the scraps of jargon-tormented life served up as ethnography? The scenes of lower class small-town America, of pallid epiphanies in postindustrial suburbs, seem familiar even if you have never been there. The

theme of something (mostly not) happening, or trying to make something happen, was that of the great short-story writer Raymond Carver in his sparse depictions of drab simmering suburbia – done to death by legions of imitators. ‘Everything left unframed by the stories of what makes a life pulses at the edges of things’, writes Stewart, in a kind of echo (44). But Carver famously had a ruthless editor, deft with the scissors.

Something very strange has happened on the way to the mall.

Like a live wire, the subject channels what’s going on around it in the process of its own self-composition. Formed by the coagulation of intensities, surfaces, sensations, perceptions, and expressions, it’s a thing composed of encounters and the spaces and events it traverses or inhabits.

Things happen. The self moves to react, often pulling itself someplace it didn’t exactly intend to go. (Stewart 2007: 79)

Even from these short extracts it’s plain that the prose offers something new; it incarnates what the other affect theorists merely promise. You have to admire the author’s pluck.

Can we run with it? There are various ways of evaluating a new concept. Does it illuminate an episode? Or suggest new and interesting questions? How does it link up with other explanatory concepts? In a brief sketch Stewart tells of a remembered scene in a doctor’s waiting room in Virginia. The men awaiting the doc are striking miners. They exude defeat. But one man spins a fantasy of their storming the governor’s mansion and looting it, briefly drawing in the others. What’s going on?

a live event – a fleeting conduit between the lived and the potential hidden in it (or hidden from it). Potentiality resonates in the scene. It’s an experiment compelled by the drag of affect in the room, and when it’s over the men just sit calmly together, as if something has happened. (98)

We note the skimpy unobserved context, the omission of dialogue (though it was a verbal fantasy), the lack of evidence for the men’s interest or for the ‘drag of

affect' that 'compelled' the event. 'Event' is meant here in the Deleuzian sense of 'the potential immanent within a particular confluence of forces', a kind of vital happening (Parr 2005, sv. *event*). But what practically, ethnographically, is conveyed by this formula? How would it be different, you wonder, if someone had merely cracked a joke at the company's expense? That too would have dispelled the gloom.

And yet something strikes a faint chord in ethnographic memory:

Ordinary affect is a surging, a rubbing, a connection of some kind that has an impact. It's transpersonal or prepersonal – not about one person's feelings becoming another's but about bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities: human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought, bodies of water. (128)

It could be a description of the Great Repentance in colonial Nias when converts crowded into huts to jump, shiver or shake, surrendering to trance (Beatty 2012). The affects were not ordinary – far from it – but *affect* in Stewart's and Deleuze's protean sense does seem to apply. I think, too, of Massumi's (2002) characterization of affect as the bodily autonomous, the non-discursive, the out-of-mind. The Niha penitents were out of time, out of their minds. In Chapter 2, I situated the Repentance among key emotions ('resentment', 'spite', *weltschmerz*) and cultural forms (the speaking heart). But the sacred symptoms – glossolalia, contagion, compulsion – were not limited to 'emotional' episodes. The rebounding energy of the movement burst its channels and could not be expressed, much less captured, by formulaic emotions or articulated forms. *Something else* was happening (there, it's catching!): a breaching of barriers between past and present, self and other, conscious and unconscious, word and feeling.

Can a single word do for all this? 'Affect', a label for too many processes, mystifies as much as it explains. If the energy transmitted between Niha penitents was 'transpersonal' (so, too, is much emotion), that is because the event, the choreography – the method in the divine madness – made it so. More things were in play than agitated bodies: traditions trashed and recomposed, cultural models reinvented, pop-up evangelists, oracles for outcomes. More was surrendered than individual autonomy and selfhood. The timing, periodicity, and strength of the movement – its ebb and flow – were geared to acts of colonial conquest and cultural repression. The historical context *overwhelmed*. Robbed of power, desperate for release and absolution, the penitents were broken people, morally annihilated. Behind the spontaneous happening was a modern history, a dark past, a veritable clash of civilisations. And behind its recurrences, a failure to find the right words, to match affect to object. One long search for the right note.

*Ordinary Affects* resists evaluation as anthropology. Too slippery to grasp in any critical frame (those tentacles!), it can only be appreciated as performance, an enactment of what it purports to describe. Among anthropologists it figures as an exemplar of 'the turn to affect', a model for the new paradigm; but other, more conventional works have a better claim. Consider, for example, Yael Navaro-Yashin's *The Make-Believe Space* (2012), a study with a solid foundation in fieldwork and something interesting to say. In

assessing what the 'turn to affect' can offer anthropologists, especially those with an interest in emotion, Navaro-Yashin merits close attention.<sup>2</sup>

## Affect and Ethnography

*The Make-Believe Space* has many merits. It makes original contributions to our understanding of the modern state. It says important things about war, historicity, and nationalism. It shows us what binds people to ideology. My interest, however, is in the book's concern with what the author calls 'affective geography'; in particular, the 'affective geography' of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), a statelet created in 1974 by the ethnic cleansing of Greek-Cypriots from the north of the island (with a symmetrical expulsion of Turkish-Cypriots from the south). The resulting division, secured by Turkish military occupation, is unrecognized by the UN and scarcely legitimate in the eyes of its citizens who guiltily conserve, trade, or use the homes and personal effects of their former neighbours and counterparts as 'loot'. The author's central question, stated in an earlier publication, is 'What affect does such an exchanged and appropriated environment discharge?' (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 4).

The wish to enjoy the fruits of violence while recognizing them as illegitimate, the mix of bad feeling and bad faith, we might characterize as 'guilt'. But that concept does not explicitly figure in the testimonies the author collected. Decades of propaganda and legislation affirming rights to the spoils of war have created an uneasy acceptance of the status quo. Redrawn maps paper over

---

<sup>2</sup> A recent collection in the same vein, *Affective States* (Laszczkowski & Reeves 2017), takes Navaro-Yashin, Stewart, and other affect theorists mentioned above as its inspiration.

memory and sentiment. On the TRNC side of the partition, a derelict zone strewn with rusted vehicles and abandoned household paraphernalia leaves the border a permanent scar of war, obsessively fingered yet thrust out of mind. The ruined landscape makes people 'melancholic'. It reminds them of bad things done to them and done by them. And it makes them reflect on their altered identity: formerly Cypriots with a complex heritage; now simplified Turkish-Cypriots categorically opposed to Greek-Cypriots. The old city walls, pockmarked with bullets, remind them they live in a prison, a frozen construct of the past. The better off have moved to new suburbs, leaving the old town to poorer settlers. But they are a haunted people: haunted by the past, by the people they have displaced, by their buried selves. As Navaro-Yashin tells it, the landscape itself is haunted, as are the looted objects, a mute testimony of their former owners.

All this is fertile terrain for an exploration of emotion, taken in the broadest possible sense. But the author eschews that path, seeing emotion in the narrow terms defined by biology or social constructionism or the inner quest of psychoanalysis, none of which will do. And if emotions were confined to discourse, the psyche, or visceral feedback to the brain she would be right. But as we have seen they are much more. They connect, respond, communicate, apprehend, appraise, model, and project. At any rate, the range of activities that we group by the term 'emotion' includes those functions. All of which can be captured through such writing strategies as narrative, dialogue, and what in fictional terms would be called dramatization – the depiction of people in their everyday exchanges, their dilemmas and predicaments. Adequately presented,



an ethnographic account grounded in experience and responsive to life yields what the old conceptual alleys shut out.

So what does the author propose instead? First, a focus on objects – the ruins of old buildings, the debris of war, the materiality of things that resist interpretation. Navaro-Yashin picks over the ruins and asks denizens what it is like to live among them. She pores over maps and charts, palimpsests on which geography and history are rewritten. She tours private collections of war loot – garage-museums of dusty finds that leave visitors perplexed, unsure what to feel.

Second, a focus on space: enclosure, occupation, partition, *Lebensraum* for people who don't belong among other people's belongings. The friction interlopers encounter, their sense of not fitting, she calls 'irritability', and makes this stand for 'a dis-resonating [*sic*] feeling produced by environments that harbor phantoms'. Irritability is 'representative of the affects invoked by the environment' (20).

Third, an interest in the tools of domination – maps, plans, offices, title deeds – whatever imposes the order of things and generates affect. Documents 'transmit specific kinds of energy among their users'; they are 'affectively charged phenomena' (125); 'they produce and effect affect' (126). What kinds of affect? What count as examples? 'Irony, cynicism, familiar contempt, and wit' (126), but also fear, apathy, and dissatisfaction. These are recognizable human responses, suggesting an overlap between the concepts of affect and emotion. But Navaro-Yashin takes a further step. 'We can conceive of institutions as having nerves or tempers or, alternatively, as having calming and quieting effects ... Here I study administration as animated, as having its own charge' (33).

As can be seen from these examples, affect is given varied denotations. Sometimes undefined and undifferentiated, as in ‘This book is about the affect that is discharged by a postwar environment’ (17), affect is also equated with a ‘force’ or ‘energy’ given off by objects, spaces, and institutions, something that ‘exceeds’ human signification but is nevertheless felt. ‘It is this excess, explored through the terms of affect, that I study ethnographically in this book’ (18). The terminology echoes Stewart (who is quoted), as well as Deleuze and Massumi. But affect is also differentiated and pluralized, and (in my terms) equivalent to emotion, mood, impulse, feeling, sentiment, even disposition or expressive act – as in the awkward formula: ‘an affect of thanksgiving to Turkey, as well as one of independence’ (93). Sometimes the equivalence is explicit, undermining claims to originality. ‘Administration, I argue, evokes a complex spectrum of affect. In northern Cyprus, this is experienced through seemingly opposed emotions: Turkish-Cypriots feel desire for and apathy toward their state administration at the same time ... This is a study of affective civil service or of bureaucracy as an emotive domain’ (82). A different kind of ethnographic approach might usefully distinguish between a reigning office ethos, personal dispositions, background moods, and fleeting emotional episodes. But no interactional episodes are presented through which such distinctions could be explored. We are stuck with the single word ‘affect’ as, variously, the precursor, elicitor, vehicle, or equivalent of emotion; or else as something undefined and altogether different.

What, then, are the ‘terms of affect’? Affect becomes ‘qualified’ through human interaction with the environment; which is presumably why affects (plural) can be labelled and distinguished with familiar emotion words like

'anxiety' and 'sadness' that respond to varying context, as well as with words for dispositions or attitudes such as 'irony' and 'cynicism', or affective tendencies like 'irritability' – to use a more conventional terminology. Navaro-Yashin only develops the notion of 'qualification' (via a discussion of Tarde) at the end the book, and links it obscurely to metaphor; but it serves to recover areas of emotion and subjectivity that her favoured theorists exclude. What the left hand takes away, the right hand gives back.

Nonetheless, we are very far from what an anthropology of emotion – or an emotionally-alive anthropology – would require. We do not see people interacting with one another, quarrelling, at play, in anger or in love; nor do we know what they are like or how they act. Despite mention of an 'emotive domain' – whatever that may be – there are no accounts of emotional scenes among people. It remains unclear whether this is because (1) the author's interest was limited to environment–person interactions or (2) affect is supposed mainly to occur in impersonal transactions (though, following the cultural theorist Teresa Brennan, she also speaks of 'transmission of affect' between persons). At any rate, the effect of the presentational focus is to animate objects and de-animate persons, who – except when they speak – become objects in the field like any other. Among believers, this would not necessarily be counted as a criticism, though from my point of view it highlights a limitation. Recourse to Actor Network Theory, one of the author's inspirations, justifies the exclusion of a vast range of experience and observations that might have cast a different light on the genuinely interesting problem she uncovers, namely, a deep ambivalence about

identity, biography, place, history, and personal relations in the wake of partition.

A glance back at my summary of Russell's 'psychological constructionist' discussion of affect reveals some superficial similarities, which both authors would probably find surprising, coming at the problem, as they do, from opposite directions. In Russell's theory, undifferentiated 'core affect' (analogous to Navaro-Yashin's 'energy') becomes qualified through a process of attribution in response to the 'affective quality' of things, thoughts, and events. Core affect is distinguished from full-blown emotions (or 'meta-emotions') of the kind we call 'anger', and it may influence behaviour out of consciousness. Like many emotion theorists these days, Russell gives an interactional (or 'relational', in Navaro-Yashin's term) account of affective states in which the environment, including other people, forms a necessary part of the account. The major differences from the alternative approach discussed here are in the psychological emphasis, the greater analytical precision, and the experimental methodology. As I say, the similarities are superficial, even coincidental; but since we are dealing with a shared term – a term trending among social scientists and cultural theorists – it is good to know what's what, and what isn't.

My chief concern, however, is to road test the affect concept. How does it work in the field? Does it open up new ground? Does it overlap with 'emotion' or have nothing to do with it? Does it require a different approach to fieldwork? Is the 'turn to affect' a wrong turn, a chimera? Given an expertise and patience I lack, it would be possible to construct a genealogy of the concept – something that [Leys \(2011\)](#) has attempted with some success. The patient reader would be

taken on the trail of Chinese whispers through Spinoza, Deleuze, Massumi (a Deleuze exponent), and Massumi's followers. Other branches of the genealogy would lead back through cultural critics like Sedgwick to the scientist Tomkins, whose psycho-biological account of emotion figured as a minor influence in an earlier period of anthropology ([Chapter 4](#)).

But the test of a tool is not whether it looks good on the drawing board or comes with the right credentials but whether it works. If a new concept turns out to be ineffective in the field, better discard it and get new tools, or do better with the old ones. Navaro-Yashin's book is extremely useful in this respect. It sets out its terms and conditions with admirable clarity, in contrast to some of the cited theorists, and it provides us with enough context to form a judgment.

Navaro-Yashin's approach to what she calls 'her material' is emphatically theory-driven and, in a way common with much recent ethnography, only loosely grounded. Her interpretations are suggested as much by her reading as by what her 'informants' say and do. (Use of the old distancing term 'informant' is revealing: there is little intimacy between ethnographer and subjects; many of the informants are anonymous and generic: an old woman, a Turkish settler, a government official, a Turkish-Cypriot.)

Theory-driven, how? 'Bataille's work might assist us in studying the energy discharged by ruins and rubbish' (150). Or: 'Through Kristeva, I am able to consider what the ruins, the rubbish, and the war remains in northern Cyprus stand for in the Turkish-Cypriots' subjective and internal psychical mechanisms' (150). Each static scene is viewed through a different theoretical lens – now Kristeva, now Benjamin, now Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, Agamben, Brennan,

Bataille, Latour, Butler, Freud, Thrift, Tarde. And with the same objective: Does 'my ethnographic material' fit the theory (or vice versa)? Would another theory work better? Can one have both, some, all? Shifted this way and that, the 'ethnographic material' only comes into focus through a specified optic. It does not live, but is inertly subjected to varied 'readings'; and where the material challenges, through not fitting, it is only to provoke some new compromise 'reading' or triangulation. Ethnography made subordinate to theoretical positioning.

Balancing Deleuze/Guattari with Benjamin requires nimble footwork:

Yet I prefer to describe my ethnographic material – these prickly plants and wastelands – in terms of ruins, shards, rubble, and debris (à la Walter Benjamin's imagination) rather than the [Deleuzian] rhizome ... How would affect be theorized were we to work with the metaphor of the ruin rather than the rhizome? (170–171)

How indeed? How to pick your way among ruins both topographical and metaphorical? 'Thinking through my material from northern Cyprus', the author writes, now on a different tack, 'I agree with Latour that there is a need to attend to the centrality of objects in the making of politics' (162). I agree, too, up to a point. Walls, frontiers, and official forms have tangible effects that reinforce, sometimes exceed, their purpose. In another old formula – anathema in this context – the medium is the message. Who (of a certain age) has not shuddered at the telegram, unopened in its blue envelope? Or winced at the dentist's buzzer? Yet the effects of material things depend greatly on their non-material aspects – what the documents *say*, how the place-names signify, how the frontier separates, what the relics recall – and would seem logically to require human agency, a human context of invention and use. Emotions are not conceivable without people to experience them; and affect (new style), if it has any

connection to affective states (old style) needs people too. In an oft-quoted declaration, the high priest of affect theory rejects any such link: ‘emotion and affect – if affect is intensity – follow different logics and pertain to different orders’ (Massumi 2002: 27). Yet even Spinoza, whose word is God in these matters, lists among ‘affects’ such recognizable emotions as joy, hatred, love, envy and fear – and goes on to explore their logical structures, explaining how the ‘passive affects’ that lower our spirits may be mastered through reason. Which is why he is sometimes claimed as successor to the Stoics and precursor to cognitive theorists of emotion – at the opposite pole from contemporary affect theory (Nussbaum 2001, Solomon 2008).<sup>3</sup>

Let us accept that there are other takes on ‘affect’, alternative uses of the word in quite different systems of thought that include such acceptations as ‘capacity to affect or be affected’, ‘potential’, and ‘becoming’ (though it is not clear whether ‘affect’ is *defined* as these concepts or just related to them). Let us suppose, however, that despite the disavowals of hardliners, this other kind of affect, as it concerns us ethnographically, *is* connected with emotional phenomena. Navaro-Yashin, citing geographer Nigel Thrift, thinks so, even if she

---

<sup>3</sup> It is possible that the difference senses of ‘affect’, and a source of confusion, derive from contrasting senses of Spinoza’s Latin equivalents, as mediated through later interpreters. In Spinoza’s ontology *affectio* (‘affection’) refers to ‘modes of substance’ or the ‘modifications of bodies’. *Affectus* (‘affect’), a term he uses much more frequently, refers to ‘affections [i.e. modifications] of the body which diminish or increase the power of the body (affects of the body) and the ideas of such affections (affects of the mind)’ (van Bunge et al. 2011, s.v. *affectio, affectus*). This is close to Frijda’s notion of ‘action readiness’. Or compare Calhoun & Solomon’s (1984: 71) cognitive interpretation: ‘Like the Stoics, [Spinoza] viewed emotions as a species of thoughts, albeit misguided thoughts.’

wants to have it both ways: 'Affect does refer, broadly, to an emotive domain, but its scope goes far beyond that of human subjectivity or the self' (167). Following Latour, Navaro-Yashin wishes to 'redistrib[ute] subjective quality *outside*' (167, original emphasis). Objects, on this view, can be said to 'discharge affect'; likewise, affect 'can be studied in sites and spaces beyond the scope of the human subject, her subjectivity, or her psyche' (168).

In my world – the place where you and I meet – things need us to be able to generate affect. They can't do it on their own. At least, no one is explicitly arguing that objects discharge affects among themselves, green walls making red walls sad, rusting cars feeling sorry for themselves. Yet to distribute affect (as it concerns the 'emotive domain') among material objects one would need to make such a claim, or at least attribute it to others. In fact, Navaro-Yashin's informants resist such projections. They are quite clear in talking about their feelings of unease as interior, using the term *maraz* for 'a state of mental depression, deep and inescapable sadness and unease', an 'inner lack of calm' (161), in contrast to the author who sees 'this melancholy not only as an expression of the inner worlds of my informants, but also as the mark of the energy (or affect, as I am calling it) discharged on them by the dwellings and environments they have now lived in for decades' (161).

We need not take people at their word, of course. It is hard to put feelings into words, hard sometimes to know what you are feeling, or why. And when you try, there is not much difference semantically between saying 'I feel bad inside prison walls' and 'prison makes me feel bad', unless you attribute malice to the brickwork. But the analytical leap to an animate geography – whether or not



Cypriots think in such terms – is not warranted by the evidence. There *is* a malice in electrified fences and bristling walls, but only imaginatively.

The anthropological question – do Cypriots experience the landscape in the way the ethnographer does, fresh to the scene? – requires a fuller answer than Navaro-Yashin is able to give. She does pretty well in conveying the desolation, but can we tell *their* experiences from hers? ‘The space through which we walked exuded a melancholy that I could feel intensely ... the atmosphere discharged a feeling of the uncanny, a strange feeling derived, in this instance, out of a sense of impropriety, haunting, or an act of violation.’ (166–167) When informants’ testimonies *are* quoted, they do not always support the ‘reading’ placed on them. An old Turkish-Cypriot woman, asked how she felt about living among ruins, says: ‘No, I don’t feel bad seeing them. I don’t notice. We got used to these ruins.’ (155) The author comments: ‘perhaps due to this involvement [of her family in the making of the ruins], the affect generated by these ruins, which appeared like a shocking war zone to my eyes and senses, had been repressed and abjected over the years.’ (155) The woman’s tale of initial unease, gradual familiarization, and eventual indifference hardly warrants the conclusion. An interpretive leap is required to fit the findings to Kristeva’s theory of abjection.

I have pursued the argument of *The Make-Believe Space* to try to put my finger on where exactly in the economy of affect the non-emotional and non-human part company with the emotional and human (the ‘emotive domain’). The strong claim is that objects ‘exude’ or ‘discharge’ affect, independently of human agency (or presence?) and ‘beyond the scope of the human subject’. This seems

difficult to substantiate. The weak claim, to which Navaro-Yashin retreats, is that 'neither the ruin in my ethnography nor the people who live around it are affective on their own or in their own right; rather they produce and transmit affect *relationally*' (172; author's italics). It is possible that, by 'relationally', the author means something like the bare 'associations' that arise between 'actants' in Actor Network Theory (Latour 2005), i.e. connection without presumption of a *social* relation. But more is explicitly entailed, including 'language and subjectivity'. In which case, the 'relational' claim is not very different from what emotion theorists have long argued. See, for example, Frijda (1986) on appraisal, Russell (2006) on 'affective quality', Burkitt (2014) on relational contexts, or Parkinson, Fischer and Manstead, who write: 'emotions are ways of aligning and realigning interpersonal and intergroup relations'. (2005: 235) When Navaro-Yashin concludes: 'my material calls for a conceptual merging of affect and subjectivity' (172), you have to wonder why they needed to be pulled apart.

An object-oriented ethnography certainly offers a novel, if tightly cropped, perspective; but 'affect', in the revamped sense, casts a dim light. The affect paradigm excludes the shared life that is the strength of fieldwork, the possibility of human connection, and the source of so many anthropological insights. Is it perhaps the latest instance of that turning away from ethnographic reality that facilitates theory but which, in the case of emotion, destroys its object? When I read Thrift's assertion that affect theory 'cleaves to an "inhuman" or "transhuman" framework in which individuals are generally understood as effects of the events to which their body parts (broadly understood) respond and in which they participate' (2004: 60), I concede that – marionette shows aside –

this might well describe certain Melanesian thought-worlds (in an essay on urban affects, very much *not* his point), but it offers little to the man or woman in the field; in fact, it makes the deep engagement of fieldwork inconceivable. Clifford Geertz once contrasted exact scientific accounts with immersive interpretive ones as ‘experience-distant’ versus ‘experience-near’. Without being scientific, much less exact, it is clear where on the scale affect theory lies.

## Conclusion

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master—that’s all.’

Lewis Carroll. *Through the looking glass*.

For affect theorists, emotions are putative properties of individual subjects, interior states that are expressible and available to consciousness. In an obsolete, cosily human world, emotions are experienced and shared by people. Affect theory, in contrast, belongs to that chilly poststructuralist world from which the human subject has been banished.

The affect/emotion divide, already wide enough in some disciplines to suggest a paradigm shift (though scarcely registered in analytic philosophy or the affective sciences), does not, however, map neatly onto established and emerging ways of doing anthropology. Why? Because nowhere has the conventional conception of emotion been more criticized. Over a period of twenty or thirty years, anthropologists have chipped away at the model, questioning the boundedness and fixity of ‘the person’, showing how emotions are mediated through discourse, at once framing encounters and pervading

politics. In deconstructing Western concepts of emotion and exploring modes of relation in other cultures, anthropologists have already encroached on the territory annexed by 'affect' in other disciplines. We have, in several senses, *been there*. And this deep ethnographic engagement with other modes of being gives us a practical and comparative perspective on other lifeworlds that affect theory cannot match. Can we therefore do without 'affect'?

If the Alice-like disagreement over what 'affect' designates and how it might be made useful to anthropology is intriguing, its applications have so far not been encouraging. They mostly signal a retreat from ethnographic precision and a loss of analytic power. Unresolved problems with constructionist, evolutionist, and phenomenological approaches to emotion have created a hunger for a theoretical messiah. But as the new paradigm stubbornly refuses to take shape a definitional fog has settled over the ethnographic terrain, blurring outlines, reducing vision, turning everything grey. In the new climate, the people we struggle to understand across cultural divides seem remoter than ever. At risk is anthropology's greatest asset: news from the frontline, the field in all its unsettling strangeness, its spikiness and vigour.