

Working with Affect in Feminist Readings

Disturbing differences

Edited by

**Marianne Liljeström and
Susanna Paasonen**



Transformations

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Working with Affect in Feminist Readings

Affect has become something of a buzzword in cultural and feminist theory during the past decade. References to affect, emotions and intensities abound; their implications in terms of research practices have often remained less manifest. *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing Differences* explores the place and function of affect in feminist knowledge production in general and in textual methodology in particular. With an international group of contributors from studies of history, media, philosophy, culture, ethnology, art, literature and religion, the volume investigates affect as the dynamics of reading, as carnal encounters and as possibilities for the production of knowledge. *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings* asks what exactly are we doing when working with affect, and what kinds of ethical, epistemological and ontological issues this involves. Not limiting itself to descriptive accounts, the volume takes part in establishing new ways of understanding feminist methodology.

Marianne Liljeström is Professor of Women's Studies at the University of Turku, Finland. Her research interests are in Russian/Soviet history, and in feminist theory and methodology. Her most recent publications are *Feminist Knowing – Discussions on Methodology* (editor, in Finnish, 2004) and *Useful Selves: Russian Women's Autobiographical Texts from the Post-War Period* (2004).

Susanna Paasonen is a research fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki. With an interest in internet research, studies of sexuality and popular media culture, she is the author of *Figures of Fantasy* (Lang, 2005) and co-editor of *Women and Everyday Uses of the Internet* (Lang, 2002) and *Pornification: Sex and Sexuality in Media Culture* (Berg, 2007).

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Introduction

Feeling differences – affect and feminist reading

*Marianne Liljeström and
Susanna Paasonen*

Affect has become a challenging epistemological question in feminist research as its theorizations as intensities of feeling, emotional attachments and gut reactions have multiplied within cultural theory during the past decade (e.g. Pearce 1997; Lupton 1998). Affect has turned into a site for rethinking theoretical concerns ranging from dualisms of the mind and the body to critiques of identity politics and practices of critical reading. Drawing on the work of thinkers as different as Baruch Spinoza or Silvan Tomkins, this rethinking has emphasized the carnal ways of being in, experiencing and understanding the world that are fundamentally relational and productive.

New materialist critiques in particular have argued for the shortcomings of textual analysis and the legacy of the so-called textual turn for its tendency to downplay the sensory and the material in accounts of society and culture while conceptualizing cultural phenomena as discourses, texts or systems to be interpreted (e.g. Massumi 2002). For many, the so-called 'affective turn' is a reaction towards the limitations of post-structuralist theorizations, their structuralist legacies and commitment to linguistic models. In contrast, considerations of affect foreground questions of matter, biology and energetic forces (Scott 2001; Braidotti 2002; Barad 2003; Clough and Halley 2007). This critical debate has contributed to a return to the so-called ontological question as connected to the pondering of difference(s) between identity categories – or what today is often called the intersectional approach to feminist knowledge production.

It can indeed be argued that there has been an overuse of textual metaphors in cultural theory since the 1990s (as in the readings of bodies, landscapes or artefacts as texts to be interpreted or 'decoded' without accounting for their materiality): a broad range of intellectual concerns are bypassed or even lost if focusing solely on the semantic and the symbolic. Nevertheless, such critique risks conveying a rather limited, if not flat, understanding of reading as a critical activity. Importantly, it may also block from view the centrality of reading, interpretation and experience – and that of ethics – as intellectual concerns within feminist research. Feminist literary scholars have paid attention to the inseparability of affect and interpretation: rather than readerly mastery, interpretation becomes a question of contagious affects and

dynamic encounters between texts and readers (Gallop 1988; Pearce 1997; Armstrong 2000; Sedgwick 2003; Ngai 2005). Cinema and media studies scholars, again, have elaborated on synaesthetic sensations, embodied experiences and forceful impressions involved in screen-based media (Marks 2002; Sobchack 2004), whereas scholars investigating the boundary work concerning the spheres of the public and the private have theorized the role of affect in marking individual and collective bodies apart from one another through hierarchical notions of difference (Berlant 2000; Cvetkovich 2003; Ahmed 2004). In thinking through the notion of difference(s), the affective dimensions of feminism itself have been increasingly taken under scrutiny (hooks 2000; Ahmed 2004; Ngai 2005; Probyn 2005).

In the wake of these debates, *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing Differences* explores the place and role of affect in feminist knowledge production in general and in textual methodology in particular. With a focus on practices of reading (above all, in ethnography, interviews, close reading, narrative and discourse analysis), the volume at hand investigates the methodological possibilities of working with and through affect in feminist research, asking what implications does working with affect have for practices of reading. What kinds of considerations of scholarly agency, accountability and ethics does it entail? And what kinds of knowledge does it facilitate? Rather than to position considerations of materiality, affect and embodiment in opposition to textual analysis, the book investigates their interrelations as intimate co-dependence.

In the very first chapter of the volume, titled 'An affective turn? Reimagining the subject of feminist theory', Anu Koivunen provides an analytical overview of the different definitions of the 'affective turn' in relation to other 'turns' within feminist theorization (including linguistic, phenomenological and ontological turns, turns to the body and the personal). Koivunen questions the dramatic notion of 'a turn', contextualizes recent scholarly debates on affect and ties them into the development and different paradigms of feminist theory. Koivunen also investigates the connections and differences between the concepts of affect, emotion, passion and feeling, as well as the different intellectual traditions and concerns connected to them, hence providing a framework for the discussions on the 'affective turn', as well as for the essays in this particular volume.

Working with Affect in Feminist Readings is divided into two thematic parts, titled 'Affective Attachments' and 'Dynamics of Difference', respectively. While the themes, as well as those presented in the individual chapters, do inevitably overlap, the sections offer slightly different approaches to affect and feminist reading. The chapters in the first part, 'Affective Attachments', are connected by their focus on issues of embodiment (in the sense of bodily encounters, body images, avatars and sexually explicit imagery) as well as the power of texts and images to move their viewers in highly bodily ways. The authors ask what it means to be moved by and attached to the texts and images we study, as well as the kinds of analytical possibilities this entails.

Sara Ahmed's chapter, 'Creating disturbance: Feminism, happiness and affective differences', focuses on what she titles 'unhappy feminist archives'. These take shape through the circulation of cultural objects that articulate an unhappiness *with* happiness, objects that perhaps have already acquired an affective value. Ahmed's method is to explore how certain objects come to be affective over time: how some bodies cause disturbance, or become the cause of disturbance, because they refuse to participate in the happiness wish. She emphasizes that to refuse the happiness wish involves an *affective reorientation* – while you can cause disturbance, you can also turn disturbance into a cause.

In 'A sense of play: Affect, emotion, and embodiment in *World of Warcraft*', Jenny Sundén explores embodied experiences, affective investments and circulations in the online role-playing game *World of Warcraft* by using the methods of ethnography and close playing. She asks what this kind of enormously popular game sets in motion as an aesthetic object and, more broadly, as a media text, as well as the effects such 'movement' may have on the ways of thinking and feeling. Sundén argues for an expansion of game studies by asking queer questions concerning gender and sexuality, and by cherishing an affective, passionate approach to games both theoretically and methodologically. The theme of the affective force of texts continues in Susanna Paasonen's chapter, 'Disturbing, fleshy texts: Close looking at pornography'. By paying attention to the neglected complexity of affect and conflicting emotional responses related to pornography, stepping away from the pleasure/disgust binary embedded in feminist studies of porn and considering the uncontrollable aspects of images, Paasonen experiments with close looking at pornography that involves acknowledging the power of images and the effects of being moved or touched by them. The chapter addresses a specific image of a penis and a running shoe in an aim to shift attention from the meanings of the image to the workings and affect of pornography.

In 'Expanding laughter: Affective viewing, body image incongruity and *Fat Actress*', Katariina Kyrölä continues to think about sensory engagements with media texts. With the purpose of mapping out the possibilities of laughter to expand our views of ourselves and others, she analyses the television comedy show *Fat Actress* (USA 2005) in relation to corporeal laughing spectatorship and the critical possibilities of unruly feminist laughter. She shows, on the one hand, how the concept of body image can be fruitful in analysing the corporeal effects of images, and, on the other hand, how laughter can be approached as an affective and power-entrenched relation between viewing and imaged bodies. The section ends with Leena-Maija Rossi's chapter, 'Daughters of privilege: Class, sexuality, affect and the *Gilmore Girls*', addressing affective media relationships in the series *Gilmore Girls* (USA 2001–7). Rossi reserves the notion of emotion to representations and the concept of affect to the bodily effects of these representations. With an interest in reading surprising and contradictory moments and critical undercurrents in the series, she discusses three aspects in particular: parodic representation of gendered

white upper-class privilege; jokes referring to non-normative sexuality and awkward moments of same-sex closeness, and a complex stance towards futurity.

The chapters in the second part, 'Dynamics of Difference', address the concept of difference from diverse viewpoints – as experiences of difference within transnational feminism, hierarchical edifices of differences and difference as incalculable force alike. The section opens with Elizabeth Grosz's critical discussion on the concepts of identity and intersectionality, titled 'Differences disturbing identity: Deleuze and feminism'. Grosz expresses concern towards the narrowing focus of feminist thinking caused by the vast attention given to the narrational, the personal and the individual. According to Grosz, this selective focus leaves out questions related to the rest of existence as feminism abdicates the right to speak about the real, matter or forces both social and material. In contrast, and grounded in Deleuzian feminist theory, she addresses (pure) difference as the generative force that enacts materiality itself, as the movement of difference that marks the very energies of existence before and beyond identity.

In the following chapter, titled 'Nomadic bodies, transformative spaces: Affective encounters with Indian spirituality', Johanna Ahonen considers the spiritual Indian leader Amma and her embrace (*darshan*). By exploring the phenomenon through the notion of affect as intensities between bodies and utilizing her ethnographic fieldwork, Ahonen aims to deconstruct dualisms such as spiritual/corporeal, transcendence/immanence or rational/mystical. She does this by combining the Deleuzian feminist concept of becoming with the Indian philosophical notion of *shakti* (feminine cosmic power). The chapter shows how these concepts facilitate considerations of transformative energy and create a potential source for new feminist theorizations of ontology. While Ahonen is concerned with the theorization of spiritual experiences as dynamic forces difficult to grasp through more conventional research methodology, Anu Laukkanen brings together the methods of kinaesthetic empathy and affective reading in her exploration into the possibilities of bodily, affective knowledge in dance ethnography. Her chapter, 'Hips don't lie? Affective and kinaesthetic dance ethnography', investigates the conflicting and ambivalent emotional paths of so-called Egyptian feeling and the Egyptian styles of Oriental dance. 'Egyptian feeling' works as a conceptual, cultural and bodily intersection through which Laukkanen considers the ambivalent nature of getting moved by dance and the histories of bodies experiencing dance.

In the chapter 'Ethics of empathy and reading in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*', Elina Valovirta brings together the idea of the Caribbean queer with the affective and ethical 'turns' in feminism. More specifically, Valovirta focuses on the role of reading in relation to the ethics of empathy at play in the novel. She examines how an extraordinary text-reader bond emerges because of the refusal of the text's vocabulary to explicitly name certain sexual identities, and shows how the affective process of 'witness' (a

concept introduced by Sara Ahmed) becomes a way to conceptualize 'queerness' in the relationship between the protagonists and in the subsequent text-reader relationship. Continuing further with the method of close reading, Lynne Pearce asks the intriguing question as to why we should wish to write or read a story that does not move its characters, and us as readers, forward in some way or give us any reward in the end. Questioning the urge of constant forward-looking, her chapter, 'Beyond redemption? Mobilizing affect in feminist reading', addresses two novels by migrate women writers about 'minor emotions', about hopelessness and disappointment, stories that do not go anywhere. Methodologically, Pearce emphasizes the necessity of making conscious, 'always already' political, interpretative choices in our affective readings.

The last chapter in this section is Marianne Liljeström's 'Crossing the east-west divide: Feminist affective dialogues', which moves to thinking about geopolitical differences. Liljeström engages critically with integrationist feminist aspirations by reading the work of the Ukrainian feminist Irina Zhrebkina and her applications of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to the construction of current post-Soviet gender discourse. Her contextual affective reading emphasizes both interlinked historical experiences and discursive networks across borders, yet underlines that the awareness of such links and care for enhanced transnational feminist communication does not absolve one from the potentiality of failed understanding.

The book ends with Melissa Gregg's chapter 'Working with affect in the corporate university'. Gregg examines the concept of affective labour and research traditions concerning it, and extends these considerations to the conditions of the contemporary workplace. By drawing parallels to studies of fandom and participatory culture, which underline the importance of scholars recognizing their own involvement and investment in the cultures of consumption they study, she addresses transformations in the white-collar workplace and, more specifically, their consequences for scholarship in the context of the corporate university where academics are presumed to strongly invest in the workplace as a source of identity. Gregg suggests that academics should cease to understand their own work lives as exceptional and that they must acknowledge their own forms of 'working with affect' in order to provide more comprehensive studies of the production cultures of knowledge work.

As this overview makes evident, *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings* takes a broad approach to both studies of affect and practices of reading. Rather than attaching itself to any singular theoretical framework, paradigm or definition concerning the 'affective turn' (e.g. Clough and Halley 2007), the volume asks for what ends this turn has been envisioned and defined, as well as the kinds of implications theorizations of affect have for feminist research in general, and for textual methods in particular. Methodologically, the individual chapters draw on forms of textual analysis: research material varies from novels and scholarly books to online role-playing games, fieldwork notes, television series, pornographic images and, centrally, the researchers'

affective encounters with, and diverse attachments to, the texts in question. The authors work with ethnographic methods (Ahonen; Gregg; Laukkanen; Sundén), representational analysis (Rossi), close reading (Ahmed; Kyrölä; Liljeström; Pearce; Valovirta), as well as variations of close playing (Sundén) and close looking (Paasonen).

As Koivunen points out in her chapter, the affective and ethical 'turns' in feminism are closely linked together in both their temporal proximity and their central concerns. In fact, the question of affect and feminist reading surfaces centrally as one of ethics and answerability. By approaching affect and analysis as intimately interconnected, this book underlines the role of the embodied and the sensory in and for acts of interpretation – the kinds of orientations, attachments and aversions that encounters with texts may give rise to, and the kinds of readings they facilitate.

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