

Openings and Retrospectives

IN THE WORLD THAT AFFECT PROPOSED

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For me, affect came into view through a slowed ethnographic practice attuned to the forms and forces unfolding in scenes and encounters. This practice pulled the apparatus of conceptualization itself into a tricky alignment with slow ethnography's immanent concerns and with the concerns of the worlds it was trying to trace. Anthropological objects became things that shimmered out of molten states or lay nascent in an atmosphere. They had to be walked around, approached from precise angles, and seen as states of being; they were emergent, or suspended in potentiality, or collapsing, or residual, roosting on live matter as if it were their resting point. The cultural became a resonant and magnetizing field that registered in people and things living through events and conditions. Ethnographic writing began, again, to try to describe collective states and sensibilities hitting people and traversing otherwise incommensurate things: bodies of thought, assemblages of infrastructures and institutions, new ecologies, the rhythms of a daily living, and the strangely connective tissue produced by handheld devices and social media. In the world affect brought into view, **the point of analysis was not to track the predetermined effects of abstractable logics and struc-**

tures but, rather, to compose a register of the lived *affects* of the things that took place in a social-aesthetic-material-political worlding.

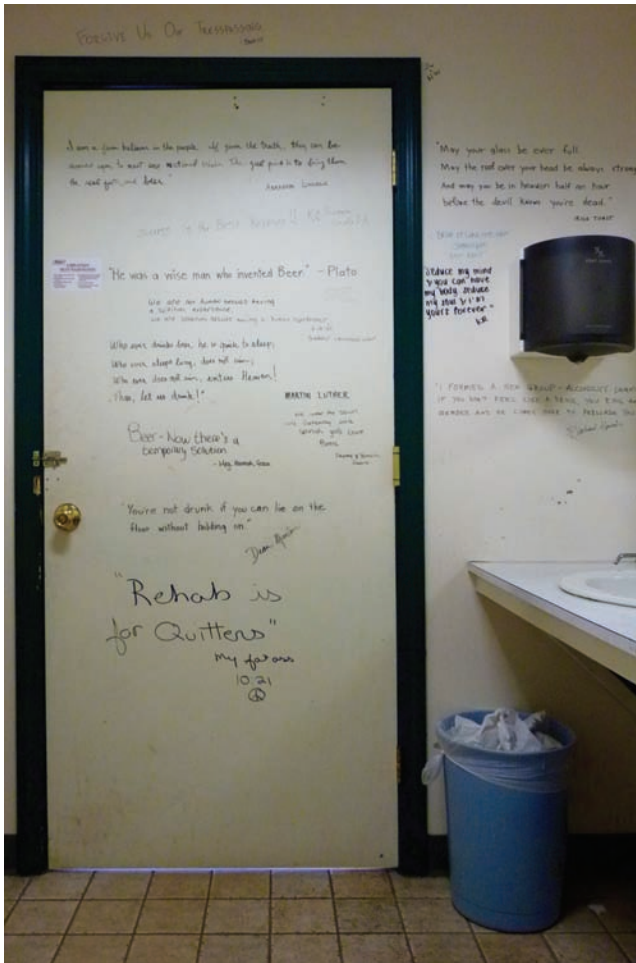


Figure 1. Photo courtesy of Jason Pine.

All this meant not just that systems and modes of being in worlds had to be seen as messier than what older forms of theory and modeling had allowed but that the singularities of what circulated across the everyday, across sociality, materiality, infrastructure, atmosphere, the political, and dream took place as a series of precisions. Far from being the instantiations or embodiments of a generality, these singularities were the events of a sociocultural world. They animated an energetic field of shifting common concerns. They emerged in the lived proble-

matics of a present, and therefore they could be brought to bear, deployed, maneuvered, suffered, or played with. Sociality itself was a rhythm marking the beat of a saturation in a world. The subject and agency were immersed in the fundamental, practical, and artful workings of difference and expressivity taking place in big and small events every day; they were weighted with a world and charged with intensity, splintering and layered.

Affects, then, were not just the side effects of systems, codes, or imaginaries located in an elsewhere but, rather, the registering of life as an assemblage of elements thrown, in the course of events, into a contact aesthetic (see [Pine 2012](#)). **Affect helped return anthropology to sense and sensation, materialities, and viscera. It proposed a world that is lived, though not simply anchored in the consciousness of the humanist subject or its categories of thought. Rather, a world charged with affect is a prolific, mixed-use contact zone in an ongoing state of transition that leaves people “improvising with already-felts”** ([Manning 2009](#), 30). The subject emerges in the risky labors of being in a world through the precise forms that forces take in lives. People labor in the very precarity of their situations, in an overwhelm of tendencies, openings and foreclosures, dissolutions and solidifyings, and in the cohesions of a milieu, a project, a habit entrained. The affective subject is a person who waits in the company of others for things to arrive, one who learns to sense out what’s coming and what forms it might take, one who aims to notice what crystallizes and how things ricochet and rebound in **a social-natural-aesthetic ecology of compositions and thresholds of expressivity**. For the affective subject, there is always the weight of the world in what can be hoped for and what must be feared, in what flourishes and what matters. Life is an experiment of being in a world, of finding ways to be in circuits of force and form, an aspiration to get something out of the alchemical (see [Pine 2016](#)) transmutations of things that twist off on trajectories far beyond humanist models of suffering or the usual hyperlegible registers of normativity and the state. Life takes place in the inhuman gestures of demons and angels, in the struggles of addicts and the rage of racists, in the endurance of the unbelievably injured or the oddly still curious.

Such a world is not already laid out on the table, with the only task left being an evaluative one. The turn to affect worried the mantras of structure, mediation, representation, and code that had come to operate as a good-enough shorthand for culture and power. In place of the sheer critique of representation, affect added an affirmative critique that registers surprise at what and how things happen. It waits to see as things unfold in a moment, notes points of contact,

recognizes the weight or smell of an atmosphere, or traces the spread of intensities across subjects, objects, institutions, laws, materialities, and species. The everyday is not naturalized as the un-thought, but approached as a prolific generation of temporary inventive resolutions to problematics that set off unexpected trajectories. This is a world deliteralized, one in which there is no endemic divide between a naturalized, given order and the exceptionalism of event or mobilization.

In the world that affect proposed, things were thrown together, perhaps with a great deal of force, to become recognizable as something to be in or near, or else to oppose and resist. Yet **this was always still an approximate composition of what was happening, a rough angle, a ricocheting impression still shooting side glances at what wasn't captured or recognized**, an exposé of the real as a rhythmic alternation that shimmers and dims. What happened could endure and do real damage not because it was always already in a finished state of achieved power but because it was charged with its own retractability, essentially haunted by the possibility of its limited life span.

Through the work of Gilles Deleuze, affect studies pointed to a differential ontology—**the prolific generativity of difference and connection taking place in a field of possibilities**. The actual became a multiplicity of precisely occurring possibilities in the forces set in motion by one thing or another. Affect studies, along with other current trends in thought now hitting anthropology—new materialism, object-oriented ontology, naturecultures and multispecies work, science studies, new ecologies and the study of social and affective as well as material infrastructures, analysis of energies or rhythms, and new approaches to the radical performativity of race or of state power—**returned anthropology to the longstanding problem of how to open the conventions of academic argument to the generativity and volatility of life as such**, to its capacity to actively shift or harden into forms of peace or violence, pleasure and pain, collectivities and chaos.

Affect studies forms part of a renewed search for modes of ethnographic theory and critique divested from the distanced, sheerly evaluative plane of academic conversation based on the stability of academic terms. Instead, it looks for ways to describe what precedes and exceeds the categorical in the labors of living through historical presents. **A concept becomes a thing deployed in a situation in an attempt to register something** of the prepersonal and performative qualities of collective life. Like experience itself, affect-inflected ethnography leans into its descriptive objects with an eye to their hardenings into something recognizable, their iron-clad investments or slippages or failures to endure. These moves have

been variously theorized as, for example, what [Erin Manning and Brian Massumi \(2014\)](#) call “thought in the act,” a close but diffuse tracing of lines of possibility still only partly unfolded and yet already palpable, or what Isabelle Stengers calls a “vivid pragmatics” ([Stengers, Massumi, and Manning 2009](#)). Following Bruno Latour, there have been articulations of the empirical as compositional, or, in [Donna Haraway’s \(2015, 161\)](#) terms, as the “compost” of emerging worlds. Matter has a heartbeat. In what [Karen Barad \(2003, 817\)](#) calls “the process of mattering,” things come to matter in both senses of the term. Life is deliteralized in a robust realism of energetic surfaces, qualities, and remainders that withdraw from phenomenological and representational efforts at reduction and paraphrase (see [Harman 2011, 2012](#)). Categories are at best an oblique mode of access to the generativity of singularities taking place ([Harman 2008](#)).

Affect studies, then, is one of the current approaches that present the possibility of sidestepping the dualist dead ends of modernist, humanist social science and its unfortunate affective habits of snapping at the world as if the whole point of being and thinking is just to catch it in a lie. As [Eve Sedgwick \(1997\)](#) argued, what is often called critical thinking and enacted as strong theory plowing through data on the strength of its independent logic is a paranoid approach to the world. Its repetitive resting point is the conviction that something is *wrong* with other people, and it dreams of finding some bad fixative of state power or normative fantasy as if these might be the only problem. In place of this head-on, demagnetizing, evaluative critique, affect studies offers an ethnographic method of mattering that slows to gather into an account any number of things the modernist mode of critical thinking misses: all the bodies, the lines of things on the move, the widespread joking, the sonorousness, how any line of a life vies with an unwitting ungluing, how things get started, how people try to bring things to an end, why thought as such might become an add-on or window dressing, why conceptuality might take radically different forms, or why it matters that attention sometimes slows to a halt to wait for something to take shape. As a critical mode of affirmation, affect studies is in good company with long legacies of feminist thought, critical race theory, cultural studies, and major strands of thought in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Georges Bataille, Alfred Whitehead, Baruch Spinoza, as well as in surrealism and the projects of the Situationists, among others.

Affect studies helped propel anthropology out of the mental habit of describing its objects as if they were fixed. An attention to the still unfolding has returned to ethnography’s commitment to thinking from the ground, but now

the ground is a set of provocations and problematics that cannot be summarized in a literalized description and therefore does not so easily slip, under the spell of a kind of analytical shorthand, into a strangely idealist paradigm that imagines the things of the world as a direct reflection of abstracted categorical distinctions. Analytic attention to the forms and forces of moving bodies and events invites experiments with description and with the conceptual. Rather than fix concepts in academic traditions to be imposed on the real, we might think of the concept as a mode of thought that takes place in what Isabelle Stengers (Stengers, Massumi, and Manning 2009) calls the *mezzo*—the state of being in the middle of attachments and threats, of what lingers and what jumps. This is a method that tries to move in the manner of things slipping in and out of existence. One that makes demands on visceral imaginaries and the sensoria.

As an ethnographic method, this would be a mode of thought that tries to describe the things that also propel it. Its objects would be its subjects. Rather than fix notions of agency, subjects, objects, bodies, and intentions, it would try to more fully describe a world under pressure, the way a present moment can descend like a curtain on a place, the way a world elaborates in prolific forms, taking off in directions, coming to roost on people and practices. In the state of emergence and precarity, points of aesthetic-material-social-political precision can appear as a flickering apparition, a flash of color, or they can come to bear, roughly, on bodies like a hard shard landed in a thigh muscle. The ethnography of such things has to be both nimble and patient, jumping with the unexpected event but also waiting for something to throw together. The ethnographic reals it approaches are not flat and incontrovertible but alchemical, traveling in circuits of impact and reaction. In this world things happen. Analysis trains itself on an effort to describe the iterations, durations, and modes of being taking place.

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