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# Affect Theory and the Empirical

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## Abstract

This review article approaches the turn to affect theory as diagnostic of broader currents in cultural anthropology. This is a time of increased curiosity within the subfield. It is also a time of increased anxiety, as researchers feel mounting pressure to make a case for the empirical value of what they do. Affect theory seems to offer cultural anthropologists a way of getting to the bottom of things: to the forces that compel, attract, and provoke. And yet what affect theory is offering cultural anthropologists may be less an account of how the world works than a new awareness of the premises that guide their research. I base these observations on a discussion of recent ethnographies that deploy affect theory in the study of labor, governance, and animal–human relations. I conclude with an assessment of the risks and opportunities associated with the adoption of theoretical models from other fields.

## INTRODUCTION: GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF THINGS

When I was a little girl I wanted to know everything. I feel like these times have come again. These days, cultural anthropologists are like inquisitive children. They do not like having limitations placed on the questions they can ask. They want to know everything there is to know about the histories that have brought together the actors they study. They want to know everything there is to know about the forces that shape what these actors do. They understand that knowledge can only ever be provisional, but they still want to know how things work.

In this review article, I focus on a body of work that reflects this curiosity. When scholars in the humanities turned to affect, it was no accident that cultural anthropologists followed, drawn by an object of inquiry that beckoned from beyond the constraints of culturally derived categories yet somehow offered a key for understanding how these categories emerged. These anthropologists were keen to leave well-trodden pathways and venture into new terrain: from boardrooms to laboratories to field sites inhabited by creatures very different from those they had studied up until then. The study of affect, narrowly conceived, has encountered obstacles: It has proven difficult, and in some cases impossible, to capture affect ethnographically (see Rubin 2012). But this does not mean that this trend has yielded nothing of value. It has served as a bellwether for theoretical advances in the field.

Cultural anthropologists and other scholars have used the term affect in a range of senses. The social theorist and philosopher Brian Massumi (2002) follows Gilles Deleuze and Baruch Spinoza in defining affect as a felt bodily intensity, the feeling of having a feeling, a potential that emerges in the gap between movement and rest. Affect is measurable in experiments that register unconscious responses to stimuli and potential perceptions that a subject may or may not perceive. As such, affect is something other than emotion, which Massumi understands as collectively recognized ways of describing embodied experience. Affect fuels expressions of emotion, Massumi argues, but these expressions never capture the unruly experience at their root (see also Massumi 1995). For the literary scholar Eve Sedgwick, who drew on the work of psychoanalyst Silvan Tomkins (1962) to pioneer one of the “two dominant vectors of affect study in the humanities,” the prediscursive field of affect is pluralized (Seigworth & Gregg 2010, p. 5). Instead of a singular drive, we have shame and her sisters: interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, desire-anguish, not to mention humiliation and contempt-disgust (see Sedgwick 2003; see also Sedgwick & Frank 1995). Both versions of the concept turn our attention to the forces that move people, forces that attract, repel, and provoke.

In mobilizing these and other versions of affect theory, what the work I consider has to offer may be less a new account of how the world works than a sharper awareness of the premises that cultural anthropologists implicitly set forth when they make empirical claims (Rutherford 2012). To the degree that cultural anthropologists approach institutions as emergent, not given, they have long been operating with a set of tacit assumptions about what makes people tick. Studies deploying affect theory open these tacit assumptions to scrutiny and possible revision. Natural scientists are constrained by standards of evidence that limit their ability to make broad claims. Cultural anthropologists produce a more ambitious, if less self-assured kind of knowledge: Instead of telling people this is how the world is, we invite them to imagine how the world might look, feel, or sound if experienced by an actor situated in a particular place and time. Approaching affect theory as a boundary object linking these regimes, I begin by examining studies that scrutinize the affective nature of labor under neoliberal conditions. I then turn to the use of affect as an analytic concept in analyses of governance. After considering what a focus on affect adds to the study of these classic topics in social science, I consider its role in a field that is self-consciously new. I look at how scholars exploring relations between humans and other animals are using the notion of affect to understand interactions that take a decidedly nonnormative form.

Attention to affect is encouraging cultural anthropologists to think hard about the ways that passions pass between bodies. It is inviting them to see in the things people say, write, make, and do together the effects of movements that breach the boundary long presumed to exist between passion and reason, body and soul. It is also encouraging them to rethink their relationships with scholarly others. There is potential in the line of work I trace. But there are also pitfalls, as we shall see.

## FORGET AFFECT?

There have been naysayers. Martin (2013), for instance, describes the turn to affect as an instance of misplaced universalism. Behind the “craving for generality” that, according to Martin, has fueled interest in this topic lies a “contemptuous attitude to the particular case” (Rhees 1970, p. 51, in Martin 2013, p. 157). Despite the progressive tone of its adherents, promoters of affect theory are guided, as Martin (2013) puts it, by a “troubling alliance with neuroscientific findings”—findings with often baleful “cultural effects” (p. 8; see also Haraway 1989, Latour 1988, Mazzarella 2009, Paxson & Helmreich 2014).<sup>1</sup>

Targeting the strong version of affect theory, Martin takes aim at Massumi’s (2002) *Parables of the Virtual*. But Massumi’s influence has not been hegemonic. Sociologist Patricia Clough (2007), who is otherwise a fan, historicizes Massumi’s work in light of transformations in contemporary capitalism (Hardt & Negri 2000) and the rise of biopolitics as a technology of power [Agamben 1998; Foucault 2007 (1978), pp. 163–90; see also Foucault 1978, 2000]. Neuroscientists, Clough argues, are creating what they are measuring, along with a new kind of biotechnological subject for whom questions of intentionality are moot. Moving beyond Massumi, the editors of *The Affect Theory Reader* list no fewer than eight orientations to affect associated with fields ranging from cybernetics to psychoanalysis to histories of the emotions (Seigworth & Gregg 2010, p. 6). Within literary studies, we find a festival of passions: Berlant’s (2011) “cruel optimism,” Ahmed’s (2010) “happiness,” Cvetkovich’s (2012) “depression,” and Sedgwick’s (1993, 2003) “shame,” all of which are “public feelings” (Cvetkovich 2007, 2012; see also Cvetkovich 2003) that register the psychic marks left on public life by power. Scholars have used affect theory to capture phenomena that might otherwise pass unnoticed: the embodied experience of a world in motion, the atmospherics of an age (see Anderson 2009, Böhme 1993, Brennan 2004, McCormack 2008, Ngai 2005, Rodaway 1994; see also Stewart 2007).

For critics like Martin, what is most striking about this line of work is its willingness to have recourse to universalizing descriptions of the human apparatus. But there is another way to make sense of what holds these diverse, even motley, projects together. Latour (1999) called for an end to the “iconoclasm” he associated with modernist and postmodernist thinking, which he saw as driven by an urge to break the idols of accepted wisdom to reveal the constructed nature of identities and other supposed facts. In shifting the focus from social constructivism to what he calls the “felt reality of relation,” Massumi and others working in this field have sought a way beyond the “cultural solipsism” that has dogged the humanities and humanistic social sciences (Massumi 2002, p. 39; see also Thrift 2008, Zerilli 2005).<sup>2</sup> It is only by paying heed to what lies beyond

<sup>1</sup>Affect theory would seem to belong to the set of “new materialist practices” of inquiry that “often veer towards universalizing metaphysical claims about the nature of ‘matter’ as such and also, at times, take scientific truth claims about the world at face value” (see Paxson & Helmreich 2014, p. 169; see also Latour 1988).

<sup>2</sup>The body has access to the “felt reality of relation” by virtue of the fact that it is always in motion and hence “in an immediate relation to its own nonpresent potential to vary.” Massumi draws on Peircean semiotics, as well as Deleuze, in making this claim (Massumi 2002, p. 4).

construction that we can understand how the social gets made. We can follow the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) in assuming that it is language games all the way down, but what leads players to play?

Big new ideas can prove seductive, and scholars understandably want to join the latest conversation. In the case of affect theory, it can easily seem that the price of admission is not to mention how people describe what they feel and do. I propose a different way of talking about this trend in scholarship. Social construction is not the solution; it is the puzzle. The best work in cultural anthropology to come out under the banner of affect theory provides us with new ways of investigating the making of persons, practices, institutions, and emergent social orders, such as the worlds of work to which I turn now.

## AFFECTIVE LABOR

Michael Hardt covered the terrain in a 1999 essay, which laid out in brief, strong strokes what is new in the economic orders of today. Affective labor is an expanded version of “immaterial labor,” which Hardt (1999, p. 95) describes as the hallmark of the latest phase in the global development of capital: from labor in fields to labor in factories to postindustrial labor in call centers, fast-food joints, tech firms, and banks (see also Lazzarato 2012, Reich 1991). On the one hand, affective labor is old: As feminist scholars have made plain, women have been doing it for free for millennia, tucked away in domestic spaces (Fantone 2007, Federici 2012, Fortunati 1995, Mitropoulos 2005, Spivak 1988; see also Hochschild 2003). On the other hand, it is new and newly hypostasized: think of the manufactured intimacies that confront consumers everywhere and the bleeding of homes into offices and of offices into homes (see Gregg 2011). For Hardt, affective labor is a new form of enslavement, a new colonization of what Habermas (1984, 1991) called the “lifeworld.” But it is also a potential source of liberation: a site of “biopower from below” (see also Chakrabarty 2000). As an embodied capacity that is generalizable, affect is an element of what Agamben (1998) called “bare life.” As what passes between participants in scenes of interaction, affect is the stuff of new forms of life, new ways of being in the world.

Within contemporary cultural anthropology, a wealth of recent studies illuminate the double-edged nature of affective labor in domestic scenes (see Constable 2009). Faier’s (2009) *Intimate Encounters* describes the lives, dreams, and dilemmas of Filipino wives of rural Japanese men; these women start out as hostesses and end up in marriages in which they strive to become the perfect traditional Japanese brides. Buch’s (2013) research on home health workers reveals similarly blurred domestic spaces, in which workers and their employers both draw on sentiments associated with the family and seek to keep their divided loyalties intact. McIntosh’s (2015) essay on white Kenyans and their relationships to black staff shows how the forms of life experienced from one side of the encounter are not the same as those experienced from the other and how open to negotiation and contestation the commodification of care can be. Serving a cocktail or helping with a bath, a hostess or home health worker enters into the embodied copresence of another person. Through a touch or a gesture, she and her charge can come to see themselves and their relationship in new and unnerving ways. Sentiments associated with social roles give way to other passions—unease, excitement, shame, shock, arousal, and other “intensities” that arise when one finds oneself without a ready script. There is “affect,” and then there is affect in these uncomfortable moments when people find themselves not quite sure how to feel (see Ngai 2005).

Such moments are also the stuff of recent work on affective labor in historically more masculine terrain [see Bear 2015, Deville 2015, Martin 2002, Miyazaki 2007; see also Smith 1984 (1759)]. Moving beyond the global north, Rudnyckij’s (2010) *Spiritual Economies* takes us to Indonesia,

where Krakatau Steel was a central site of value generation under the New Order, Indonesia's long-standing authoritarian regime. In the post-New Order period, Islamic organizations, formerly tightly controlled by Suharto, enjoyed a fluorescence. Alongside Islamic televangelists and Islamic fashion magazines, Islamic management leadership programs sprang up, promising to build better workplaces by building workers with better souls. Krakatau Steel contracted with a program known as "Emotional Spiritual Quotient" (ESQ), in an effort to tamp down corruption and keep international investors happy. Cranking up the air conditioning to evoke the cold of the grave, ESQ's leaders asked employees to picture themselves in hell and to feel the torments they would suffer given a frank assessment of their conduct. The aim was to get participants to weep, and weep they did, their "hearts opened" to a new understanding of their place in the company (and eternity) (Richard & Rudnyckyj 2009, p. 72). The empirical stuff of Rudnyckyj's study is both affect and "affect": both the unnerving sensations Rudnyckyj himself felt while attending ESQ sessions and the locally specific notions of desire and terror on which the trainers drew. "Affect is 'infrastructural,'" Rudnyckyj notes, quoting Massumi (2002, p. 45): The feeling of having a feeling creates neoliberal workers (see also Ross 2004, Sanchez 2012, Urciuoli 2008). But so is talk of affect, which roots embodied experiences in deeper histories, while gesturing toward what these descriptions cannot grasp.

Muehlebach's (2012) *The Moral Neoliberal: Welfare and Citizenship in Italy* joins a series of studies exposing the affective dimensions of humanitarianism and the politics of pity and solidarity (see also Allen 2009, Haskell 1985, Redfield 2013, Ticktin 2011). In the current phase of neoliberalism in Italy, the emphasis is no longer on structural adjustment. Few in Italy are challenging the prevailing wisdom that the world is made better when states retreat to create space for entrepreneurs. Rather, what is new is the emergence of a different kind of entrepreneurial spirit, one motivated not just by profits but also by finer sentiments. The "moral neoliberal" is Italy's answer to high unemployment, the fraying of the safety net, and demographic collapse: Instead of claiming a right to their share of the public good, the elderly ought to lay claim to the empathy of their fellows, who, in giving of their time, create social cohesion from person to person from the ground up. Social service agencies encourage pensioners to engage in volunteerism with their more needy fellows as a form of self-fashioning and self-care. Romantic desires for reciprocity and community become an alibi for neoliberal reforms.

Muehlebach's argument cuts two ways: On the one hand, her research offers a vivid description of the domestication of leftist ideals, with capitalism making use of anticapitalist slogans and personnel, combined with elements of Catholic piety. On the other hand, the ethics of solidarity promoted by these organizations encouraged volunteers to speak out against the state's abandonment of their charges, using the language of neoliberalism to talk back to the neoliberal state. The homes Muehlebach entered were alive with different ways of telling the story of what was happening there and then. Having internalized the values of pity, generosity, and solidarity, volunteers were quick to differentiate themselves not only from state employees, but also from care workers from the Global South who performed similar labor for a wage. Muehlebach, who draws on Mauss (1967), shows how when money meets intimacy, the tension between interest and disinterest associated with gift exchange is deeply felt (see also Parry 1986, Zelizer 2007). In giving, one creates an image of oneself as a generous individual. It is like being caught in the act of self-creation when we sense the interested nature of the generous things we do. This is one way of interpreting the volunteers' critical remarks about migrant care workers, who were living figures of their own ambivalence about their work.

Affect and "affect" are both objects of anthropological claim making, whose empirical nature becomes particularly obvious in work that focuses on the force of feelings. This is also the case in

the next body of literature I consider: work on the affective dimensions of governance in colonial and postcolonial states.

## AFFECTIVE STATES

The colonial state is an affective state: This is Stoler's (2007) assessment. Colonial regimes devoted much energy and anxiety to the task of cultivating proper sentiments among their native subjects, as well as to the European men and women who made their careers and homes abroad. For their part, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political theorists described governance as depending on the manipulation of public sentiments, be this through the creation of "artifices" that extended the sympathies of subjects to criminals and distant compatriots [Hume 1962 (1738), Locke 2003 (1681), Smith 1984 (1759)] or through spectacles of sovereignty that filled the populace with fear and awe [Machiavelli 2003 (1531), Hobbes 1998 (1651); see also Foucault 1979 (1975), 2000]. We need to think about power to understand affect and how it is aroused and channeled into proper pathways through discourses of control and containment (see Masco 2014, Schull 2014; see also Aretxaga 2003, Blom-Hansen & Stepputat 2001, Taussig 1992). But could it be that we also need to think about affect to understand the nature of power?

Two recent studies provide us with possible answers to this question. If reason is a passion, as Hume [1962 (1738)] and others insisted, then the new form of sovereignty that emerged in the long eighteenth century had a feeling tone, one associated with the unencumbered anonymity of individuals entering what Habermas [1991 (1962)] famously called the public sphere and engaging in rational-critical debate. But this sensory orientation, as Mazzarella (2013) tells us in *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity*, gained its grip not only by repressing, but also by feeding from a far less constrained set of embodied passions. Focusing on a series of moments in the history of censorship in India, Mazzarella, like Stoler, shows us a state intent on regulating the sentiments of subjects. But he also engages in a thoroughgoing questioning of the affective basis of state authority. Debates over censorship are, in fact, debates over sovereignty—debates over its origins, its legitimacy, and the embodied dispositions on which it rests.

Whatever their political motivations, postcolonial censors and their colonial counterparts have a shared goal: the control and edification of what they viewed as an immature public (see also Borch 2012). Every sign addresses a potentially unlimited set of others; this is particularly the case when it comes to images, whose interpretation is constrained by conventions different from those associated with words. The circulation of Bollywood movies throughout Africa is only one example of the capacity of mass cultural forms to overflow their banks. Mass publicity's open edge can give rise to exuberance but also to anxiety if this expanded public is viewed as open to provocation. Censorship runs in an ideological loop: It aims to keep the masses ignorant and immature; for precisely this reason, more censorship "is needed to keep the masses and their dangerous instincts in check" (Mazzarella 2013, p. 17). Censors, for their part, are immune from contagion: They can watch sex scenes and political propaganda safely without jeering and rioting. This is not just a matter of decorum or bureaucratic discipline. When it comes to mass publicity, censors are sovereign: They can do with impunity what others cannot (Agamben 1998, Schmitt 1985). In adjudicating the "volatile relationship" between "the sensuous charge of an object, grounded in its collective nature, and what that sign might possibly mean," the censor's fist gains its force from the very energies it seeks to stamp out (Mazzarella 2013, p. 23).

Mazzarella (2009) is known for his critique of Massumi's approach to affect, which he sees as compromised by an undertheorized "dream of immediation" (p. 294). Mazzarella's own approach draws on Émile Durkheim's [1965 (1912)] description of "collective effervescence,"



an idea Durkheim developed through an analysis of the *corroborri*, an Australian aboriginal rite.<sup>3</sup> Missionary accounts describe the natives participating in this ritual as swept up in a frenzy of excitement due to the simple fact of their being together. The gatherings entailed a breaching of bodily boundaries, as shrieks give way to songs, wild gesticulations to dances, and gazes meet in the image of the totem, which became a reminder and an embodiment of the energies participants had shared. For Durkheim, the collective effervescence evident in these rites was the hidden undergirding of religion, morality, law, governance, and science. Both Durkheim and contemporary anthropologists examining the sensorial formation of publics reveal something profound about the affective grounds of all forms of social and political life (see also Allen 2009; Hirschkind 2006; Masco 2006, 2014). It is only by virtue of the human capacity to perceive others' perceptions and to share others' passions that sign use becomes possible. Conventions are only conventions because they presume the possibility of affecting an infinite number of possible participants. To the degree that they are public, all signs have an open edge. We are beside ourselves alongside others, haunted by their passions and perspectives, every time we speak or write, every time we use a conventional form.

In Navaro-Yashin's (2012) *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity*, sovereignty is upheld by passions elicited by literally haunting figures: the ghosts that inhabit a contested landscape in the wake of civil war. The Other here is the former neighbor, who was made to flee his or her former homeland in 1974 when United Nations peacekeepers established a boundary dividing the island of Cyprus in half. Navaro-Yashin's book focuses on the affective geography found in Turkish-backed Northern Cyprus, an invented polity unrecognized by the international community but given a certain reality for residents through state practices ranging from the assigning of place names to the issuing of identity cards. Alongside the "phantastical" nature of the North Cypriot polity, Navaro-Yashin investigates what she calls the "phantomic" nature of the North Cypriot landscape, which, in the wake of partition, left houses, fields, and commodities bereft of their owners. Phantomic landscapes stimulate affects. They convey "irritations," to use a term from Gabriel Tarde (1903): quotidian intimations of a conflict between present and past. During the period of Navaro-Yashin's fieldwork, this haunting became the basis of a political movement that challenged the North Cypriot state's legitimacy. Protesters demonstrated against their imprisonment on the northern half of the island, where they were unable to travel or work abroad and isolated from the Greek Cypriots who once shared their home.

Navaro-Yashin (2012, p. 44) draws on Das & Kleinman (2000, p. 1) in defining subjectivity as "the felt inner experiences of the person that includes his or her position in a field of relational power." The political conflicts Navaro-Yashin describes bring affects born of the trauma of absence into confrontation with the subjectivities promoted by the Northern Cypriot state, which worked to encourage citizens to experience themselves as settlers on empty land. But the opposition is not sheer. On the one hand, Navaro-Yashin pays heed to the affects associated with bureaucratic practice. On the other hand, she describes the mediated character of people's responses to landscapes and the things that populate them. People arrive in landscapes with subjectivities shaped by previous experience. Different humans respond to the nonhuman in different ways; the human apparatus is no less material and historically fashioned than the landscapes that humans inhabit and fashion.

<sup>3</sup>Mazzarella calls one of his chapters "The Elementary Forms of Mass Publicity" in an oblique reference to Durkheim's work. According to Mazzarella (2013, p. 39), Durkheim was himself responding to contemporary debates concerning the "unruly energies of urban crowds" in his analysis of the "reality" behind religion.

The question emerging from these ethnographies is how to conceptualize what Navaro-Yashin (2012) calls the “forces, energies, and affective potentialities” associated with political regimes (p. 27). For Navaro-Yashin and Mazzarella, the affects that matter exceed bodily boundaries. Both depict orientations akin to what Hume called sympathy. The human tendency to posit another’s thoughts and feelings and experience them as one’s own is what accounts for what happens when people see movies or walk past burnt out cars and imagine becoming someone else (Rutherford 2009). Hume [1962 (1738), pp. 226–27; see also Hume 1988 (1748)] explains sympathy as a “principle of human nature.” Spinoza, whom Navaro-Yashin cites, puts the traits of the apparatus down to God. Mazzarella and Navaro-Yashin follow Durkheim in positing a collective reality, based in human bodies, behind political institutions and practices. But they leave the nature of these human bodies vague.

Other scholars have explicitly invoked universal human traits in authorizing their claims concerning the affective nature of the political. Protevi (2009) begins *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic* by laying out a wide swath of scientific findings, in fields ranging from mathematics to biology to cognitive science. He deploys what he has learned in chapters that take up events in popular culture to show how political institutions build on and, in some cases, overcome such tendencies as the innate fear of reciprocal violence that makes humans hesitate before using lethal force.<sup>4</sup> Still others, like the political anthropologist Bloch (2013), have approached ethnography in an experimental vein. Bloch draws on current research on mirror neurons and other findings from cognitive psychology to develop field methods for measuring how people move, in his words, “in and out of each other’s bodies”—in essence testing their capacity to experience other minds (see also Astuti & Bloch 2015, Keane 2016, Luhrmann 2012). Touched on gingerly or confronted directly, affect provides a resource for anthropologists who are seeking to ground their accounts of the political in something that feels really real.

The question is whether psychologists, biologists, biological anthropologists, and other scholars have something to teach cultural anthropologists about the affective capacities that are mobilized and evoked by regimes of power. If the answer is yes, we also need to wonder what cultural anthropology might bring to the mix. Both questions become particularly vexed when the focus is on the relationship between humans and members of other species. The affective turn is already a turn toward the animal to the degree that it challenges presumptions about the exceptional character of the human. But the tensions between the tools of cultural anthropology and those of other forms of knowledge production become particularly evident when we consider how multispecies ethnographers authorize their empirical claims.

## AFFECTIVE ANIMALS

When species meet, passions proliferate. There is love—that “love in the age of extinction” that Rose (2011) has called for, a passion born of sensitivity to the mutuality that links humans to a multitude of other beings, ranging from primates to plankton to salmon to sheep to crickets to the microbes used in making cheese (Haraway 2008, Hayward 2012, Kirksey & Helmreich 2010, Paxson 2012, Raffles 2010).<sup>5</sup> There is shame, as in the sensation the late French philosopher Derrida (2008) claimed to feel in front of his house cat, which confronted him as he was exiting

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<sup>4</sup>One example is Protevi’s discussion of the Columbine massacre, whose perpetrators deployed modern military methods to channel their aggression in a way that allowed them to overcome the inhibitions that otherwise might have kept them from killing. See also Ngai (2005) on the “ugly feelings” that ground the social.

<sup>5</sup>On mutuality as the basis of human kinship, see Sahlins (2013).



the shower, leaving him naked before an unexpected and inscrutable gaze. There is curiosity for scholars such as Haraway (2008), who welcome the tools today's natural scientists are offering for dismantling human exceptionalism. After one day with the dingoes or one trip around the agility course with a championship dog, Western philosophers versed in the Cartesian tradition might find themselves questioning the assumption that animals are merely machines.

There is nothing new about the links that the multispecies literature draws between animals and affect [see Agamben 2004, Deleuze & Guattari 1987, Lacan 1998 (1973)].<sup>6</sup> Passion has long marked the spot where the animal and the human converge along an "animacy hierarchy" leading from rocks to men (see Chen 2012).<sup>7</sup> Biologists and psychologists have argued that humans and other mammals share many of the same affect programs: One can supposedly learn about aggression in humans by conducting experiments on cats (see Griffiths 1997, p. 87). Likewise, animals are not a new addition to ethnography. From totemism to the Nuer cattle complex, for anthropologists, as for the colonized people they once studied, animals have long been "good to think" [see Evans-Pritchard 1940, Lévi-Strauss 1963 (1962), Rappaport 1984]. Yet in the past, ethnographers tended to look at animals through the lenses of different cultures, a move that took culture as the phenomenon to be described. Today, they are approaching animals as actors with a central role to play in the worlds humans create. Recent work in this vein shifts attention from how humans think to how animals feel: the feelings they evoke in humans and the feelings they feel themselves.

Fear is one way to describe the passion that predominates in Parreñas's (see 2012, 2017) work on orangutan rehabilitation in Sarawak. Fear is not what the European volunteers Parreñas met at the centers where she did research wanted to feel when confronted by their charges. Bored by their office jobs, they had paid thousands of dollars to come to Sarawak because they loved the orangutans in the fashion Rose describes. But fear was in the air. Fangs that can tear off a face; powerful limbs; shy, anxious, sometimes angry dispositions; a tendency to turn on a dime—these were the attributes of the orangutans in the centers that the volunteers learned to notice most. A good volunteer, they discovered, was afraid of orangutans, just as a good orangutan was afraid of humans. Rehabilitation may be a pipe dream, given the loss of the orangutans' habitat. Yet by sowing fear, rehabilitation seeks to set orangutans free.

Parreñas draws on disciplines ranging from primatology to feminist studies to describe the passions of those who frequented the centers. Need, greed, and pity; concern for the plight of their homeland, their nation, or the planet—these are a few of the sentiments that led indigenous workers, bureaucrats, volunteers, and other humans to engage in this difficult and dangerous work. The impulses that fueled the orangutans' behavior were equally complex. Rehabilitation was built on interactions at the heart of which was a deep sense of uncertainty: When primates met in this setting, each partner had to take a leap of faith to know whether the other would bite or embrace, offer a beating or a mouthful of food. As Parreñas shows us, what gave these encounters their charge was a shared experience of alterity. Their limbs tangled, their breath mingled, their gazes locked; the parties to these encounters could sense each other's reactions. But they could never

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<sup>6</sup>According to Lacan [1998 (1973)], animals merely react; they never respond, as humans do when they speak. But the drives from which the capacity for language emerges betray humanity's alliance with other mammals: Food, sex, and excretion are functions they all share. Deleuze & Guattari (1987, pp. 232–309) found a figure for deterritorialized desire in the form of the wolf pack. Agamben (2004) followed up his 1998 analysis of modern sovereignty with an exploration of the place of the animal in the same tradition. On the animal as bare life, see also Striffler (2005) and Blanchette (2015).

<sup>7</sup>Chen's analysis derives from research on how languages rank different kinds of entities on the basis of their control over their own actions. Members of marginal groups appear on the hierarchy as relatively animal like.

experience what the other was experiencing. They could only guess, and this mystery is what made these meetings so seductive and so fraught.

Song's (2011) *Pigeon Trouble: Bestiary Biopolitics in a Deindustrialized America* has even more to say about the enigma of the animal Other and the affects born of it in a multispecies scene. Song's field site was a space of animal death, not animal survival. This world was easily and, as Song's study shows, erroneously depicted as divided into two competing sides: the people of Hegins, Pennsylvania, who sponsored the Labor Day Pigeon Shoot until its banning in 2000, and animal rights activists, sophisticated urban types who descended on the park every year to rescue injured birds. Many of the shoot supporters were former miners, witnesses to a vanishing way of life. But Song does not turn his story into a tale of people using animals to play out a conflict whose origins lie elsewhere, in class warfare, say, or in long-standing hostility between ethnic groups (Darnton 1984). Such a move would obscure the enigmatic nature of all the Others that confront human subjects in this setting: not just the ones with beaks and feathers, but also the ones with mouths, arms, and legs.

These are Others with mouths, legs, and lenses, to be more precise. The Labor Day Shoot was a product of its own representation: The young men who came each year to confront the protesters were playing to a televisual crowd. Biting a pigeon's head off, walking slowly to a dying bird then quickly stomping it flat—these acts occurred only when the cameras were running. Those who engaged in these cruel gestures did so with the same air of self-conscious frivolity one sees in fans at a sporting event when they notice their faces being projected onto an enormous screen. Song himself initially donned a camera in hopes of making himself less conspicuous. But Song's lenses also included the embodied apparatus he brought to his fieldwork. Song is a bird phobe, as he admits early in the study. It is no accident that one of the book's aims is to explore the nature of anthropological reflexivity. Song offers a vivid depiction of how it feels to sense that one is being seen from a perspective that remains opaque.

Such perspective might be opaque, like the lens of a camera. Or the eyes of a pigeon. Or the glassy eyes of protesters, whom the shoot supporters described as hopped up on drugs. Song sets his account in the context of what he calls avian existentialism, a predicament he analyzes with help from Sartre [2001 (1956)], who described the uncanny experience of seeing someone seeing without being able to see what the person sees (p. 230). The world does not consist of culture areas, bounded spaces where people are thought to share a worldview. Rather, from the perspective of any particular subject, the world is incomplete. The Others' eyes mark the spot where another vantage point is both promised and withheld from us. All the contexts we might marshal—all the "regimes of power" we might identify to make sense of what we see—cannot stitch the picture back together. Affect results from encounters with this dilemma: Frivolity, like shame, is a symptom of the fact that we live in a world filled with holes.

We are not the only ones to live in such a world; so do pigeons, according to the most experienced hunt supporters, whose wisdom Song passes on. Song devotes the last half of his book to "brushing," the local term for a technique that involves tying strings of beads and bells to the tail feathers of a pigeon in training. The pigeon learns to associate the sounds with an approaching predator, such as a hawk, and react by following evasive and bold lines of flight. To explain the advantage of this training, Song describes how pigeons experience a shoot. Released from a dark, silent trap, they fly into the blazing sun and the din of the spectators. In the confusion, a bird that has been brushed does not hesitate. It conjures up the perspective of a predator and finds a way out. For pigeons, seeing others as they see us is not just a rush; it is a matter of life and death.

It is a matter of life and death for the birds, but not exclusively. Survival is not the name of the game for only the pigeons and their killers; it is also the name of the game for ethnographers, who are increasingly being called on to defend the worthiness of their approach. Reflexivity, as Song

makes plain, is one resource that cultural anthropologists have long depended on in documenting the circumstances that shape the sentiments and subjectivities of various actors in the scene of fieldwork (see also Csordas 2013). A sense of what it takes to offer an empirical portrait of a world filled with holes—could this be something cultural anthropology has to offer other fields? Might we offer an ability to contextualize without taking anything for granted, including what should count as a context and which contexts count? When species meet, the desires behind anthropology's new attention to affect become patent: Credulously or reflexively, we find ourselves on supposedly more scientific ground. But we also find ourselves confronted with a puzzle: At the bottom of things lies a mystery, the irreducible Otherness of others, without which nothing social could exist and nothing new could emerge.

## CONCLUSION: THE REALLY REAL

“Let us set ourselves before the reality” [Durkheim 1965 (1912), p. 24]. For Durkheim, whose work is refreshingly useful in light of recent trends, the reality behind religion—and science—and law—and morality—take your pick!—was, on the one hand, historical: “the product of an immense cooperation that extends not only through space but also through time” (p. 15). At the same time, it was also affective, born of bodies and minds moving in unison, getting under each other's skin. In recent years, some cultural anthropologists have found the stuff of our studies in the histories that give rise to both cultural phenomena and the terms we give them (Palmié 2013). Others, like the scholars considered in this review article, have looked to the capacities and proclivities that define humans as social beings. The first approach is tried and true when it comes to debates over anthropology's empirical mission (see Boas 1911; Stocking 1966; Trouillot 1991, 2003). The second puts us on shakier ground. What kind of bedfellows are we finding in our search for the forces at play in the making of social worlds? Are they liable to steal the covers or push us off the edge?

Consider, for instance, Kohn's (2013) *How Forests Think*, which is inspiring a palpable sense of excitement among cultural anthropologists. Here is a study not of culture, but of life. Life for Kohn is a semiotic, end-directed process, unfolding within environments woven of intersecting selves—the selves of trees and aphids, of jaguars, of human hunters and colonizers, of spirits, of dreaming dogs. Kohn draws on the work of Deacon (2013), a biological anthropologist who has gathered an interdisciplinary circle of colleagues around him to ask the question, how did mind emerge from matter? Deacon's response reconciles the second law of thermodynamics with the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs (Peirce 1991; see also Parmentier 1994). Instead of reducing intentional practices to physical processes, Deacon shows how physical processes are themselves intentional practices: Through the entanglement of systems tending to entropy, new kinds of order emerge.<sup>8</sup>

The danger involved in entering these kinds of alliances is real if often unspoken. Kohn describes his Runa interlocutors as providing an “amplification” of the view of life that Deacon illuminates. But is an amplification of universal principles the most that cultural anthropologists have to offer? How much of the turn toward science stems from the insecurity that humanistic disciplines are feeling at a moment when funding for higher education is under threat? Cultural anthropologists have reasons to be seeking partners with a voice in public policy and access to larger grants. Within the subfield, scaling up used to entail having recourse to preexisting

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<sup>8</sup>Other cultural anthropologists have drawn inspiration from theories of niche construction (see Kirksey & Helmreich 2010; see also Fuentes et al. 2010).

cultural units; ethnographers extrapolated, on the basis of what they had learned in a single field site, to arrive at what were supposedly widely held worldviews. These days, to grasp the likelihood of particular people having particular kinds of habits and expectations, we must grapple with probabilities rather than presuming the existence of shared practices and beliefs. The knowledge produced in other disciplines can give us greater confidence in the relevance of our findings. But we risk losing a certain piety in the face of difference. Large samples are useless in the absence of what the statisticians call “construct validity”: the assurance that one is counting the right thing.

The literature on affect gives us reason to be guardedly hopeful when it comes to the case that cultural anthropologists are in a position to make for the empirical value of what we do. If cultural anthropology has a soul—a spirit of inquiry, a style of argumentation, an epistemological and ethical position that seems our own—we can find it in the pages of the work considered here. Among mainstream social scientists, no one but a cultural anthropologist would study what it is like to grab an armload of pigeons out of a crate to prepare them for target practice in rural Pennsylvania. No one else would use her own sensory apparatus to gauge the passions emanating from a deserted street in a neighborhood pockmarked with signs of war. No one else would try so hard to capture the conflicted quality of relationships in households where caregivers are almost part of the family, but never quite. The little girl in me still wants to get to the bottom of things, but it may be enough to know how to imagine living in other bodies and other worlds.

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