
Editor's Introduction

Affect: The Alchemy of the Contingent

I've always assumed that the most useful work of this sort is likeliest to occur near the boundary of what a writer can't figure out how to say readily, never mind prescribe to others.

—EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK, *TOUCHING FEELING*

I initially intended to introduce this issue by adopting the stance of etymological sleuth. I imagined myself stalking the word “affect,” tracing its social, philosophical, and political lives, gesturing toward its multiple histories, asking what work it achieves—for whom and when and why. Such an approach has merit insofar as words (not *just* words like affect, but perhaps *especially* words like affect) are sly, fickle things. They sidle away when you're not looking. They crawl up, around, and over meanings, blurring sense-making with sensation. But upon reflection, and considerable anxiety over how I might synthesize the varied neurobiological, psychoanalytic, and philosophical lineages at stake without resorting to obtuse jargon or tired cliché, I abandoned that approach: it's far more pleasurable to luxuriate in the irony that much of what is talked about in affect theory is that which escapes, resists, or exceeds language. In a tradition stretching back to Baruch Spinoza and carried forward by Gilles Deleuze, affect “inheres in the capacity to affect and be affected.”¹ It refers to processes of potentiality and becoming, to vital forces and intensities, to physiological and biological matters that lie outside discursive structures. This may be why some variants of affect theory in the humanities and social sciences today circulate in writing so abstruse, or “aloof,” as Tavia Nyong'o puts it, as to paradoxically estrange us from the sensate, material body. “In talking about affect,” he muses, “I have noticed [that] one can easily lose the thread quite suddenly, in mid-conversation, and sometimes cannot seem to pick it up again despite continuous further discussion.” Given the intellectual gains of the past two decades that affect studies has afforded queer theory in particular, Nyong'o is not willing to dismiss the matter entirely. But the situation “presents a perplexing irony: have our attempts to move closer to the shapes and textures of everyday feelings moved us further from the live wires of felt concern?”²

I feel that perplexity too. Occasionally I'm baffled. But I also believe that wrestling with "the boundary of what a writer can't figure out how to say readily" is worth the effort. It's also worth recognizing that part of the difficulty for many theories of affect lies in the methodological implications of singling out a sensory moment that is never in the "here" and "now" but always in process, always becoming, always a vibrant somatic resonance operating somewhere in between. This is why Teresa Brennan focuses on the "transmission of affect" rather than a physiological experience or phenomenon.³ For Sara Ahmed, affect is "what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connections between ideas, value, and objects." She describes happiness, for instance, as "the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds," as well as "'the drama of contingency,' how we are touched by what comes near."⁴ "Contingency" is a good term to think with, as is "relational," in part because theories of affect are absolutely alien to the idea of a singular, core self. Whether experienced as a somatic irruption, a vibrant flash of feeling, or a shift in the atmosphere, affects *move* people and things in unpredictable ways.

Put another way, theories of affect deflate illusions of the sovereign self and embrace mutability, a world in constant flux. Laughter, for instance, which Maggie Hennefeld explores in this issue, is an affect often described in terms that suggest a displacement of the self—to be "beside oneself" with laughter, as the saying goes. Beyond that, laughter can be contagious, impossible to corral as it leaps from one convulsing body to the next. Of course, there are no guarantees—personally, politically, ethically, physiologically, or otherwise—that a good laugh will lead to something new or better than what exists in the here and the now, much less to a transformative, collective body politics. But then again, it just *might*. Drawing together sources from varied historical, political, and theoretical scales, Hennefeld's wide-ranging study both interrogates and clarifies some of the most interesting feminist work on affect studies today. As anyone who has experienced a good laugh will know, it is difficult to "intend an affect," as Lauren Berlant observes elsewhere. But a promise hovers: as intellectuals, as writers, as artists, as media makers, as activists, we can *intentionally* be attentive to "the nimbus of affects whose dynamics move along and make worlds, situations, and environments."⁵

This issue of *Feminist Media Histories* pays special attention to the world-building shifts in atmosphere generated by media. It also takes the promise of affect studies, an attachment to the propitious and the contingent, as a call for something other than academic business as usual. Rather than cling to

hard-and-fast distinctions between affect and its correlatives (emotion, feeling, sensation), for instance, the authors in this issue take their sensuous, embodied, often autobiographical encounters with media, people, and things as a premise for unsettling sedimented ways of “making sense” in academic discourse and critical expression. Terminology thus differs as a matter of course—you could even say it’s personal. Ann Cvetkovich prefers the term “feeling” to “indicate material forms of touch and sensation, categories that have been given new life by affect theory,” thus repeating a premise she elaborates elsewhere and brings into conversation here with new media artists Rachael Shannon and Zoe Leonard as well as graphic novelist Alison Bechdel.⁶ Kathleen Woodward agrees with Cvetkovich that the vernacular use of the term feelings makes good sense. Or, that is, some of the time. But the constellation of “geo-affects” at work in Cecelia Condit’s experimental video *Within a Stone’s Throw* (2012) calls for a different phrase, which Woodward terms “planetary affect” and which she distinguishes from the feminist “emotion of freedom” expressed in Condit’s latest video, *I’ve Been Afraid* (2020). Then again, neither “feelings” nor “emotion” adequately grasp the visceral, exhilarating, sometimes terrifying corporeal extremes of female passengers in early aviation films that Paula Amad excavates as part of a gendered “sense perception” of modernity, while Sandra Soto lingers over the multiplicity of ways that José Esteban Muñoz ruminated on “brown feelings,” which he also called a “certain brown *élan vital*,” a “vital force of brownness,” and a “sense of brownness” among others. Such lexical distinctions aside, a consensus prevails among these and other authors gathered in this issue: that exploring how feelings metabolize as bodies encounter a mediated world offers a powerful means of moving us to action, dreaming new forms of collectivity, and imagining alternatives to the lives constrained by empire, capitalism, heteronormativity, colonialism, racism, misogyny, and precarity.

When I first began dreaming of what became this issue, it felt essential to shake things up, to see what happens when scholars discussing “affect” and “media” from the often-disparate critical ecologies of queer theory, feminist cultural studies, Black feminism, queer of color critique, and historical film feminism come together. Although a global pandemic stymied our plans for a three-day experiment in “thinking-feeling-acting-being-together” at the University of Washington campus in Seattle, these seven authors enthusiastically joined me for a virtual version of that workshop on May 15, 2020. Would the work gathered here have developed differently if we had met in person? Or if we hadn’t met at all? I can’t help but speculate that the

collective struggle to continue a dialogue in such an extraordinary time also contributed to a collective desire to take risks—to play with the vitality of ordinary language, to source inquiry from anecdotal experience, to relinquish the keyed-up tone of academic discourse.

In like manner, this introduction deviates from scholarly norms and from the affective expectations this particular genre of writing brings. In contrast to the ambitious survey of affect's diverse lineages that I initially imagined, my approach here is both partial and personal. What follows is neither a map of this issue's contents nor an overview of a field. It resists the spatial coherence of a view from *above* (a perspective implicit to introductions conceived as overview, map or survey) and strives to place my reflections and obsessions *beside* those of the contributors whose writings have aroused memories, flashes of feeling that I re-constellate here as one way of ruminating on the potency of affect studies for "feminist media histories" while parsing a series of relationships among conceptual models and disciplinary histories usually perceived as critically and politically distinct. In the interest of fair warning, the reader who hopes to glean from this introduction a working theory of affect is bound for disappointment. The story I tell is more tenuous, curious, and passionately contingent.

THE WORK OF LOVE

Looking back, I was first drawn to thinking about affect precisely because it suggested a way out of the relentless reiteration of abstract notions organized as Theory, especially the post-structural varieties governing humanistic thinking in the 1990s, the years in which I was in graduate school. I cut my academic teeth on the work of Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, and Julia Kristeva; I grappled with Jacques Lacan and hailed Louis Althusser with gusto. And then I fell in love with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.⁷ The jouissance of that first textual crush still lingers. It was a humid evening in Austin, and I was sprawled across a colorful cushion on the floor of a friend's house with a dozen members of our newly formed queer theory reading group. "Here's a few things theory knows today," someone chortled, reading aloud the first sentence of Sedgwick and Adam Frank's introduction to *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*.⁸ The authors follow that opening gambit with a shrewd, dazzling, and remarkably rapid overview of the assumptions underlying poststructuralism in its many guises, revealing in short order that what Theory knows best is itself.

I'm pretty sure I flushed. My sudden recognition that the totalizing systems (of language, of discourse, of ideology, of semiotics) that this theory interrogated also formed the *premise* for that theory struck me as both profound—and profoundly relieving. I began to chatter, testing the concept against work I had been doing in my seminars (and aspiring, with varying degrees of failure, to replicate in my writing). At one point, I nearly rolled off my cushion, burbling in the impassioned tones of the acolyte something like: if Lacan says the unconscious is structured like a language, and Laura Mulvey says “the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form,” then no wonder the only way out is to “destroy” that form, and its pleasures, altogether!⁹ The other way, to paraphrase Sedgwick and Frank, is to refuse the dualistic premise of conscious/unconscious as a model of subjectivity in the first place. This other way means grappling with a different gestalt of the everyday, one rife with unpredictable somatic irruptions and a network of reciprocal affective resonances. This other way shimmers in Sedgwick and Frank's deceptively simple question: *What does it mean to fall in love with a writer?*

However shameful, I never did fall for Tomkins. But one of the many gifts Sedgwick transmitted to her readers is a conviction I now hold as an immutable truth: that the affective stance of the critic is as important to feminist, queer, and anti-racist work on affect as are the cultural and textual feelings one seeks to explore. Better put, the two are inseparable. In a well-known essay on reparative and paranoid reading first published in 1997, Sedgwick urges her readers to relinquish a “hermeneutic of suspicion” and adopt instead a “reparative” position, a term she borrows from Melanie Klein and which she occasionally interchanges with “love.”¹⁰ To read and write from a reparative position entails a sense of creativity, a willingness to be surprised, a bit of curiosity at what one might find, and a commitment to multiplicity. It also means resisting the lure of paranoid reading, which I might paraphrase as the practice of telling big truths about even bigger systems. An exemplary paranoid text for Sedgwick is Judith Butler's 1990 *Gender Trouble*. This study teaches us that “you can never be paranoid enough” because the problem (naturalized conceptions of gender) is everywhere (in space) and infinite (in time). The troubling revelation of *Gender Trouble*, Sedgwick writes, is how laboriously it demonstrates “that there can have been no moment prior to the imposition of the totalizing Law of gender difference; hence her [Butler's] unrelenting vigilance for traces in other theorists' writing of nostalgia for such an impossible prior moment. No time could be too early for one's

having-already-known, for its having-already-been-inevitable, that something bad would happen. And no loss could be too far in the future to need to be preemptively discounted.”¹¹

Why, then, if there is no alternative, and no option for resistance, would Butler write such a book in the first place? What is its *raison d'être*? In Sedgwick's incisive analysis, the goal of paranoid reading is exposure. The critic labors to reveal the ideological effects (all of them negative) presumably unavailable for paranoid reflection by other more naive audiences, critics, or consumers. Sedgwick disparages such presumptions with characteristic flair: “How television-starved would someone have to be to find it shocking that ideologies contradict themselves, that simulacras don't have originals, or that gender representations are artificial?”¹² Her aim is not to be witty for the sake of shaming others, or at least that's not her exclusive aim. On the contrary, the call for reparative reading is a call for criticism as a productive ethical practice, one consistently engaged in a conscientious meditation on the limits of critical sovereignty. Its methodology stays “local,” to follow Heather Love's neat synthesis. The reparative position “gives up on hypervigilance for attentiveness; instead of powerful reductions, it prefers acts of noticing, being affected, taking joy, and making whole.”¹³

Sedgwick's influence on the critical ecology of affect studies in queer theory and feminist cultural studies is inestimable. There is a reason that editors Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth dedicate *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010) to Sedgwick, while the Public Feelings project launched in 2001 by Lauren Berlant, Kathleen Stewart, Ann Cvetkovich, and others takes “Eve Sedgwick's articulation of a reparative rather than paranoid critical practice” as “one of our most crucial touchstones.”¹⁴ One need only glance at *Ordinary Affects* (2007), Stewart's exquisite book of creative nonfiction, which she defines as an “experiment, not a judgment,” to gauge a dynamic shift in critical thinking no longer interested in demystifying “uncovered truths that support a well-known picture of the world.” Instead, Stewart “tries to provoke attention to the forces that come into view as habit or shock, resonance or impact.” In other words, she writes, “The notion of a totalized system, of which everything is always already somehow a part, is not helpful (to say the least) in the effort to approach a weighted and reeling present.”¹⁵ What *is* helpful surfaces as a series of nonlinear vignettes recounting moments and feelings and forces in everyday life that snap together, waver, become strange, alter course, engender curiosity. What is helpful, I will stress, is an openness to contingency and speculation.

Might we understand every creative act as a speculative act, a gesture toward a world the work itself is building, instead of just reflecting? This feels especially true if the creative act is, itself, a built space—a miniature world. The immersive installations of new-media artists like Cecelia Condit, Zoe Leonard, and Rachael Shannon offer spaces that people can get inside, thus literally producing new ways of being, feeling, and sensing others that exceed other cognitive or linguistic patterns. In contrast to empty exhortations of hope in the face of climate change, for instance, the “nondiscursive” sensations of Condit’s video installation *Within a Stone’s Throw* generate what Kathleen Woodward calls a “planetary affect.” In her contribution to this issue, Woodward recounts her experience of being ravished by the visual, aural, and kinetic dance “co-created by Condit and the landscape,” affectively transformed by a “heartening” energy that may very well form a poetics of possibility or “potentiality” itself. For Cvetkovich, the experience of crawling inside Rachael Shannon’s *Breastival Vestibule* (2013–ongoing) at queer film festivals and elsewhere, or sitting with her girlfriend in Zoe Leonard’s camera obscura installation, incite queer dreams of a “radical democracy.” As she discusses in her essay here, these two visual artists produce work that feels quite different, and yet their respective sensory affects evoke similar utopic aspirations. Shannon’s inflatable, portable environment crafted from nylon emphasizes tactility and materiality, a sensory connection between its body (a structure blown up with air, itself animate and vibrant) and the bodies sprawled inside, sometimes topless, sometimes watching a screen attached to the interior. By contrast, viewers do not literally touch the wavering, ephemeral, shifting image of empty urban space projected in Leonard’s camera obscura, but her installation encourages them to experience seeing itself as subjective, to grasp that “ways of seeing” or “viewpoints” of the world are “not just metaphors” but depend quite literally on embodied—hence contingent—practices of vision. “Leonard’s desire to slow down the process of seeing, to ask us to notice everyday details and the mundane,” Cvetkovich writes, participates in the energy of queer activist spaces and other built environments that value “each person’s embodied sense perception as the foundation for collective forms of witness that are multiple, partial, and affective.”

The rhetorical power of these essays in this issue is shaped by each writer’s intimacy with the media objects she discusses—a critical attachment forged by solidarity and affection as well as “love,” to use a term Sedgwick adapts from Klein and exchanges, occasionally, with the reparative position. For

some critics, intimacy of this sort is suspect. In an essay that surveys the prominence of reparative reading practices in “queer feminist” affect studies, including work by Cvetkovich as well as Heather Love and Elizabeth Freeman, Robyn Wiegman worries that such an approach reflects the critic’s “investment in herself,” and hence an academic investment in recuperating the value of “interpretive work” at a moment when interest in the humanities is declining. In a surprising rhetorical move, Wiegman claims there is little difference between reparative and paranoid reading practices insofar as both “are engaged in producing, confirming, and sustaining critical practice as a necessary agency” in an increasingly corporatized university system.¹⁶ Berlant offers a more complex note of caution. She suggests that the “mode of self-reflective personhood” in Sedgwick’s narratives and in the ideology of reparative reading is symptomatic of certain strains of liberalism. She thus calls for a conception of “impersonality” that would more forcefully contest “the march of individualities toward liberal freedoms.”¹⁷ While Berlant staunchly endorses Sedgwick’s refusal of the hermeneutics of suspicion and paranoid reading “on the ground that it always finds the mirages and failures for which it looks,” she hesitates to name her own anti-paranoid intentions as reparative. “How would we know,” she asks, “when the ‘repair’ we intend is not another form of narcissism or smothering will?”¹⁸

It’s a good question: How would we *know*? Cvetkovich responds in this issue by arguing for a “sovereignty of the senses,” a way of knowing that is felt rather than thought. Thinking with Audre Lorde, who clarified the stakes of a “disciplined attention to the true meaning of ‘it feels right to me,’” Cvetkovich refuses to fret over questions of the self’s incoherence to itself, a state that Berlant terms non-sovereignty. She instead argues for an affective politics in which embodied or felt desires, collectively shared and exchanged, become the basis for imagining and creating new forms of democracy. There is nothing easy about this, since feelings are often difficult to access—and to trust. But Cvetkovich pointedly reminds us that queer, Black, brown, and Indigenous activists often “scale up” from the body—Lorde is exemplary here—since the “desire for a better future can sometimes only be conjured affectively.” Another response comes from Amber Jamilla Musser, who frames her 2018 study *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* in terms of her emotional proximity to the many media, art, and textual objects she has no intention to master. “Instead of dwelling primarily on the ways that epistemologies shape expressivity,” she explains, “I use empathetic reading to discern the reorderings that brown jouissance enables. This is

a performative methodology, and there are, admittedly, ways that this mode of reading itself produces a form of plural selfhood, one that sits alongside the forms of selfhood that I argue are central to brown *jouissance*.” But Musser is hardly interested in apologizing for such critical intimacies: “There is no way to parse the distinction between theorist and theory or reader and text or spectator and art object. These epistemologies can be fully discerned only through the experiential.”¹⁹

The experience that Musser shares in this issue reveals the power of nondualistic thinking underlying the aspirations of reparative reading. She tracks what she calls “the promises of liquidity” that shimmer in the “sweat” glistening on two African relics (a *nkisi* and a *bieri*) currently housed in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. This liquid might technically be what happens when wood metabolizes the palm oil ritualistically applied to these figures by the Songye and Fang peoples, respectively, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But this sweat, this excretion, is also a form of expressivity that escapes capture (as museum object, as “African art,” as colonial possession), Musser argues. The sweat metabolized by these relics renders them less like objects and more like subjects entangled with sensation and affect. It also forms a tangible, material reminder of the *nkisi* and *bieri*’s role in the history of Black media as figures originally employed to connect generations, ancestors, species, or spirits—crafted to facilitate communication. As such, Musser’s contribution dramatically fulfills a deceptively simple hope underlying the impetus for this issue: that a focus on media has something to tell us about current conceptions of affect, and that affect helps us think differently about current conceptions of what media do, might do, or indeed might have done.

VERNACULAR FEELINGS

It was later in my career—after graduate school—that I first absorbed Sedgwick’s thoughts on reparative reading. They struck me immediately as a profound way of reading her reading of Tomkins. Sedgwick and Frank settle in close to Tomkins’s 1962 *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (all four volumes!), enchanted by a style of writing that “nurtures, pacifies, replenishes, then sets the idea in motion again.” They anticipate their readers’ reservations about Tomkins’s wacky affective model and our knee-jerk disdain for his schematic of eight or nine hardwired biological responses to stimuli. But their reading of him is generous, conducive, provocative, enabling. This is what it looks like to

fall in love with a writer “along the lines of an ordinary literary-critical lover’s discourse” and then yearn to share with others “what we take to be an unfamiliar and highly exciting set of moves and tonalities.” Among those moves are several concepts that form an implicit primer for most any discussion of affect today: “How sublimely alien Tomkins’s own work remains to any project of narrating the emergence of a core self,” they write. “A reader who undergoes the four volumes of Tomkins’s *Affect Imagery Consciousness*,” they assure us, “feels the *alchemy of the contingent* involve itself so intimately with identity that Tomkins comes to seem the psychologist one would most like to read face-à-face with Proust.”²⁰

I especially like that phrase: the “alchemy of the contingent.” I like it because it’s a “chunky” concept, to borrow an adjective Sedgwick often employed when talking about ideas so rich, so fecund, that she returned to them obsessively.²¹ It’s the kind of idea big enough to do things with, different kinds of things—an idea to play with as a child might play with dirt or sand without worrying if it will fall apart or stretch too thin. It’s the kind of idea that helps me think about my own obsession with another “affective turn” in the 1990s, a critical shift in film feminism often dubbed the “historical turn,” but which looks less like an interest in empirical evidence and more like a theory of affect when approached through the writings of Miriam Hansen. I would go so far as to suggest that Hansen’s rereading of Walter Benjamin’s “Artwork” essay (as well as Siegfried Kracauer’s photography essay), a project she began in 1993 and would conclude in her posthumously published book *Cinema and Experience* (2012), parallels Sedgwick’s rereading of Tomkins (and Klein) in intriguing ways.²² Of course the vitality and ferocity of Hansen’s work in the 1990s cannot be separated from a dynamic shift in film feminism interested in women’s embodied experience of technological and urban modernity—a lineage arguably beginning with Patrice Petro’s *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (1989) and carried through in Giuliana Bruno’s reconstruction of the voyeur as a voy(ag)eur in her *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the Films of Elvira Notari* (1993) as well as Anne Friedberg’s theorization of the late nineteenth-century flâneuse as an embodied, mobile, female observer in her *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (1993).²³ The orientation toward public space, especially the street, that these studies emphasize hints at the importance of the public sphere as itself a historical category undergoing transformation, a point expressly argued in Hansen’s *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*

(1991), which conceives the earliest cinema as an “unpredictable horizon of experience” for working-class women and immigrants in the United States while stressing cinema’s “availability to ethnically diverse, socially unruly, and sexually mixed audiences.”²⁴ By the end of the decade, Hansen would write the first of a series of articles conceiving cinema as a form of “vernacular modernism,” thus offering a theory of history that is also a theory of affect.

It is interesting to consider Hansen’s intellectual obsessions alongside Sedgwick’s in part because the two are *not* in conversation. But both situate somatic affect at the center of their work, and each does so by obsessively, even idiosyncratically, rereading intellectuals whose writings significantly preceded them. More specifically, Hansen sought to repair—in a quite literal sense—Benjamin’s writings on cinema and mass media. As early as 1993, in an article published in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, she drew attention to the second version of Benjamin’s “Artwork” essay, insisting on the status of this version as *the* official one. By 2004, in an essay published in *October*, Hansen had sharpened her polemic, arguing that the third version of the “Artwork” essay, the one translated into English for the 1969 collection *Illuminations* (edited and introduced by Hannah Arendt), is dangerously misleading: “It is this multiply compromised and, for Benjamin, still unfinished version that has become known all over the world as the Artwork essay,” she laments.²⁵ Taken together, these compromises equal a truly ludicrous distinction, insofar as the wrong version articulates a series of rigid antinomies that oppose aura and traditional art against photography, cinema, and the masses. The naturalization of the wrong version means that generations of readers have missed Benjamin’s stress on cinema’s capacity for *Spiel* (play; play-space; room for play), a collective phenomenological experience intrinsic to technological media: “What is lost in the withering of semblance [*Schein*], or decay of the aura, in works of art is matched by a huge gain in room-for-play [*Spiel-Raum*],” he observes, adding: “This space for play is widest in film.” As Hansen sums up, play is the category through which Benjamin sought to “imagine an alternative mode of aesthetics on a par with modern, collective experience, an aesthetics that could counteract, *at the level of sense perception*, the political consequences of the failed . . . reception of technology.”²⁶

Might we also call the second version of the “Artwork” essay a “reparative” reading of mass media, in the Sedgwickian sense of that term? Hansen surely would object; her tenacious commitment to an exposition of Benjamin’s distinctive lexicon is both commendable and notorious. And yet there is something to be gained by reflecting on what it means for a Jewish

intellectual, writing in Nazi Germany, to refuse the paranoid impulse that gripped his friend Theodor Adorno, who vigorously rejected “any potential of alterity within the notion of play” in his response to the “Artwork” essay.²⁷ Because Adorno’s editorial hand shaped the version of the essay that became canonical, all references to play disappeared, including central sections in which Benjamin lauds Mickey Mouse and Charlie Chaplin, animation shorts and slapstick comedies, as potent figures of a “collective dream” capable of triggering a physiological response that “unfetter[s] the human sensorium from its imaginary confinement to the human shape.” In Hansen’s view, Mickey Mouse belongs to the same framework as the cyborg, because such a framework puts stable sexual identities into question and blurs the boundary between organism and machine, human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate. Even the most messianic-utopian reading of the “Artwork” essay would not claim that media induce emancipatory affective responses intrinsic to all of technology. But the interplay of technology with the human sensorium might evoke, Hansen speculates, “a different organization of the social, economic, and sexual order—a postnational, postcolonial, and non-Oedipal order of humanity.”²⁸

In 1999, two years after Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” her first essay on the topic, Hansen published the first of three essays that conceives cinema of the mid-twentieth century (roughly 1920 to 1950) as a form of “vernacular modernism.” In these she offers what Paula Amad in this issue calls a “tool for understanding the global power of cinema’s everyday appeal beyond explanations dominated by recourse to narrative hegemony or ideological critique.” There is an ethics to Hansen’s insistence that US cinema’s transnational success depends on its capacity to produce “hitherto unperceived modes of sensory perception and experience,” “its glimpses of collectivity and gender equality,” and its reflexive relationship to technological modernity. This view refutes the intolerably cramped perspective that sees popular cinema exclusively as a tool of capitalist-imperialist domination and subjugation, an aesthetic idiom that exports a version of “Americanism” passively absorbed by audiences in different corners of the globe. This view stresses an “active” scene of spectatorship, as Amad puts it, one that revels in cinema’s raucous play with viewers’ bodies, psychic energies, and imaginations. This view is open to the *potential* for alterity, or what Hansen calls the “dreams of a mass culture often in excess of and conflict with the regime of production that spawned that mass culture.”²⁹

Part of this model's conceptual power lies in the conjunction of the terms "vernacular" (an idiom of the people, a promiscuous language of the everyday) and "modernism" (an idiom associated with intellectual elitism, and with a domain of artistic play usually demarcated as white, European, and male). Amad directly tackles this dichotomy. Exploring an array of early aviation films and related star discourse, her essay in this issue demonstrates how a gendered popular vernacular disoriented the masculinist domain of male modernists, specifically the myth of "aerial vision as a weightless, abstracted regime of a superhuman and mobile masculine eye." The perceptual extremes enabled by harnessing the camera to the plane in these films, an experience that Amad terms "cin-aeriality," played with the corporeal delights as well as the anxieties of aerial vision for female passengers, a "joyride" figure who also doubled for the viewer. Tracing the "psychosexual ambiguities" animating female passengers such as Minnie Mouse in *Plane Crazy* (1928) and the female protagonist in the Soviet film *Bed and Sofa* (1927), whose bodily arousal during an extended aerial sequence reflected (quoting Hansen) the "playful and physical expression of anxieties over changed gender roles and new forms of sexuality and intimacy," Amad dislodges the nexus of airplane and camera as iconic machines of modernity "from its better-known, high-modernist, masculinist heritage" in texts by Futurists like Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Le Corbuiser, "in which flight is connected to a rejuvenated, virile, and violent masculinity of penetration and condemnation of 'mother' earth."

In the process of putting this issue together, it has been difficult for me to separate my thinking about Hansen's work from a set of memory-images that her student and friend Zhen Zhang shares in a poignant memoir written for this collection. I am reminded that the power of Hansen's posthumously published *Cinema and Experience* lies in its meticulous commitment to reading Benjamin in the context of his friendship with Siegfried Kracauer and Theodor Adorno, weaving together often-disconnected threads into a tapestry of common concepts and concerns that highlights the closeness and the distance between these thinkers in unexpected ways. In like manner, future scholars will need to interrogate the different but related concepts of vernacular modernism that Zhang and Hansen developed in parallel and in conversation. As Zhang recalls, Hansen's version emerged from her "theoretical intervention in the so-called classical Hollywood paradigm through a reenergized lens of critical theory rooted in Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer. Mine attempted to bridge and mediate the legacy of this

school of thought, feminism, and a locally, culturally fermented vernacular movement in modern China, as crystallized in the geo-culturally specific *Yangjingbang* cosmopolitanism of Shanghai cinema and urban culture.” Reading Zhang’s memoir provides an alternative context for Hansen’s second essay on vernacular modernism, which grapples with the idiom of modern womanhood in Chinese films of the 1920s and 1930s, and which I now know emerged from the experience Hansen shared with Zhang while watching dozens of early Chinese films together at the Giornate del Cinema Muto (Days of Silent Cinema) festival in Italy in 1995 and 1996. Will it influence anyone’s analysis of their work to learn that Hansen was diagnosed with cancer in 1997, with a bleak prognosis, and presided over Zhang’s dissertation defense the following year with grace and rigor, although her “dark short-style wig and . . . small, frail frame and delicate features made her look like a Chinese actress in those silent films. The tumor above her right collarbone was frighteningly large, the size of a mango.” And she persevered for another decade, writing *Cinema and Experience* and composing the essays on vernacular modernism while trying Chinese herbal medicine, meditating, and taking long walks in the Japanese garden near her home by Lake Michigan. “Fashion and food” were favorite subjects in their phone conversations, Zhang recalls, remembering the one trip they shared to Shanghai in 2005, when Hansen bought an orange-red silk scarf with an art deco design at the Shanghai Museum.

That orange scarf flutters in the background of a photo that Zhang shares with us here. It is the photo’s punctum, to use Roland Barthes’s term—that element of contingency intrinsic to photography that he defined as the sensory, intensely subjective, effect of a photograph on the viewer: “The punctum of a photograph is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”³⁰ The punctum in other words is that which is accidental to the photograph. It is nothing purposeful, nothing the photograph *strives* to convey. I think its power lies in the reminder of our own vulnerable existence, of how impossible it is to consciously will, to think, to cognitively grasp the dynamic combinations, contingencies, and possible consequences of our lived experience and of our body’s shifting relation to other beings and things.

AFFECT IS NOT A LUXURY

In the summer of 1996, Sedgwick learned that her breast cancer, first diagnosed in 1991, had spread and become incurable. Unlike the sense of dread

pervading the queer community during the height of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s—a source of anxiety that shaped Sedgwick’s activism as much as it shaped the paranoid slant of queer studies evolving at that time—her own illness and immanent mortality felt different: “I knew enough to know the paranoid/schizoid was no place I could afford to dwell as I dealt with the exigencies of my disease.”³¹ Instead, she wrote *A Dialogue on Love* (1999), an experiment in creative and critical writing that is also a record of her therapy. She also began to read further in Buddhism, locating “reparative possibility in the eroding present of dying,” and nurturing the idea that “some passage of discontinuity like death can be the occasion of enlightenment, if you do it right, i.e., if you can be in a place to recognize a love that is you and is also toward you.”³² But enlightenment as such is tricky to sustain. In the essay “Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes,” published in 2007, two years before her death, Sedgwick refers to the precarity of her good days—“call them Buddhist ones”—and the fragility of psychic defenses often “devoured by my own cycles of greed, envy, rage, and in particular, anxiety.”³³ Embracing such tensions, Sedgwick shares her conviction that the imperative is not to disavow or strive to overcome such negative feelings. The more laborious and emphatically more ethical task is to integrate them, and thus to maintain what Klein termed the depressive position, the psychical position that is also *reparative*.

This is not the place, and I am not the scholar, to elaborate Klein’s object-oriented revisioning of psychoanalysis. It is perhaps enough to say that Klein’s work after 1935, particularly her account of the depressive position, provides the armature for a racialized theory of affect that Sedgwick’s student José Esteban Muñoz explored in a 2006 essay conspicuously titled “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position,” which Soto recalls in her “feel piece” for Muñoz with which this issue opens. As Muñoz knew well, for Klein the ability to learn, to love, to be creative, to theorize, *depends* on negativity—not on its absence, but on the individual’s ability to integrate negative feelings (hate, anger, rage, anxiety, loss, grief) without succumbing to an endogenous, defensive anxiety that prohibits affective action as well as innovative cognitive activity. The terms are worth stressing: to integrate, rather than to project. To internalize both good and bad as an integral part of the self (reparative), rather than project menace as entirely exterior (paranoid). The depressive position for Klein is defined by the capacity for ambiguity, for recognizing that one can both hate and love the same object, and not be destroyed or annihilated by it.

It thus makes sense that Muñoz turned to Klein in his ongoing attempt to find vocabularies for “brown feelings,” and for understanding brownness as shared affective sensibility, as an interweaving of the subjective and the social, rather than given or presumed identity. He writes: “Utilizing Klein as a theorist of relationality is advantageous because she is true to the facts of violence, division, and hierarchy that punctuate the social, yet she is, at another moment, a deeply idealistic thinker who understands the need to not simply cleanse negativity but instead to promote the desire that the subject has in the wake of the negative to reconstruct a relational field.” What does it mean, he asks, to witness the most sadistic, violent, harmful inequities of the social realm—racism, homophobia—and then struggle against the paranoid impulse to shut down, to retreat from the world as a mode of psychological isolation or to externalize those threats as exclusively elsewhere and other? What does it mean to acknowledge that violence and antagonism also emerge from within minoritarian groups, wrought by other brown or Black or queer people, as well as from within oneself? It means committing to the ethics of reparative work, or what might best be termed the work of love. “Love for Klein,” Muñoz observes, “is indeed a kind of striving for belonging that does not ignore the various obstacles that the subject must overcome to achieve the most provisional belonging.”³⁴

Insofar as Klein envisions the complexities of psychic life in terms of a capacity for taking in, introjecting, or internalizing negative feelings, might this also be understood as a type of metabolism, as a process of ingesting, incorporating, and, ultimately, of transforming? To suggest as much invokes a lineage of affect theory rooted in the work of Black lesbian feminist poet, educator, and activist Audre Lorde. As Musser explains in her essay here, Lorde is invested in metabolism—specifically the metabolization of hatred and racism into something else. This does not mean that Lorde negates violence, nor does she ignore or overlook its devastating effects. She rather “offers a way to see that this violence is not totalizing.” As various critics have discussed, including Hennefeld in this issue, Lorde consistently transforms so-called negative feelings, like anger, into political, intellectual, and creative work. In her 1977 essay, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Lorde urges her readers to embrace the messy, chaotic, upsetting and often unnamable sensations of the inchoate self and to express a sensual, visceral knowledge that would counter the “worship of rationality and that circular, academic, analytic thinking.” “The white fathers told us, ‘I think, therefore I am,’” she pronounced, “and the Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams, ‘I feel, therefore I can be free.’”³⁵

For Musser and for Cvetkovich, Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic," first delivered as a paper at the Berkshires Conference on the history of women in 1978, offers a theory of affect that is also a theory of *relationality*, a variation of Muñoz's investment in identity conceived as shared affective sensibility. While Musser explores the "possibility (even idealized) of Black connection" in the diaspora, and Cvetkovich envisions "queer dreams" of a "decolonial commons," both find inspiration in Lorde's conception of the erotic as a felt sensibility, an experience of "joy" that travels between the subjective and the social, connecting individuals beyond the rigidity of identity categories, national belonging, or geographical locations. For Lorde, the erotic body is a body aroused to connectivity in all its forms—social, psychical, physical, intellectual, spiritual. The erotic body thus assumes a stance diametrically opposed to the position Klein diagnosed as "paranoid." It is likewise opposed to the affective stance of a white, heteronormative culture which expels the person of color, the gender nonconforming, the disabled, the sick, the poor, and the old as hated objects that represent an endangering difference.

As Roderick A. Ferguson sums up, Lorde sought to rehabilitate our "inner senses of scrutiny," arguing through her poetry, her writing and her activism that "the seriousness of intellectual work lies in the critical activation of sensual matters."³⁶ This kind of work takes time. I thus encourage the reader to approach this issue slowly, to read as a form of lingering, a bit of conscientious tarrying. Indeed, a call for reading *as* "lagging," as temporal dissonance, quite literally opens this issue in a poignant, experimental essay that Soto wrote as a means of mourning Muñoz while meditating on his legacy. For Soto, the process of sifting through "brown feelings," which is what Muñoz sought to think through before he died, demands "slow and reparative reading, a queer willingness to explore unfamiliar and defamiliarizing forms of commitment to minoritarian subjectivity and aesthetics." Although she dallies in particular over two essays he published before his premature death at the age of forty-six, Muñoz's description of the brown commons in his posthumously published book *The Sense of Brown* feels useful here:

The brown commons is not about the production of the individual but instead about a movement, a flow, and an impulse to move beyond the singular and individualized subjectivities. It is about the swerve of matter, organic and otherwise, the moment of contact, the encounter and all that it can generate. . . . A brown commons as I am attempting to sketch here is an example of a collectivity with and through the incommensurable.³⁷

Muñoz knew full well, Soto tells us, that “the protocols of academic knowledge production are such that most of his readers would want to come away from an essay with a working definition of his sense of brownness.” He did not give us that. Nor does Soto. If you’re patient, though, willing to slacken the pace and feel your way around, you’ll find instead this issue’s most loving gift: to want academic study to become invested in what makes us affectively implicated in the lives of others, perhaps most acutely when those lives do not appear to resemble our own. ■

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NOTES

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1. The ubiquity of this phrase in affect studies is well known. Here I am quoting Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 11.

2. Tavia Nyong’o, “Trapped in the Closet with Eve,” *Criticism* 52, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 243.

3. Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press 2004).

4. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 230n1, 4.

5. Lauren Berlant and Jordan Greenwald, “Affect in the End Times: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant,” *Qui Parle* 20, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 2012): 88.

6. For a detailed discussion of the term “feelings” and its relationship to affect studies see Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press) 2003; Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press) 2012.

7. “What does it mean to fall in love with a writer?” Sedgwick and Adam Frank pose this question as a means of interrogating their obsession with the work of Silvan Tomkins. Jonathan A. Allan quotes this inquiry in the opening line of his essay “Falling in Love with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 48, no. 1 (March 2015): 1. In declaring my own love for Sedgwick, I am influenced by Allan’s argument that “love affords another model for thinking through questions of influence, particularly a theory of influence informed by queer theory and affect studies” (1).

8. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins,” in *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 1–28. This essay is revised and reprinted in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2003), 93–121. All subsequent citations refer to the latter version.

9. I’m referring to Laura Mulvey’s oft-cited and oft-reprinted essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” first published in *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.

10. The first version of her thoughts on reparative and paranoid reading appear in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You,” in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–37. This introduction was revised and published as “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” in *Touching Feeling*, 123–51. All subsequent citations refer to the latter version.

11. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 130–31.

12. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 141.

13. Heather Love, “Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” *Criticism* 52, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 237–38.

14. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 5.

15. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 1.

16. Robyn Wiegman, “‘The Times We’re In’: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative ‘Turn,’” *Feminist Theory* 15, no. 1 (2014): 18.

17. Lauren Berlant, “Two Girls, Fat and Thin,” in *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*, ed. Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (New York: Routledge, 2002), 73–74, 104.

18. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 123, 124.

19. Amber Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 17.

20. Sedgwick, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold,” 95, 117, 98, my emphasis.

21. Sedgwick’s playful relation to language encourages me to play. In a 2007 essay on her relationship to Melanie Klein, she recounts a childhood memory about her desire for a “chunkier” doll—not the smaller, sleeker, hand-me-down doll from her

sister, an object that simply didn't "fit" her. This memory, she explains, vibrates with intellectual and emotional intensity whenever she reads Klein. I do not think it coincidental that she shortly thereafter refers to "the invitingly chunky affordances of Klein's thought." Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 627, 629.

22. Hansen's recovery of Benjamin's "Artwork" essay developed through a series of provocative writings, including Miriam Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92, no. 1 (1993): 27–61; Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (1999): 306–43; Miriam Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October* 109 (2004): 3–45. These concepts were elaborated and refined in Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

23. Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1989); Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

24. Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 16, 19.

25. Hansen, "Room-for-Play," 4.

26. Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 183, my emphasis.

27. Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 197.

28. Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks," 47, 51.

29. Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema and Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 69.

30. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 27.

31. Sedgwick, "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes," 640.

32. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love* (Boston: Beacon, 1999), 215. For an exquisite reading of *Dialogue on Love*, see Tyler Bradway, "'PERMEABLE WE!': Affect and the Ethics of Intersubjectivity in Eve Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love*," *GLQ: Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (2012): 79–110.

33. Sedgwick, "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes," 627.

34. José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 31, no. 3 (2006): 683.

35. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Quality Paper Book, 1984), 38.

36. Roderick A. Ferguson, "Of Sensual Matters: On Audre Lorde's 'Poetry Is Not a Luxury' and 'Uses of the Erotic,'" *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 40, nos. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2012): 299–300.

37. José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 2.