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Gender, Affect, and Narrative

Abstract: This chapter summarizes some of the most productive ways in which affect theory has shaped the study of gender and narrative on methodological, onto-epistemological, and phenomenological levels. It delineates the multiple intersections between queer, feminist, and critical race theorist work on affect that foregrounds narratives' worldmaking potential, affective-aesthetic characteristics, and ability to challenge readers' assumptions about the world though various narrative strategies. Attending to various genealogies of affect-based literary studies scholarship, this chapter introduces theorizations of affect which center on affect's relational dimensions and critical work which challenges the underlying, universalist assumptions about affect's generative and pro-social capacities. It also limns the discourse on affect and gender in the context of US sentimental fiction, public sphere debates, and reparative reading practices. It also introduces specific critical interventions in recent scholarship on experimental North American literature.

Keywords: affect, worldmaking, recognition, assemblage

Introduction

Since the affective turn in the social sciences and humanities, affect theory has had a substantial influence on the study of gender and narrative. This ranges from scholarship which attends to the affective-aesthetic dimensions of narratives that problematize hegemonic depictions of gender to work that advances theorizations of affect, rooted in queer and feminist scholarship, with a strong interest in how intersectionality and critical race theory come to bear on our understanding of what affect is and does. Affect's valence in conceptualizing the relationships between bodies, experiences, readers, and attachments, refracted through attention to the interplay of categories of difference along the lines of gender, class, sexuality, age, and ability, has had considerable impact on critical interventions in the study of gender and narrative. As this chapter will illustrate, the affective turn has fully arrived in the field of literary studies in more than one way.

Affect's pervasiveness in literary studies is noteworthy since affect itself is often defined as pre-linguistic and non-representational. Brian Massumi, for instance, suggests that affect is a pre-personal "intensity" (2002, 24), characterized by an "irreducibly bodily and autonomic nature" (ibid., 26). But since lived experiences (of gender) are "mediated, negotiated, and demarcated through language and narrative storytelling" (Schultermandl et al. 2022, 14), and narratives generate affects, attending to affect, feelings, and emotions can serve as a meaningful way of engaging with them. Much of the present scholarship situated at the intersection of gender and narrative applies affect, emotion, and feeling either as distinct categories (see Gould 2010) or interchangeably (see Figlerowicz 2012). My purpose here is to curate the various critical interventions that have emerged and to discuss their contributions, so as to achieve a better understanding of the triangulation of affect, gender, and narrative. To this end, I also embrace a capacious understanding of the concept of narrative to include narratives across various genres and media. Borrowing Gülsin Ciftci's compelling question, "What are affects good for in literary studies?" (2022, 13), I examine affect's role in the ways that narratives ideologically interpellate readers along the lines of counterhegemonic notions of gender identities.

Affective Turns in Literary Studies

In light of the affective turn, literary studies have moved beyond concerns relating to rhetoric, discourse, and representation and have thus extended the scope of classical post-narratology. The study of feelings, affects, and emotions in literature has a long tradition, but affect theory largely originated outside the immediate perimeters of literary studies. Patricia Ticineto Clough's insistence in the introduction to *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (2007) that affect "constitutes a nonlinear complexity out of which the narration of conscious states such as emotion are subtracted" (2007, 2), and Greg J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg's contention that "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" (2010, 1) indicate affect theory's focus on the social. Literary studies, it seems at first sight, only belatedly joined the affective turn. The deliberate integration of affect theory into the study of literary texts, however, is preceded by a number of critical interventions in queer and feminist narratology as well as in the theorization of reader-text relationships, which have also been shaped

by a sustained interest in affects. This section outlines some of the foundational work in literary studies, thereby suggesting that literary studies, too, is now "fully within the Episteme of the Affect" (Brinkema 2014, 2).

It is nevertheless worth noting that the turn to affect in literary studies required a certain amount of interdisciplinary translation. The reason for this lies in affect's overall elusive nature and bodily resonance. For instance, Gilles Deleuze's theorization holds that affect is "defined by zones of intensity, thresholds, degrees and fluxes" (Deleuze 2006, 130), as his later work on pleasure makes clear. Similarly, Silvan Tomkins's theory of differential affects privileges the body as the site of affective mobilizations. As Gregg and Seigworth summarize: "affect [is] the prime 'interest' motivator that comes to put the drive in bodily drives (Tomkins); affect [is] an entire, vital, and modulating field of myriad becomings across the human and nonhuman (Deleuze)" (2010, 6). Tomkins's and Deleuze's respective works became the foundation of two distinct traditions in affect theory, both of which coincidentally originated in 1995: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's and Adam Frank's essay (1995), "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold," as well as Brian Massumi's (1995) "The Autonomy of Affect."

A cursory look at some of the most recent handbooks and anthologies devoted to delineating the points of convergence between affect theory and literary studies indicates similar genealogies via the critical interventions of scholars such as Gilles Deleuze and Brian Massumi on the one hand and Silvan Tomkins and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on the other, while also limning the conceptual borders between phenomenological work and neuroscientific work on affect (see Stanley 2017). They focus on aspects of form, genre, aesthetic experiences, identity assemblages, and onto-social relationships that affect-based scholarship in literary studies, literary criticism, and literary theory may engender. For instance, *The Palgrave Handbook of Affect Theory and Literary Criticism* (2017), edited by Donald R. Wehrs and Thomas Blake, assembles critical analyses of the ways in which literary texts, performances, and films address, shape, and elicit affect. The contributing chapters outline the potential that different traditions of affect theory can have on literary criticism in various culture-specific literary traditions across centuries and genres. Stephen Ahern's *Affect Theory and Critical Literary Practice: A Feel for the Text* (2019) curates chapters that interrogate the valence of affect theory, thereby unlocking new insights into the multi-vectoral relationships between characters, readers, and texts. Ahern's project delineates new methods of engaging with texts, while honoring the affective

dimensions that affect contains on the level of narrative and prompts on the level of reception. Alex Houen's edited anthology, *Affect and Literature* (2020), proposes an affect-based literary theory "that is open to considering literary affects in terms of fusions of content and form" (Houen 2020, 5). In his own introductory chapter, Houen outlines a theory centered around affect's literary aesthetics, noting that "the suspended status of literary writing presents a reader with distinctly aesthetic forms of feeling that can be experienced as exerting their own affective force despite the suspension" (ibid., 16). These critical anthologies routinely offer chapters that trace various origins of affect theory, often as starting points to their subsequent delineations of how affect shapes literary narratives, the practice of reading, and literary theory writ large.

Methodologically, affect theory's influence in literary studies ranges from neuroscientific work on reading to affect-based narratology, two critical traditions for which Patrick Colm Hogan and Robyn Warhol often serve as lynchpin figures. Affect-based narratology's interest in the importance of narrative voice, the formation of subjectivities, and the relationships between characters shares many concerns with feminist and queer theory. This is true for questions revolving around the politics of representation as well as the cultural work that narratives can perform. Robyn Warhol's groundbreaking study in feminist and queer narratology, *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms* (2003), attends to the somatic and sensory manifestations of reading experiences, ranging from effects on readers' moods to belated effects such as laugh lines on readers' faces. By thinking of reading as "a physical act" and recalling "the affects reading generates in our bodies" (2003, ix), Warhol's project focuses on the ways in which particular representations of feelings mobilize readerly affects on a bodily level.

By contrast, neuroscientific work on literature's affective dimensions focuses on the cognitive processes of reading. Patrick Colm Hogan's seminal study, *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories* (2011), applies neuroscientific insights on "biological factors" (Hogan 2011, 7) to the study of narrative elements, such as plot structures, character developments, and linguistic properties, paying little attention to the ways in which emotions are presented as distinctly literary effects that rely on certain formal and aesthetic properties. Hogan's emphasis on narratological structures and their ability to generate cognitive processes in readers as well as readers' ability to decode them is substantially different from Warhol's emphasis on readers' prior

interpellation via social status, cognizance of literary conventions, and personal experiences. On the level of gender representation, cognitive literary studies have been lagging behind some of the advancements made by cultural studies fields such as gender studies, postcolonial theory, or queer theory.

While both queer and feminist narrative theory have long attended to intersectional approaches that "foreground[] that sexuality, race, class, nationality, age, and ability—to name just the most frequently cited categories of difference—intersect with one another to form intricate variations upon oppression and privilege" (Warhol and Lanser 2015, 6-7), this has only belatedly emerged in cognitive literary theory. As a matter of fact, as Sue J. Kim argues, "These two discourses seldom come into contact not only because they happen in different academic spheres, but also because they have such different, often mutually hostile, fundamental assumptions about universality, reason, and objectivity" (2013, 3). Kim's own conceptual work, *On Anger: Race, Cognition, Narrative* (2013), precisely bridges this gap by fusing insights into the cognitive-psychological and biological scholarship on anger with historical-materialist, feminist, and critical race theorist arguments about the culture-specific contexts in which anger can register modes of agency and resistance in the face of persistent "gendering and Othering" (Kim 2013, 1). In understanding anger as a deeply political affect and attending to its particularly racialized sanctions in mainstream discourses, Kim's work is also among the most explicit theorizations of race and affect in literary studies; others include Sianne Ngai's notion on "animatedness" (2005, 91), Sara Ahmed's theorization of the "feminist killjoy" (2017, 10) and José Esteban Muñoz's *The Sense of Brown* (2020), as well as Tyrone S. Palmer's influential works, as will be discussed below. Kim's project engages with some of the fundamental insights that feminist narratology has brought to bear on literary studies, e.g. that identities are fluid, that gender is performative, and that narrative agency exists in relation to prevalent power structures. In the field of narrative studies, concepts rooted in cognitive narrative theory, such as the notion of storyworlds and ideas about worldmaking, have also readily found footing in queer and feminist literary theory.

A particularly productive conceptualization of affect-oriented narrative theory, which also draws on neuroscientific work, has been proposed by Claudia Breger. Breger's model of narrative worldmaking (which syncretizes neuroscientific, Deleuzian, and phenomenological approaches to affect, bringing them to bear on queer and feminist narratology) theorizes the "multidimensional, multivectoral assemblage"

(Breger 2017b, 242) of the complex interrelationships between readers, texts, and characters that come together in “a performative process of configuring affects, associations, attention, experiences, evaluations, forms, matter, perspectives, perceptions, senses, sense, topoi, and tropes in and through specific media, including mental operations as well as graphic notations, words and gestures, images and sounds” (Breger 2017a, 231). Much in line with Deleuze’s and Guattari’s notion of assemblages as continuously changing interrelationships (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 4-8), Breger mobilizes affect’s capacity to define literary reading and writing as “processes of *connection, association,* and *attachment* [that] form the core element of narrativity, but there is no requirement for particular trajectories, forms, degrees, or effects of connection—such as causality, coherence, or stability—making room for the fluidity and instability of affects” (Breger 2017a, 231; original emphasis).

Affect theory has also shaped literary studies epistemologically, emphasizing that readers’ affective relationships to texts influence what knowledges might be generated in the reading process. In this context, recent turns in literary theory can also be linked to the emergence of affect-based epistemologies that partially replaced the long-dominant employment of poststructuralist theory and the pervading methodology of literary critique. Since Bruno Latour’s infamous proposition that critique has lost its interpretive monopoly (Latour 2004, 225), more attention has been devoted to a theorization of the reader-text relationship in affective terms. Much of this work, which Robyn Wiegman summarizes under the header of a “reparative turn” (2020, 7), recalls Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s proposition of a reparative reading practice characterized by the willingness “to experience surprise,” both “terrible” and “good” (Sedgwick 2003, 146), as it strives to discover “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the object of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (ibid., 150-51). Sedgwick’s notion of reparative reading introduces a new register of affective experience into the sense-making apparatus of literary reading. As Wiegman proposes, “Sensation, we might say, displaces the authority of suspicion” (2020, 16).

Similarly, Rita Felski, whose work has offered conceptual signposts in the critique/post-critique debate, emphasizes that the critical tradition based on Paul Ricœur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Ricœur 1979, 56) not only offers an account of symbolic language but that it is also motivated by a particular affective stance (Felski 2011, 323), one that Sedgewick terms “paranoid” (Sedgewick 2003, 123). The affective

dimension inherent within this recent turn in literary theory comes to the fore in Wiegman's emphasis on the attitudes and attachments that reading practices register when readers "seek new environments of sensation for the objects they study by displacing critical attachments once forged by correction, rejection, and anger with those crafted by affection, gratitude, solidarity, and love" (Wiegman 2014, 7). Unlike New Criticism's exclusive focus on literary structures, reading practices that emerged in the aftermath of Sedgwick's critique of the paranoid stance have been deeply informed by psychoanalytic and Marxist criticism, which provided the "metalanguages" (Best and Marcus 2009, 1) for literary theory and its various interdisciplinary interlocutors, including feminist theory, critical race theory, and queer theory.

The conceptual, methodological, and epistemological traditions in literary studies that have been shaped by the affective turn, the reparative turn, and the turn towards post-critique have also influenced critical debates surrounding literature's valence both within and outside academia. Prior traditions of literary studies that trivialized readerly affect "with […] strictures against affective fallacies that threatened to pull literary studies back into the impressionistic judgments and gut reactions of lay reading" (Felski 2011, 220) became themselves the subject of critical interrogation, as did assumptions about what kinds of insights and knowledges literary studies can facilitate at all. This coincided with a renewed interest in literary form and aesthetics, attention placed on genre experimentations, and the affective-aesthetic political work that such approaches facilitate in the discussion of transnational feminist life writing by authors ranging from Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (cf. Schultermandl et al. 2018); queer feminist texts that fuse personal narrative and their own theoretical deliberations on knowledge production through identity positionalities in authors such as Maggie Nelson, Lauren Berlant, and Kathleen Stewart (see Wiegman 2020); re-registering settler colonial violence and racism through affective tropes of various public feelings, as exemplified by authors such as Billy Ray Belcourt and Ocean Vuong (see Cvetkovich 2022); or, in the Black feminist ecopoetic pedagogy of writers like Alexis Pauline Gumbs (see Kwakye 2022).

Foundational Work on Affect and Gender in American Literary Studies

In the field of American literary studies, the study of affect and narrative is deeply rooted in feminist and queer theory, ranging from work on affect's onto-social dimensions and

on social and aesthetic utopias, to literature's ability to mobilize readerly affect in the interest of forming a national sense of belonging. The disciplinary context in which the above theorizations of affect's valence for the study of gender and narrative lies predominately in the field of American studies. I take this not to be coincidental or the result of my own disciplinary footing, but of the robust interest in affect-theoretical themes in American literary studies well before the onset of the often-cited affective turn. With the example of works on sentimentalism and queer futurity, I discuss in this section how scholarship in American studies has engendered affect-based critical traditions that conceive of affect as being simultaneously a personal and political phenomenon, thereby revisiting the existing feminist and queer theorist work on the social through the perspective of affect-related concepts and approaches. I discuss sentimentalism and affect's public-oriented dimensions precisely because of their inherent interest in their mobilization of gender as a category of difference.

American sentimental fiction mobilizes feelings and behaviors as specifically gendered and racialized characteristics. Within the structures of feeling, through which normative orders regulate notions of belonging, affect has positioned white middle-class women "as the moral center of the family, community, or even the nation" (Gerund and Paul 2018, 18). The question as to how literature affectively impacts readers' onto-social relationships gained particular prominence with regard to sentimental novels' political impact. Most famously, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s (1852) admonition to her readers to "feel right" epitomizes the generative potential of sentimental storytelling, assuming a transference of the feelings readers feel towards the fictional text onto readers' morals and ethics (Stowe 1998, 452). That this appeal was specifically directed at female readers encapsulates the prevalent assumption at the time that women possessed "the desire to bond" (Dobson 1997, 267). Affectively, sentimental narratives assume a sense of emotional universality. This emphasis on sympathetic identification glossed over the different positionalities of white middle-class women and enslaved African American women.

While Stowe's bestselling novel was credited during her time to have a significant impact towards the abolition of slavery in the US, New American Studies' work on sentimentalism has explored this phenomenon from a variety of critical perspectives. For instance, Berlant contends that the generative capacity of sentimentalism depended on a "particular form of liberal sentimentality that promotes individual acts of identification based on collective group memberships" and binds

citizens “to the nation through a universalist rhetoric not of citizenship per se but of the capacity of suffering and trauma at the citizen’s core” (Berlant 2008, 15). This liberal sentimentalism does not account for white citizens’ access to power and privilege and is therefore likely to reproduce hegemonic assumptions about racial difference. As Rebecca Wanzo argues, “stories that touch people’s hearts are often better at reinforcing preexisting conditions than at inciting revolution. After all, there is a level of comfort in stories that encourage identification and intimacy, while radical change often demands that people be made uncomfortable” (Wanzo 2009, 16-17). Therefore, Wanzo considers sentimental narratives to be a “politically effective but insufficient means of political change” (ibid., 9) because they tend to reify existing power asymmetries and employ dominant myths and stereotypes. For instance, it was not the suffering of enslaved individuals that served as point of sympathetic identification for antebellum readers, but the emotional excess of witnesses of the horrors of slavery, who were white middle-class women in many sentimental novels of that period.

It would be remiss to understand this attention to white female protagonists, authors, and readers as radical feminist intervention. As evidenced by the famous Douglas/Tompkins debate, sentimental novels do shed light on female publics that were largely missing from the male-dominated canon of American romanticism (Tompkins 1985), while at the same time being complicit with dominant gender ideologies about women’s penchant for sentimental excess (Douglas 1977). While it is true that “[s]entimentalism envisions the self-in-relation” (Dobson 1997, 267), this raises the question as to how this relationality is framed by various categories of difference. For instance, the privileging of female sentiment has reified existing gender norms that equate feeling with femininity and reason with masculinity. This “feminization of American sentimentalism” overlooks “the cultural work of sentimental men” (Chapman and Hendler 1999, 2) in nineteenth-century American literary culture and the ways in which various tropes of male suffering also challenged national scripts of identity and belonging.

Sentimentalism’s function of establishing national cohesion illustrates the contiguity between the private and the public, with work on the public dimensions of feelings adding to critical scholarship on sentimental fiction (see Hendler 2001). Feminist and queer theory’s critical work on the intimacies of kinship, solidarity, and community shares this understanding of feelings as being *public* and *social* in the sense that they index dominant emotional scripts of a particular time and place. As Ann

Cvetkovich and Ann Pellegrini note, “from the deployment of affect to produce national patriotism, to the rallying of audiences on behalf of social forms of oppression and violence, to passionate calls for activism” (Cvetkovich and Pellegrini 2003, n.p.), personal affective experiences always stand in dialogue with the state. Cvetkovich’s work on depression not only acknowledges the socially produced conditions for depression but also the “political disappointments and failures” (Cvetkovich 2012, 1) at the root of the neoliberal state. Conceiving of depression as public feeling allows Cvetkovich to “depathologize negative feelings so that they can be seen as resources for political action” (Cvetkovich 2012, 2).

Likewise, Berlant’s theorization of “cruel optimism” envisages deeply personal affective attachments as constrained by the societal conditions which render them appealing and ultimately unattainable. These attachments become cruel optimism “when the object that draws your attachment actively impeded the aim that brought you to it initially” and “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (Berlant 2011, 1). Berlant theorizes a queer anti-social position towards “good-life fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—” (ibid., 2), which grapple with the neoliberal “crises in state participation in the economic and legal life of social actors and populations” (ibid., 14). The ‘impasse’ generated by these crises is not a passing moment or phase but intricately enmeshed with the affective registers of neoliberal self-optimization and the drive to be the best worker, lover, citizen, etc.

Narratives of gender and affect are often mobilized as lifelines within, through, and out of this impasse. They can hold a space of articulation for marginalized subjects. The narratives of minoritized and marginalized communities are part of an “archive of feelings” (Cvetkovich 2003) which validates their experiences in the face of the “historical ‘impossibility’” (Love 2007, 4), during times when they were intentionally repressed and erased. In this sense, non-essentialist narratives that center around LGBTQIA2S+ lives can become “lifelines for those deprived of other forms of public acknowledgment” (Felski 2008, 43). While historical injuries caused by discourses surrounding sexual stigmatization cannot be undone, sharing these emotions in the form of narratives that write back to these discourses holds great agential potential. This, too, is a form of public feeling in the sense that narratives also constitute community-building endeavors in the face of heteronormative and cis-normative discourses, presently and historically, as I will discuss in detail in the following section.

Affect and Relationality: Forms of Queer, Trans, and Critical Race Theorist Worldmaking

In *Politics of Affect*, Brian Massumi writes: “to affect and to be affected is to be open to the world, to be active in it and to be patient for its return activity. This openness is also taken as primary. […] To begin affectively in change is to begin in relation, and to begin in relation to begin in the event” (Massumi 2015, ix). Massumi’s assertion about relationality offers an important reference point for a categorization of current debates in affect theory that address literature’s relationship to the social. A central assumption in affect-oriented literary theory is that narratives hold space for relationships to emerge in various constellations: reader-character, reader-reader, and text-reader. In each of these cases, affect registers as generative of proto-social relations, deemed good or bad. For instance, Ahmed argues that negative affects “stick” (Ahmed 2014, 4) to racialized and gendered minorities and promote or perpetuate xenophobic, homophobic, misogynistic, and transphobic ideologies. As Ahmed contends, “emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities […] through the very intensity of their attachments” (Ahmed 2004, 117-19; original emphasis).

One particular focus lies on narratives’ role as primary instruments of social cohesion. This ranges from Berlant’s work on the formation of “intimate publics,” whose emergence epitomizes the impression that there exists “a world of strangers who would be emotionally literate in each other’s experience of power, intimacy, desire, and discontent, with all that entails” (Berlant 2009, 5); to Jennifer L. Brady’s observation about the formation of a “reading public” (Brady 2011, 726), which is founded on the feeling of intimate connections among readers based on their individual but shared emotional responses to the same reading material; to Nancy Fraser’s and Michael Warner’s respective arguments regarding the formation of counterpublics through “*the reflexive circulation of discourse*” (Warner 2002, 90; original emphasis), or within particular feminist spaces such as “journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places” (Fraser 1990, 67).

Different readers access narratives from a variety of positionalities. Their affective relationship depends a great deal on their own experiences and connections; their relationship to the text may also depend on their “angle of […] arrival” (Ahmed

2010, 41). The multiple lines of flight that affect may engender can generate all kinds of relationships for readers in an array of affective registers, and these, in turn, can articulate counterreactions to discrimination, oppression, and erasure and evoke "potentiality for another world" (Muñoz 2009, 1).

In a recent collaborative project with Jana Aresin, Dijana Simić, and Si Sophie Pages Whybrew (2022), I proposed the concept of *affective worldmaking* as a possible line of inquiry into the formation of counterpublics through narratives. While the range of affective responses to a text may vary, affective worldmaking attends explicitly to narrative's capacity to validate experiences of feminist, queer, and transgender subjects. This notion of affective worldmaking understands narratives to have a significant impact on constructions of individual and collective identities, on identities deemed comprehensible and thus (in)validated, on how people position themselves in the world, and on how they articulate untold pasts, marginalized presents, and possible futures. Affective worldmaking registers affect on three levels: the texts' affective dimensions and the protagonists' experiences, relationships, and emotions; the potential affective positions and attachments between readers and texts; and the potential the above two relationships hold for societal and political transformation. Affective worldmaking expounds on narratives' potential to "offer solace and relief not to be found elsewhere, confirming that I am not entirely alone, that there are others who think or feel like me" (Felski 2008, 33). In literary theory, the concept of recognition best captures this potential.

Recognition describes two potentially concurring aesthetic responses: the moment of recognizing one's identity in a text and the experience of recognizing one's affective responses to it. As Rita Felski proposes, recognition in reading and representation may facilitate a "moment of personal illumination and heightened self-understanding" and "practices of acknowledgment" as well as "acceptance and validation" in the wider social and political realm (Felski 2008, 30). For instance, the marginalized status of marginalized identities often becomes affirmed through the narratives that erase or misrepresent them in the first place. Affective worldmaking can occur through what Muñoz has termed "disidentification," meaning an act of resistant worldmaking by deconstructing and reshaping dominant cultural narratives. Muñoz posits that "[t]o disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject" (1999, 12). Moreover, recognition might even help readers to mitigate feelings of

invalidation, feelings that may have been prompted both by lived experiences as well as by dominant narratives that espouse patriarchal, heteronormative, and cis-normative notions of identity. As Sarah Nuttall argues with regard to postcoloniality, "[r]eading may often be about recognizing the self as known, identifiable or acknowledged by a text, as if for the first time" (Nuttall 2001, 391). Similarly, as Hil Malatino's work on transgender rage urges, moments of recognition may help (re-)build resilience through witnessing that others also "share a similar crucible" (Malatino 2019, 135). This is true for realist and speculative genres alike, as Si Sophie Pages Whybrew discusses with relation to science fiction and trans worldmaking. Whybrew proposes that validating representations of trans and non-binary characters "may suggest blueprints for more accepting and validating social relations, trans be/longing, and trans for trans (t4t) care, as well as the promise of more affirming and broader social worlds" (Whybrew 2022, 94).

Affect's relational directionality has the capacity for readers to take back agency over the politics of representation of their gender and sexual identities. In this context, affect registers the affirmational quality of narratives as deeply personal but entirely political acts of being and being visible. Beyond the level of narration, this can also facilitate relationships between audiences and narratives that are validating to audiences, including the formation of counterpublics. If affect is essentially relational, as indeed much of affect theory has contended, the implications of this are that affect is a positively generative and affirmative force. The affective worldmaking described above understands interpersonal relationships as reliant on a sense of intelligibility. This premise comes with two issues: firstly, it does not fully delineate the assumptions about intelligibility at the basis of this argument, and secondly, much of the discourse on affective relationality adopts metaphors that affirm the cycle of capitalist production and consumption.

Critical work on affect's antisocial dimensions has been equally generative of insights into the interplay between gender, affect, and narrative. This includes work on anti-novel ideologies, neoliberal framings of affects in literature, critical race theorist work on the nexus of affective intelligibility of particularly racialized subjects, and dominant appropriations of affective expressions as forms of racial othering. The correlation between affect theory and neoliberalism is central in Rachel Greenwald Smith's analysis of "impersonal feelings" (Smith 2015, 2) in American literature. Smith's *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* theorizes "impersonal

feelings" which do not depend on such manifested connections to others "because they are not easily codifiable or recognizable; they do not allow for strategic emotional associations to be made between readers and characters; and they emphasize the unpredictability of affective connections" (Smith 2015, 2). Smith contends that the emergence of the "affective hypothesis" in literary studies, meaning the "belief that literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience" (ibid., 1), extends neoliberalism's emphasis on the private and the individual into the realm of aesthetic reception, where readers "consume" (ibid., 29) texts or emotionally "invest" (ibid., 3) in the lives of the characters. Smith notes a conspicuous simultaneity between the emergence of affect theory in the sciences and humanities and the rise of neoliberalism.

A similar observation has been made by Eva Illouz with regard to the notion of emotional competence, which, she proposes, "is translatable into a social benefit, as professional advancement or social capital" (Illouz 2007, 63). Ciftci's recent discussion of Ottessa Moshfegh's narrative strategies that depict a protagonist's "capacity to *think* of feelings but not to *feel* them" (Ciftci 2022, 11; original emphasis) limns literature's potential to express affective intensities through literary form, proposing a reading method that localizes the center of "affective closeness" (ibid., 25), not with the protagonist but with the text's makeup, meaning that "affects stop being the-thing-you-feel-on-the-skin and become a matter of form and structure" (ibid., 18). Similarly, Eugenie Brinkema argues that "affects inhere in forms" (2014, 27) and that particular textual constructions capture, express, and generate certain affects. This attention to affects has also pushed recent scholarship on aesthetics into new directions, for which Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005) and *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012) are perhaps most deliberately modeled after affective effects.

In addition, the ability to recognize affective expressions is an ideologically fraught issue. Racialized and gendered structures of feeling about bodily, emotional, and moral capacity have persistently rendered Black subjects as illegible within white-oriented ontologies, presently and historically. Recent work on affect, critical race theory, and Blackness, for instance, has generated productive ways to theorize these hierarchies, exclusions, and erasures from the US national imaginary through intersectional perspectives. Blackness has historically been the subject of otherness, alterity, and objectification, all three being deliberately oppositional to onto-social positions of relationality. Intersectional feminist, critical race theorist, and Afropessimist

work on affect therefore challenges the universalist assumptions about relationality by calling attention to the various conditions inflicting oppression, violence, and erasure on Black lives.

Tyrone S. Palmer, for instance, argues that equating affect with relationality fails to acknowledge the particular conditions of Blackness and, in turn, offers concepts of worldmaking which exclusively revolve around non-Black worlds characterized by their "reification of Black abjection" (Palmer 2023, 49). Palmer's work delineates the degrees to which such theorizations of affect essentially perpetuate "the anti-Black paradigm" (Palmer 2020, 250), unless they acknowledge that "[w]orld(ing) is an achievement, a *capacity*, that Blackness is rendered, time and again, as fundamentally lacking by definition" (ibid., 259; original emphasis). Palmer's work on affect critically interrogates affect's generative potential and instead attends to the onto-epistemological asymmetry regarding affect and Blackness, which he terms "fungibility" (Palmer 2017, 37), indicating that "[t]he Black […] stands as a fungible object upon, around and through which affect accumulates, yet whose own affective power is of no consequence" (ibid.). This notion of fungible affect registers the specific onto-epistemological positionalities Blackness has historically inhabited under conditions of colonization, slavery, and segregation, yet it does not address the concomitant forms of gratuitous violence inflicted on Black subjects and communities. For instance, Shermaine Jones's reading of Claudia Rankine's affective poetics focuses on artistic interventions against Anti-Black violence and "affective asphyxia" (Jones 2017, 37).

While Palmer's work engages with the onto-epistemological asymmetry regarding the fungibility of Black affect, Xine Yao's work theorizes the affective registers of a "negativity of unfeeling" (Yao 2021, 3) as a liberatory practice against sentimentality, compassion, and other forms of white guilt. In *Disaffected*: *The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America*, Yao "deliberately reads against the grain of the culture of sentiment to refuse the usual move of arguing for the humanity of minoritized subjects by enlisting literature to affirm that they feel too" (ibid.). Racialized and gendered assumptions regarding affectability, Yao notes, are often "coded categories in the cultural imagination deployed to flatten out and invalidate individual and collective subtleties" (ibid., 6), categories such as "unsympathetic Blackness, queer frigidity, Black objective passionlessness, and Oriental inscrutability" (ibid.). For Yao, unfeeling in literary texts encompasses "a range of affective modes,

performances, moments, patterns, and practices that fall outside of or are not legible using dominant regimes of expression. The range includes withholding, disregard, growing a thick skin, refusing to care, opacity, numbness, dissociation, inscrutability, frigidity, insensibility, obduracy, flatness, insensitivity, disinterest, coldness, heartlessness, fatigue, desensitization, and emotional unavailability" (Yao 2021, 11). As Yao's project exemplifies, disaffection and unfeeling can replace relational affect as counterhegemonic strategies of resisting, and of cultivating alternative forms of being and belonging that are not oriented towards a particular social hegemony.

Conclusion

Theorizations of literary form are integral to all of the above-mentioned projects in affect-oriented literary theory. This includes particular attention to the affective-aesthetic dimensions of narratives through genre experimentation, inter- and transmediality, multilingualism, and structural elements that appeal to readers and audiences in affective ways. Whether affects are understood to be generative of relations or to resist affectability that can be contained within the personal realm of readers and audiences, a renewed attention to the literary qualities of literature has brought to the fore affect-oriented literary studies scholarship that conceives of the political and the aesthetic as mutually constituent aspects of literary narratives. In turn, therefore, the fact that we are now "fully within the Episteme of the Affect" (Brinkema 2014, 2) is due to the methodological, epistemological and phenomenological inquiries that have shaped feminist, queer, and critical race theorist projects in the past decades.

Attention to narratives' affective aesthetic dimensions balances questions of readerly affect with questions of literary craft. It generates conversations about what literature can do to and with us at the same time as it accounts for what we do to and with literature. This balance is important because, as Sianne Ngai argues, "purely subjective or personal experience turns artworks into [what Adorno calls] 'containers for the psychology of the spectator'" (Ngai 2005, 29). Instead, affect-oriented literary studies offers multiple entry points into the multifaceted encounters between readers and narratives. In the context of queer, trans, and feminist narrative studies, affect-oriented literary studies and notions of affective worldmaking help better understand the ways in which readers, texts, and protagonists are oriented towards each other as well as within the world writ large. Reparative notions of affect's pro-social work in and

through narratives on the one hand and neoliberal and critical race theorist problematizations of affect's generative potential on the other emphasize the intricate interrelations between narratives' aesthetic and political dimensions. In turn, the forms of queer, trans, and critical race theorist worldmaking of contemporary narratives bring into sharper focus the political significance of processes of composition and reading alike.

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