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Response to Readings on Affect

One of the elements that drew my attention toward affect studies is the inclusive nature of the field. Particularly in work by Lauren Berlant (“cruel optimism”), Elspeth Probyn (“the ubiquity of shame”), Kathleen Stewart (“textures of everyday living”) and Melissa Gregg (“the rise of ‘snark’ in affect-less workplaces”)¹, we see evidence of mass “shared feelings” that serve to connect communities. In “The Study of Affect and Romanticism,” Mary Favret motions toward the idea of blankets of affect in noting “Lauren Berlant identifies ‘affective atmosphere’ and affective atmospheres, she suggests, ‘are shared’” (1162). Brian Massumi, too, explores affective atmospheres in his work on “threat environments”². Essentially, these thinkers posit that affect operates as a type of collective unconscious that influences our decisions and feelings about environments based on the emotional climate of a situation or setting. As Teresa Brennan famously began her seminal work *The Transmission of Affect*, “Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and ‘felt the atmosphere’?” (1). The general “vibe” of an area (be it situations, places, peoples, or moods, more generally) may very well influence how we act and react to situation, even before we become cognizant of the atmosphere. Massumi speaks about how color-coded alert systems at airports crept into the American psyche and likely prompted the nation’s highly emotional (and polarized) responses to “The War on Terror.”³

Which is to say, I’m fairly reluctant to side too firmly with either the biological imperatives of Tompkins’ “Basic Emotions paradigm” (Leys 439), or with Massumi’s “mystery of the missing half second” (Massumi 28)⁴, because, to my thinking, becoming too embroiled in

¹ All had essays featured in the fantastic edited collection *The Affect Theory Reader*. I was slightly taken aback to see these scholars excluded from Leys assessment of the field, but, given that her article appeared in the Spring 2011 issue of *Critical Inquiry* and *The Affect Theory Reader* was published in 2010, it’s likely that Leys lacked the opportunity to explore the collection before submitting her article for publication.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/apr/15/half-life-of-disaster>

³ “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact” in *The Affect Theory Reader*

⁴ Much like Leys, I’m a bit suspect of Massumi’s thesis (I much prefer his explorations of the Cult of Reagan). That said, it was the “missing half second” that solidified my decision to frame my dissertation with theories of affect. In the summer of 2014 I began work on my dissertation, while also spending every free minute watching World Cup Soccer. During the United States’ opening match against Ghana, I watched as Clint Dempsey scored a beautiful goal in the sixth minute of play. What surprised me about the goal was not that it happened (I’d expect nothing less from Dempsey), but my reaction to it. When his shot went in, I found myself jumping up and down with raised fists before I was totally cognizant of the goal. That is, in that instant I felt that my movements had embodied the missing half second – a physical reaction before cognition. In retrospect, it’s more likely that watching Dempsey’s run toward the goal prompted an anticipatory celebration, and that I may have had my arms raised before Dempsey took the shot. Nevertheless, in that moment I found myself thinking, “Maybe there’s something to this affect thing after all,” replaced quickly by, “USA! USA! USA!”

the minutia of conflicting (and occasionally hostile) biological research may stifle the literary critic's ability to apply the idea of affect⁵. To be sure, defining what affect *is* or *isn't* (or can be, should be) proves vexing, and I often find myself siding with Ann Cvetkovich who uses "affect in a generic sense [...] as a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that includes impulses, desires, and feelings that get historically constructed in a range of ways" (*Depression: A Public Feeling* 4). Thus, my own inclination leads me to view affect as some sort of amalgamation of the "cluster of related terms: feeling, mood, sense or sensation, emotion, and [...] passion" noted in Favret's introductory remarks (1159).

For me, affect's primary application has been to twentieth-century conceptions of the South⁶ and southern literature⁷. That being said, the history of affect in the South has a long reach, and one of the first instances exploring the affect(s) of the South proves quite relevant to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century studies. When, in a 1785 letter to the Marquis de Chastellux, Thomas Jefferson wrote that "In the North they are cool, sober, laborious" while "in the South they are fiery, voluptuary, [and] indolent," he positioned the U.S. South as a site of excessive, overflowing, and caustic affect. Recent turns toward transnationalism and the "global South" approach Jefferson's easy binaries with a wary eye, as when Jefferson spoke of the South, he really meant the white, affluent South. Nevertheless, the South remains an area laden with affect and emotion. Tara McPherson, whose *Reconstructing Dixie* helped usher in the wave of New Southern Studies, posits that "our understandings of the South encourage particular emotional registers" and, subsequently, how these orientations serve "as a key nexus between cultural and political paradigms" (32-33). For McPherson, as for Jefferson, if we want to understand the South (and by extension, the country⁸), affect positions itself as a crucial paradigm.

⁵ Please don't read this statement as me being overly dismissive of the biological aspect. I encourage those who find them useful to apply them; honestly, my reluctance to dive too deeply into the scientific pool speaks more to my lofty background in the hard sciences than it does to the overall usefulness of these concepts.

⁶ Whatever "the South" means.

⁷ Whatever "southern literature" means.

⁸ See Leigh Ann Duck's *The Nation's Region*, or for a more succinct presentation of the idea, we can cede to Faulkner who wrote, "To understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi"