Introduction

Affecting feminism: Questions of feeling in feminist theory

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This special issue engages with the relationship between feminist theory and ‘the affective turn’. Through their analyses of a range of affective states, spheres and sites, the authors in this volume pose critical questions regarding feminist theoretical engagements with affect, emotion and feeling. They ask whether it is necessarily a positive move to put affect theory and feminist theory together, or whether there are inherent risks, for example of depoliticisation, or of an over-privileging of the individual; whether feminist theorists have made, or can make, distinctive contributions to conceptualising affect; and what particular insights feminist theory can bring to bear. In different ways, the authors featured here consider how we can understand the complex implications of the turn to affect in and for feminist theory, and how we might examine its potentialities for theoretical, political and social transformation.

Feminist theory and the affective turn

While ‘the affective turn’ has gained significant currency over the last decade, it is nonetheless difficult to define as it has come to signify a range of different, and sometimes contradictory, movements and articulations. As a transdisciplinary intellectual shift emerging out of the ‘textual turn’, it represents an intensification of interest in ‘emotions, feelings, and affect (and their differences)’ as objects of ‘scholarly inquiry’ (Cvetkovich, 2012: 133). Challenging ‘the scientific superiority of “detached reason” and “objective observation” over the emotional and the subjective’ (Greco and Stenner, 2008: 5), theorists associated with the textual turn paved the way for a ‘resurgence of empirical and theoretical interest in emotions’ (2008: 5). Feminist scholars have been at the heart of these engagements with affect, in part, because, for some, feminism itself is a politics ‘suffused with feelings,
passions and emotions’ (Gorton, 2007: 333), but also one that has long recognised the critical links between affect and gendered, sexualised, racialised and classed relations of power.

A number of feminist and queer theorists have been highly influential in the field of affect studies, including Ann Cvetkovich (1992, 2003), Judith Butler (1997, 2004), Lauren Berlant (1997, 2008), Ranjana Khanna (2003), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), Teresa Brennan (2004), Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010), Clare Hemmings (2005, 2011) and Sianne Ngai (2005). While these critics draw on a diverse range of theoretical sources, encompassing Michel Foucault, Karl Marx, Luce Irigaray, Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, Raymond Williams, Erving Goffman, Silvan Tomkins and Gilles Deleuze, they all explore ‘the way feeling is negotiated in the public sphere and experienced through the body’ (Gorton, 2007: 334). This increasing engagement with the political, cultural, economic and psychoanalytic implications of affect and emotion both reflects and engages with a wider ‘emotionalisation of society’ in which ‘emotions are imagined to provide a privileged source of truth about the self and its relations with others’ and there is a ‘perceived growth in the range and intensity of emotions and emotional expressions in the public sphere’ (Swan, 2008: 89). 2 In the context of transnational capitalism, feminist and other critical theories of affect have been employed alongside Foucauldian notions of biopolitics to examine the politics of subject formation and neoliberal forms of governmentality. 3 Affective frameworks also figure centrally in feminist and postcolonial analyses of the embodied and psychical legacies of colonialism and slavery, as well as the emotional politics of contemporary forms of nation building, migration and multiculturalism. 4 Notwithstanding their differences, these analyses are linked by a concern with how power circulates through feeling and how politically salient ways of being and knowing are produced through affective relations and discourses.

Yet, if the textual turn saw emotions primarily as ‘discursive dialogical phenomena’, some scholars associated with the affective turn interrogate the limitations of approaches which assume that affect can only be analysed as, or within, discourse and thus bracket out ‘all pre- or extra discursive reality’ (Greco and Stenner, 2008: 9). 5 For these theorists, affect describes ‘visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion’ (Gregg and Siegworth, 2010: 1). Most dynamically, it signifies potential: ‘a body’s capacity to affect and be affected’ (2010: 2; original italics). From this perspective, the affective turn has represented a shift away from ‘the text and discourse as key theoretical touchstones’ and a vital re-centring of the body (2010: 9). Within these approaches, affect is positioned as a productive concept and framework for grasping transformations, potentialities and “unpredictable connections between bodies” (Greco and Stenner, 2008: 11). Affect thus cannot be reduced to either ‘discourse’ or ‘emotion’, but rather exceeds these categories; it is a material intensity that emerges via the ‘in-between’ spaces of embodied encounters, circulating power not primarily as a mode of discursive regulation but rather as the potential to ‘become otherwise’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994).
The affective turn is, from this standpoint, closely linked to other putative conceptual shifts, such as ‘the ontological turn’ and ‘the new materialism’. Monica Greco and Paul Stenner note, for example, that ‘invoking affect is closely related . . . to the call for a post-deconstructive rethinking of ontology’. The shift from text to affect ‘thus parallels a shift in emphasis from epistemological questions to questions as to the nature of (pre-discursive) realities’ (2008: 10). It also dovetails with both mainstream and feminist calls to bring serious attention (back) to the substance and significance of matter, materiality and the body. An influential strand of this work draws on shifts towards ontology and materiality to reconceptualise the changing nature of ‘the social’ in a context in which ‘politics, economy and culture’ are ‘presently being reconfigured differently across various regions of the world’ (Clough, 2007: 2). Patricia Clough accordingly argues that the turn to affect ‘marks the way these historical changes are indicative of the changing global processes of accumulating capital and employing labor power through the deployment of technoscience to reach beyond the limitations of the human body, or what is called “life itself”’ (2007: 2). Theories of affect and ‘the deployment of affective capacity’ are valuable at this conjuncture, she suggests, ‘to grasp the changes that constitute the social and to explore them as changes in ourselves, circulating through our bodies, our subjectivities, yet irreducible to the individual, the personal and the psychological’ (Clough, 2007: 3). In this way, the affective turn can be seen to involve a move away from key concepts such as discourse, epistemology and culture and towards thought, ontology and materiality.

Several feminist and queer theorists have seen such directions in affect theory as both exciting and productive and have taken a leading role in exploring their transformative implications. For example, in *Touching Feeling* (2003), Sedgwick calls for a reprivileging of ontology through a critical focus on affect, which she understands as integral to accessing life that exceeds the social regulation of our existence. Furthermore, Elizabeth Grosz frames her book, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*, as a reminder to feminists, amongst others, that ‘we have forgotten the nature, the ontology of the body, the conditions under which bodies are enculturated, psychologized, given identity, historical location, and agency’ (Grosz, 2005a: 2). Interweaving affective, ontological and new materialist agendas in the companion text, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* Grosz argues for the importance of developing a ‘politics of imperceptibility, leaving its traces and effects everywhere but never being able to be identified with a person, group or organization’ (Grosz, 2005b: 194). Such a framework, Grosz suggests, might allow feminists to develop a ‘politics of acts, not identities’ (2004b: 186). From this perspective, feminist theory might most productively explore affects less for how they dominate, regulate or constrain individual subjects and more for the possibilities they offer for thinking (and feeling) beyond what is already known and assumed.

Feminist scholars, however, have also been attentive to the risks of certain mobilisations of the affective turn. In particular, theorists examine how rhetoric employed to position affect theory as novel and groundbreaking can elide or narrow in defining feminist histories of knowledge production. In an influential
article, Clare Hemmings argues that constituting theories of affect as ‘the new cutting edge’ has involved rewriting the recent history of cultural theory in ways that ‘flatten out poststructuralist inquiry by ignoring the counter hegemonic contributions of postcolonial and feminist theorists’ (Hemmings, 2005: 548). In this special issue, Hemmings engages with Sedgwick’s (2003) contention that, within poststructuralist critical approaches, ‘the ontological (life and difference)’ is routinely subsumed to ‘the epistemological (social ordering of power and knowledge)’ (Hemmings, 2012: 148). She argues that in characterising epistemology as a rather blunt theory of knowledge and bracketing out ontology from social, political or historical considerations, work carried out in the name of the ontological turn ‘rather curiously instantiates the opposition it critiques’ (Hemmings, 2012: 149). Similarly, Ahmed argues that ‘the new materialism’ frames itself as new, in part, through making claims about feminist theory’s ongoing failure to engage with the matter and materiality of the body, in spite of its ‘long genealogy’ (2008: 25). For Ahmed then, ‘we should avoid establishing a new terrain by clearing the ground of what has come before us. And we might not be quite so willing to deposit our hope in the category of the “new”’ (2008: 36). While affect theory provides a valuable resource to interrogate long-held assumptions and think social and political life differently, such openings are not framed productively (or accountably) through an elision of the critical and diverse contributions of feminist, postcolonial and queer analysis.

In this vein, Cvetkovich begins her piece in this volume by expressing her reluctance to use the term ‘affective turn’ because it implies that there is something new about the study of affect when in fact this work has been going on for quite some time. She highlights the inception of the Public Feelings project (2001), in particular, as ‘the outcome of many years of engagement with the shifting fortunes of the feminist mantra that “the personal is political”, as it has shaped theoretical and political practices and their relation to everyday life’ (Cvetkovich, 2012: 133). Moreover, Ranjana Khanna suggests that in the work of theorists such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, as well as Clough, affect ‘is gestured towards rather vaguely’, and this difficulty in ascribing it any content means that concepts such as affective labour, ‘originally and ultimately a feminist concept’, are analysed primarily in terms of the ties they could generate rather than the labour they involve. While Khanna is sympathetic to ‘the idea of affect’s movement beyond the subject, beyond expressiveness, and beyond perceptibility’, she worries that the ‘suspicion of content’ that is ‘quite typical of the ontological approach’, sometimes manifests itself ‘as a dismissal of feminist notions of labour, or the way in which the woman has become enframed as a certain mode of being’ (Khanna, 2012: 216). In exploring the alternative ways of thinking affect theory offers, these scholars suggest, feminist analyses are of most critical value when they attend reflexively both to what might be gained and lost through claiming a ‘new’ conceptual paradigm.

The authors in this special issue straddle and interweave these different strands of the affective turn in novel and cogent ways. All, however, engage carefully with genealogies of feminist analysis of emotion and affect. In imagining how we might
think radically otherwise, feminist theory has always sought to journey beyond the status quo; yet, as this collection illustrates, its political work is also pursued invaluably – and imaginatively – through exploring the ‘undetonated’ political potential of what has been declared outmoded or anachronistic (Freeman, 2010). Tracing the ambivalent and shifting experiences, implications and effects of emotions and affects, within and across a range of social and theoretical terrains, the contributions here seek to offer ways of thinking the feminist politics of affect that are both open-facing and accountable.

**Knowing through feeling**

Feminist theorists have long been concerned with the relationships between affect, knowledge and power. Fundamental in this regard have been their efforts to interrogate the gendered nature of the reason/emotion binary. Throughout the history of Western thought, language and ethics, this dualism has functioned to exclude women (and other bodies outside the white, masculine mainstream) from ‘legitimate’ knowledge production.\(^{11}\) As Moira Gatens (1996) argues, the concept of rationality (one of the key historical criteria for political participation and other citizenship rights) has been defined in opposition to the qualities typically thought to correlate with femininity and the female body. In this context, feminist theorists have played a crucial role in highlighting the significance of affect and emotion to critiques of positivism and the presumed role of objectivity in knowledge production.\(^ {12}\) Through fleshing out the critical imbrications of location, embodiment and knowledge, these thinkers not only illustrate the impossibility of objective knowledge detached from embodied location, but also explore the potential for affect to provide different, and potentially transformative, ways of knowing. As Hemmings notes, feminist theory has illustrated potently that ‘in order to know differently, we have to feel differently’ (2012: 150).

Along with Whitehead and Pedwell, Hemmings focuses specifically on the potentialities and risks of ‘knowing through empathy’ in relation to feminist theory and praxis. While empathy has recently become a buzz-word across a range of academic and mainstream sites, it has a longer history in feminist debates about epistemology, politics and transformation. As Hemmings notes, for a range of feminist theorists empathy has signified ‘the importance of feeling as knowledge; it opens a window on the experiences of others and stresses their importance for an ethical feminist epistemology’ (2012: 151). Nonetheless, all three authors are concerned with the potentially problematic associations made between empathetic knowledge and truth. In her reading of Sindiwe Magona’s novel *Mother to Mother* (1998), Whitehead considers how the text critiques the mobilisation of empathy by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the service of nation-building agendas. In Pedwell’s discussion of discourses of affective (self)-transformation in international development literatures, she argues that, through conceptualising face-to-face encounters between development professionals and ‘poor people’ in ‘developing’ contexts as offering access to ‘felt truth’, development discourses risk severing
empathy from both processes of imagination and structural relations of power. For both Whitehead and Pedwell, then, emotions are conceptualised most productively ‘not as affective lenses on “truth” or “reality”, but rather as one important (embodied) circuit through which power is felt, imagined, mediated, negotiated and/or contested’ (Pedwell, 2012b).

From Hemmings’ perspective, current framings of empathy remain ‘inadequate to [the] task of developing an affective solidarity’ in feminist praxis because they continue to privilege ‘ontology over and above the negotiation of the relationship between ontology and epistemology’ (2012: 152). In other words, they seek to extract the ‘truth’ of our ‘being in the world’ from the relations of power that condition our descriptions and understandings of it, rather than examining their mutual intertwining. For Hemmings, however, it is precisely in the gap between the ontological and the epistemological that the transformative spark of affective politics might be ignited. Moving away from a focus on empathy as a privileged way of connecting with others, Hemmings considers the political potential of ‘affective dissonance’ through a reconsideration of feminist standpoint epistemology. In her re-imagining, standpoint ‘describes not just marginal experience and the critique of dominant knowledge, but the process of moving from affective dissonance to . . . affective solidarity (maybe even one that includes empathy)’ (2012: 157). Thus, while all the authors in this volume are deeply interested in the genealogies and potentialities of affective knowledge, they are nonetheless attentive to the risks of perspectives that slide towards equating knowing through affect as offering access to being or truth outside of histories and structures of power and representation.

**Emotional transformation**

As the preceding discussion suggests, feminist theorists have for many years explored the role of affect in both oppression and political transformation. Fleshing out the links between emotion, power and embodiment, scholars such as Audre Lorde (1984) and Iris Marion Young (1990) illustrated how the work of oppression is often carried out at an affective level. Other feminist theorists have built on these important frameworks to examine how power works through affect to shape individual and social bodies (Ahmed, 2000). Megan Boler traces how, ‘in patriarchal culture, we learn emotional rules that help to maintain society’s particular hierarchies of gender, race and class’ (Boler, 1999: xxi). Similarly, Ahmed (2004) considers how ‘emotions can attach us to the very conditions of our subordination’ (Ahmed, 2004: 12). From Ahmed’s perspective, one of the reasons that social transformation is so difficult to achieve, that relations of power are ‘so intractable and enduring, even in the face of collective forms of resistance’, is the strength of our affective attachments to social norms (2004: 11–12, see also Butler, 1997). Feminist engagement with affective politics thus requires attention to the ways in which feelings can (re)produce dominant social and geo-political hierarchies and exclusions.
Of course, feminist theorists have also been interested in the relationships between affect, solidarity and resistance. As Boler argues, if emotions are ‘a primary site of control’ they are also ‘a site of political resistance’ and ‘can mobilize movements for liberation’ (1999: xiii). The political travels of the second-wave feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’ provide a case in point. In calling attention to the political nature and implications of intimate relations within the home and the family, including women’s emotional labour, feminist praxis in the 1970s and 1980s mobilising under this banner challenged the ‘privatization and pathologizing of emotions’ (Boler, 1999: xiv). Boler credits the ‘women’s liberation movement (which drew from the civil rights movement) and feminist pedagogy with developing the first collectively articulated feminist “politics of emotion”, particularly through practices of consciousness-raising’ (1999: xi). The impact of this feminist theory and activism remains salient across many spheres of contemporary feminist praxis. As Cvetkovich highlights in her contribution to this volume, ‘the personal voice has persisted as an important part of feminist scholarship, enabled, if not also encouraged, by theory’s demand that intellectual claims be grounded in necessarily partial and local positionalities’ (2012: 133). Yet in this volume, as in her earlier work, Cvetkovich is also attentive to some of the more vexed effects of feminist efforts to frame the personal as political. In Mixed Feelings (1992), she argued that feminist theory’s shift towards the personal saw forms of affective healing associated with personal and intimate relations increasingly framed as solutions to complex collective and social problems. Lauren Berlant (1997, 2008) has also been an important voice in analysing how a focus on healing via ‘the emotional’ and ‘the personal’ can replace (and indeed efface) attention to the structural causes of suffering. For both Berlant and Cvetkovich, feminist enthusiasm for the possibilities of community, solidarity and change associated with the force of affect must thus be tempered with acknowledgement of the persistent difficulty of generating structural transformation through projects of collective feeling.

Rather than privileging ‘the personal’ or ‘the emotional’ above and beyond ‘the structural’, recent feminist approaches have analysed their complex imbrication. From Ahmed’s perspective, exploring this intertwinement of the affective and the structural requires that we examine both ‘the structure of feelings’ (Williams, 1977), and ‘the feelings of structure’. Indeed, she suggests, ‘feelings might be how structures get under our skin’ (2010: 216). In this respect, analyses like Ahmed’s remain indebted to the groundbreaking work of feminist sociologists such as Arlie Hochschild. In her classic text, The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling (1983), she argued that feelings themselves are subject to ‘management’ in both private and public contexts, and that such ‘emotion work’ could be commercially exploited as ‘emotional labour’. Hochschild’s work was crucial in contributing to budding theories of the social construction of emotions, and later analyses of their performative circulation in the context of gendered, classed, racialised and sexualised relations of power. It was also prescient in tracing the links between emotion, global capitalism and neoliberalism later fleshed out by key scholars such as Nikolas Rose (1989, 1996), as well as laying the groundwork for
analyses of their gendered articulation in relation to concepts of affective labour (Adkins, 2002; Swan, 2008). In this volume, Pedwell considers how feminist and anti-racist notions of affective transformation might be reconceptualised when relations of postcoloniality and neoliberalism are foregrounded (2012a). Her analysis of affective narratives in international development literatures suggests that when empathy is understood as entailing a process of ‘humanising’ through ‘individualising’, it can divert attention away from analysis of wider structures of power which condition transnational encounters. Feminist engagements with feelings, these contributions suggest, tell us most about the affective workings of contemporary power when they illuminate the complex and shifting co-constitution of emotional subjectivities and encounters and socio-political and economic structures and relations.

Although the contributors to this volume share Berlant’s view that ‘shifts in the affective atmosphere are not equal to a changing world’, like her, they also remain committed to thinking about how emotion and affect might be related to the ways in which radical rupture, change and transformation emerge (2010: 116). For Cvetkovich, thinking through affect and attending to ‘public feelings’ can open up new ways of doing feminist and cultural theory that move past the work of critique or the exposure of social constructions. Analysing depression as a ‘public feelings project’ linked to structural legacies of colonialism, slavery and racism, she suggests, might help to trace affective materialities that not only offer alternatives to a medical understanding of depression, but may also produce new vocabularies of hope and happiness that nonetheless avoid ‘naïve optimism that does not address the past and its violence adequately and that is too easily celebratory’ (2012: 143). As such, Cvetkovich’s analysis of depression is resonant with Ahmed’s recent exploration of happiness. When happiness is not automatically ‘presumed to be a good thing’ or ‘what we should aim for’, Ahmed suggests, it becomes possible to conceive of happiness as ‘a possibility among others’. Such a stance allows us to consider how unhappiness might sometimes work as ‘a form of political action: the act of saying no or of pointing out injuries as an ongoing present affirms something, right from the beginning’ (Ahmed, 2010: 207). It also enables us to ‘value happiness for its precariousness’, for the unexpected openings and shimmers of possibility it might create, rather than something we expect to occur when we get what we already knew we wanted (Ahmed, 2010: 219).

From Hemmings’ perspective, affect is what sustains feminism and gives it life. In her discussion of the politicising potential of ‘affective dissonance’ she suggests that ‘politics can be characterised as that which moves us, rather than that which confirms us in what we already know’ (2012: 151). Similarly, both Pedwell and Whitehead explore the relationships between imagination, affect and change. Imagination, Pedwell argues, is necessary to interrupt assumptions of commensurability, transparency and ‘felt truth’ which characterise international development discourse in the neoliberal compassion economy. For Whitehead, in performatively enacting its own distinction from the modes of affective testimony and engagement privileged by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Mother to Mother
illustrates that ‘literature is an imaginative mode of encounter that can open up different kinds of attachments to others’ (2012: 192). As will be explored in the next section, both Khanna and Robin Stoate explore the transformative possibilities of feminist and other critical articulations of affect’s movement beyond ‘the subject’, and the productive modes of relationality that might emerge through thinking (and feeling) affect in terms of mobility.

**Travelling affects**

In recent affect theory, affect has notably been represented by influential figures as mobile, creative, and unpredictable in its effects. Sedgwick has been central to these claims for affect theory’s creative potentiality. Sedgwick marked her engagement with affect, and her theoretical inspiration within the field, in the publication of a co-edited reader of the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins (1911–1991) (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995). This volume at once positioned Tomkins as central to current debates on affect, and provided the groundwork for Sedgwick’s subsequent key publication, *Touching Feeling* (2003). Sedgwick drew upon Tomkins’ categorisation of an identifiable range of nine universally shared emotions in order to elaborate the key affects for her own theoretical project, namely shame and anger. Centrally, Sedgwick also drew from Tomkins a conceptual model by which affect attaches itself randomly and unexpectedly to a range of subjects and objects; the creative unfolding of affect was figured by her as a form of contagion.

Hemmings (2005) significantly interrogated this strand of affect theory in relation to feminist thought. Turning her critical gaze not only on Sedgwick, but also on the related work of Deleuze (1997) and Massumi (2002), she questioned whether affect was as freely and creatively mobile as these thinkers suggest. Reading work on affect alongside critical race theory by Frantz Fanon (1991) and Lorde (1984), Hemmings argued that affect does not circulate freely but tends to travel along already defined lines of cultural investment. Certain (gendered, raced, sexed) subjects accordingly become the objects of others’ affective responses. Hemmings aptly noted: ‘only for certain subjects can affect be thought of as attaching in an open way; others are so over-associated with affect that they themselves are the object of affective transfer’ (2005: 561). For Hemmings, then, it is not that affect should be rejected outright in its relation to feminist theory; rather, claims for its autonomy and free circulation should be subjected to critique, and she urges us to look beyond ‘the contemporary fascination with affect as outside social meaning’ (2005: 565). A key strand of interest in many of the articles that follow has been to take up Hemmings’ challenge, and to realign affect with the social.

Hemmings’ commitment to a feminist theorising of affect in relation to social meaning is in close dialogue with Ahmed (2004). The latter’s nuanced exploration of the mobility of affect seeks to trace out how emotion moves culturally and where it ‘sticks’, so that affect is bound not only to mobility but also to various forms or modes of attachment. Moving beyond what she herself terms the ‘inside out’ model of psychology, and the ‘outside in’ model proffered by sociology and anthropology,
Ahmed’s focus is on the ‘sociality of emotion’ (2004: 9). According to this model, there is no pre-existing inside or outside; rather, ‘emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place’ (2004: 10). At both an individual and cultural level, emotions ‘are crucial to the very constitution of the psychic and social as objects’; affect is not ‘in’, or indeed ‘outside of’ the individual or the social, but the very circulation of emotion allows different objects or bodies to take shape for us (2004: 10). Central to Ahmed’s work, then, is a focus on surfaces and boundaries (both personal and cultural) as the effects of the circulation of affect, which is thereby rendered – as for Hemmings – not random or arbitrary, but subject to particular ‘sticking points’ or sites of tension.

Several of the articles in this special issue explicitly address the question of how affect travels within and across cultures, situating feminist debates about emotion and intimacy within international, transnational, cross-cultural, and cross-racial contexts. Cvetkovich provides a rich exploration of whether the particular affect of depression could be said to travel along racial lines. Whitehead similarly questions whether the persistent after-effects of South African apartheid can be tied to affect’s tendency to ‘stick’ at sites of cultural tension. Her reading of Mother to Mother considers what might be gained by a refusal of affective identification on the part of those who are, to return to Hemmings, ‘over-associated with affect’ (2005: 561). Pedwell examines the literal movement or travel involved in ‘Immersion programmes’, and asks whether the rhetoric of affective mobility that underpins these journeys risks reinforcing already existing cultural lines of power; again, if this is the case, how might we develop a critically constructive approach to empathy within the transnational context? Across each of these articles, there is a common concern with how affects can speak of, if not shape, social meaning; and with how cultural boundaries – with their very tangible economic, social and political effects – might be regarded as themselves effects of the cultural circulation, or perhaps more properly accumulation and sedimentation, of emotion.

Other articles in the volume pick up on and interrogate another key strand of the ‘travelling’ of affect as it has emerged in feminist theory; namely how affect inflects ideas of the subject or subjectivity, and notions of the human. If affect travels beyond conventional boundaries of the ‘subject’ or the ‘human’, what might the implications be both for how we think of ourselves, and for how we conceive of the ‘non-human’ (the machine, the animal)? This aspect of the feminist ‘turn to affect’ is bound to wider debates around ontology, embodiment and the neurosciences, and what these might mean for feminist theory and politics. Donna Haraway is a central figure in relation to these debates: her early work on the cyborg has been supplemented by recent reflections on the contingency of subjectivity inspired by the bonding of dogs and people (Haraway, 1991, 2008). In the past few years, feminist theorising of the body has sought to engage with the implications of affect conceptualised as pre-individual forces, which either reconfigure the body as technology (Clough, 2007) or open up feminist theories of the body to
contemporary neuroscience, posing questions about our relation to the animal and the material (Wilson, 2004). In both cases, whether the impetus is towards the mechanical or the creaturely aspects of ourselves, there is a turn away from conventional psychoanalytically informed conceptions of subject identity – in the former, the move is towards an engagement with non-organic life and information systems; while in the latter, it is typically towards Darwin, or towards Freud’s early neuroscientific conceptions of the body which predated hysteria.

In this special issue, these debates are central to the articles by Stoate and Khanna. Drawing centrally on Haraway, Stoate’s reading of Duncan Jones’s science fiction film Moon (2009) interrogates the boundary between human and machine through the figure of the ‘caring computer’. If computers can care, Stoate asks, how does this reconfigure our notion of the putatively ‘artificial’ subject? What, too, does it imply about care, in terms of the kinds of affective relationalities that it can inaugurate? Khanna also focuses on affect and technology; or, more precisely, affect as a form of technology. She turns to Wilson’s (2004) reworking of Freud to argue that this offers a model of psychoanalysis as technology that answers Clough’s rejection of the psychoanalytic as exclusively concerned with the organic. For Khanna, this reconceptualisation of affect as technology displaces its relation to the subject; affect registers in her article as a surplus or excess to the subject, which challenges its stability and boundaries. For both authors, although they work with very differing conceptions of the subject, affect represents at once an undoing and a potential opening out towards alterity.

Finally, affect can also be said, in the context of this special issue, to travel across various modes of textual representation; the articles accordingly move across the genres of novel, film and development literatures. It is striking that many of the texts discussed in this volume seem themselves to have notably fluid and open generic boundaries. Saidiya Hartman’s Lose Your Mother (2007), discussed by Cvetkovich, is poised between the genres of research scholarship, slave history, memoir, travel narrative and family history. Magona’s Mother to Mother is likewise uneasily positioned between novel, testimony, memoir, biography, autobiography, letter and diary. Shirin Neshat’s work, analysed by Khanna, plays across the genres of film, portrait photography and video, to powerful and destabilising effect. We do not wish to claim that these more experimental texts are a privileged or reified mode for representing affect, which circulates across all modes of cultural production. Nevertheless, there is arguably something about these particularly porous textual bodies, which call attention to their own boundaries and surfaces, that urges us to think about, and to imagine, ways of inhabiting affect differently.

Notes

1. This special issue arose from two international conferences organised under the banner ‘Affecting Feminism’ – ‘The Cultural Politics of Care, Compassion and Empathy’ (May 2010) and ‘Feminist Theory and the Question of Feeling’ (December 2010) – by Anne Whitehead, Carolyn Pedwell, Stacy Gillis, and Bob Stoate on behalf of Newcastle
University's Gender Research Group, the School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics, and the School of Arts and Cultures. The second event was co-hosted by Feminist Theory and marked the re-launch of the journal in its new institutional home at Newcastle University.

2. See also Rose, 1989, 1996.
3. Adkins, 2002; Ong, 2006; Fraser and Bedford, 2008; Pedwell, 2012b.
5. See also Deleuze, [1968] 2004; Deleuze and Guattari, 1994; Massumi, 2002; Clough, 2007; Gregg and Siegworth, 2010.
6. See also Sedgwick, 2003; Thrift, 2007; Coole and Frost, 2010.
7. See also Sedgwick and Frank, 1995; Barad, 2003; Wilson, 2004.
8. See also Grosz, 2011.
10. For a response to Ahmed see Davis, 2009.
13. See also Young, 1990.

References


