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# The New “New”: Making a Case for Critical Affect Studies

Jenny Edbauer Rice

Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), vii + 224 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), \$29.95 (paper).

Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), xi + 227 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), viii + 142 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

Patricia Ticineto Clough, ed., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), xiii + 313 pp. \$84.95 (cloth), \$23.95 (paper).

A recent conversation on the popular website *Ask Metafilter*, where readers post questions about everything from how to set up HDTV to high-altitude cooking temperatures, caught my attention when a reader posed a question that seemed to be pulled from the latest conversations in academia. Without the slightest hint of the question’s enormity, this writer asks: “[W]hat are all the possible definitions or uses of the term Affect in philosophy, critical theory, and academia more generally, and what constitutes the affective turn in post-structuralist theory?”<sup>1</sup> The writer explained that he was taking a course on affect and post-structuralism, but he wanted some additional perspectives on what constitutes “affect” in the first place. In response to this immense question, some fellow *Ask Metafilter* readers directed him to start with the work of Gilles Deleuze. Many others scoffed at him for paying any attention to the current buzzword of the moment in critical theory. This exchange caught my attention because of what it suggests about the current state of affect (or at least the current state of affect theory). The fact that this reader chose to direct his question to a non-academic, popular forum suggests that perhaps theories of affect are in the air, so to speak. Whether or not affect is a buzzword of the moment, and whether or not

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“all the possible definitions and uses” of affect can even be defined, it is nearly impossible to ignore the fact that affect is a growing topic within academic discourse—and perhaps beyond. At the same time, as this question and its subsequent string of responses makes clear, the concept of affect is not easily summarized.

If I had responded to the *Ask Metafilter* query, I might have pointed to the growing category of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences that Jennifer Seibel Trainor recently dubbed “critical emotion studies” (CES). According to Trainor, CES is a study of “the relationship between emotion and whatever it is that a particular discipline studies, from brain chemistry to teacher education to election results.”<sup>2</sup> This cross-disciplinary body of scholarship focuses on the effects of emotions—sadness, happiness, anger, disappointment, love, hate—on various areas of everyday life. For example, a number of recent articles in composition studies address pedagogy and emotions in the classroom (Lindquist, Robillard) and the sometimes negative emotional contours of administrative work (Micciche). Likewise, in the field of design, emotion has become an important part of talking about how users interact with things and how emotions such as happiness can actually help people more easily learn to navigate machines (Norman).<sup>3</sup>

However, my response would be inadequate if I stopped there. On one hand, the scholarship that Trainor calls critical emotion studies might seem to encompass affect as part of its focus. Terms like “emotion” and “affect” are often conflated to the point of being nearly synonymous. However, several scholars—most notably Brian Massumi and Antonio Damasio—have stressed important differences between these two terms. Massumi describes emotions as having a “narrativized” content that is shaped through specific cultural, social, and political contexts. Thus, my feeling of anger when witnessing the recent dismantling of the SCHIP program for insuring children is an example of an emotion. It has a content that has been arguably crafted by cultural contexts and judgments, such as the valuation of healthcare as a universal right, empathy for children, a history of negative images where conservatives and healthcare are concerned, and so forth. Affect, on the other hand, does not necessarily have a narrative, and neither is it crafted through cultural contexts. According to Massumi, affect is like a degree of intensity that is prior to an indexed or articulated referent. Affect describes an energetics that does not necessarily emerge at the level of signification.<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Grossberg describes affect in terms of effects:

The active engagement with texts is rarely determined exclusively by the interpretive content of meaning production. . . . If not every meaning is a representation, and not every text has representational effects, it may also be true that texts may have effects other than meaning-effects.<sup>5</sup>

This distinction would allow us to decipher a difference between the content of anger at SCHIP’s demise and the degree or duration of intensity experienced in my body.

Branching out from emotion-oriented terminology, therefore, we might follow up on Trainor’s neologism by identifying a separate area of scholarship called “critical affect studies” (CAS), or the interdisciplinary study of affect and its mediating force

in everyday life. This scholarship comprises work that explores what Ann Cvetkovich describes as “forms of affective life that have not solidified into institutions, organizations, or identities.”<sup>6</sup> Massumi’s *Parables for the Virtual* is certainly one of the most cited works on affect, but other significant contributions to CAS include Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*; Moira Gatens’s *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality*; Lawrence Grossberg’s *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*; Antonio Damasio’s *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*; and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*.<sup>7</sup> The body of literature that comprises CAS is hardly unified in its rhetorical scope, methodology, or even a shared bibliography. Nevertheless, there are some common themes that do unify these texts, justifying their shared categorical distinction as another cultural “study.”

In this review, I will examine four recent contributions to CAS: Teresa Brennan’s *The Transmission of Affect*, Sarah Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Patricia Ticineto Clough’s *The Affective Turn*, and Denise Riley’s *Impersonal Passion*. While these four texts are not necessarily paradigmatic of this scholarship, they do highlight some common threads of CAS. In this sense, they serve as a reflection on current interdisciplinary conversations about affect. Reading these four texts will definitely not help us answer that complex question posted at *Ask Metafilter*: What are all possible definitions or uses of the term affect in philosophy, critical theory, and academia? However, by mapping the *topoi* of CAS, we might be able to discover some uses of affect theory for rhetorical studies. My review aims to consider why rhetoric should take notice of the latest “buzzword of the moment” when we already have so many. (Do we really need a new “new” in rhetorical/cultural studies?) In an attempt to move past the hype that critical theory sometimes suffers from, I will explore several topologies of affect as they appear in these four texts. My intention is less to create a thorough outline of affect theory than to suggest a few proximities between this “new” area of scholarship and some very familiar questions in rhetorical studies.

### **Topos 1: The Physical Life of Social Bodies**

Teresa Brennan’s *The Transmission of Affect* is among the most ambitious works on the physiological character of affect. Her scope is huge, drawing from disciplines like neuroscience, history, clinical psychology, and cultural theory. Brennan frames her book by calling it an investigation into the transmission of “energy between and among human subjects” (8). The introduction opens with the near-universal experience of walking into a room full of anxious bodies and picking up on the tension. For Brennan, that experience is neither imaginary nor insignificant. “Feel[ing] the atmosphere,” as Brennan puts it, reflects a socially induced phenomenon that literally changes our biological makeup. Affects and energies are transmitted between bodies, resulting in a “process whereby one person’s or one group’s nervous and hormonal systems are brought into alignment with another’s” (9). Brennan argues that affects emerge across bodies both physically and biologically.

These transpersonal affects are the social-material elements of “personal” thoughts and feelings.

As an example of the physiological manifestation of social affects, Brennan examines studies on the transmission of love between mothers and children. Older studies have established that babies who experience a “failure to thrive” have often experienced a lack of nurturing, even though their nutritional and medical needs are met (34). But what is less known, according to Brennan, is that a lack of love from mothers can actually change the makeup of the brain. Rats born to attentive and nurturing mothers had more brain synapses and NMDA neurotransmitters than rats who were not nurtured. These additional brain structures resulted in a greater ability to learn and remember. The findings were similar for rats raised by indifferent mothers but born to attentive mothers, making love an affect transmitted either just after birth or in the womb (35). This small example encapsulates much of Brennan’s argument about affect: there is a structural, reciprocal relationship between an environment and a body’s biological composition.

Although Brennan does not frame it as such, *The Transmission of Affect* offers a multi-disciplinary, multi-methodological approach to the empirical characteristics of sociality. Breaking away from post-structuralist critiques of the subject, Brennan looks to a zone of relationality that keeps one individual from preserving her neat boundaries. It is true that an argument against the subject’s interiority or autonomy is nothing new, yet the novelty of Brennan’s argument lies in this hypothesis of affects literally transmitting between bodies. In one of the more compelling and complex moments of her book, Brennan lands in the improbable arena of smells to support her argument against the false image of a self-contained ego. Although “I” may cling to the notion of autonomous agency, she argues that bodies are constantly in the process of transmitting affects back and forth through chemical transfers. Your body gives off pheromones that (for better or worse) mesh with my body, thus becoming part of “me.”

As a kind of strange exemplar of this smell transmission, Brennan reminds us that the Spanish phrase *Lo siento* not only serves as an apology but literally means “I feel it.” *Sentir*, the verb from which we get *siento*, is also related to the verb “to smell” (139). When I find myself in a situation that necessitates an apology, my body actually comes to know something about bad relations. I imbibe the negative chemicals produced by this situation—literally feeling the “bad vibes” in the air. Brennan’s fascinating argument about smells exposes us to the fact that a body is never single, for we are always taking in the physical structure of our contexts. We are always imbibing each other. Consequently, “[t]here is no secure distinction between the ‘individual’ and the ‘environment’” (6). Brennan’s use of quotation marks around these two words indicates one of the keys to understanding affect’s character: affect is not personal feeling, but is instead the means through which bodies act in context with each other. The sources of my self are literally “in the air.” Brennan thus argues that affective encounters between bodies alter our very anatomical makeup. Even at the cellular level, which might be the most elemental element, my self is rooted in others.

The archives comprising Brennan's chapters repeatedly draw from case studies of traumas and maladies. Perhaps a traumatic archive is best for exploring how affects (negative affects, in this case) can change the body's makeup psychically and physically. For example, in Chapter 2 Brennan explores the "new maladies of the soul" (45), or the new diagnostic disorders like chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) and fibromyalgia (FMS). Brennan notes that patients experiencing CFS are much more likely to suffer from lifelong depressive and anxiety disorders. Likewise, people with FMS are much more likely to have experienced emotional trauma, such as sexual or physical abuse. Brennan argues that these conditions are not necessarily a matter of cause and effect. Rather, both CFS and FMS are symptomatic of bodies facing negative affects (46–47). She argues that these disorders are not simply psychological internalizations of abuse, but they are actually chemical and biological transformations born from the negative affects that spread via contagion between bodies. Negative chemicals transmit and restructure our selves. Furthermore, it is possible that growing cultural negativity contributes to the decomposition of other bodies, thereby leading to an overall increase of such syndromes across public spaces.

Ultimately, *The Transmission of Affect* revisits issues of subjectivity through the lens of bodily affect and our physiological lives. If we were to boil down Brennan's immense argument into a pithy statement, it would be this: because affects are transmitted between bodies, "I" am always more than one and "we" are always fewer than two. Brennan persuasively demonstrates how affective transmission depends on a relationality that is not simply a multitude of individuals: "the emotions of two are not the same as the emotions of one plus one" (51). My body imbibes contextual affects that include what you give off, thereby changing the makeup of my physiology. Consequently, "we" describes the zone of relations that is operative in affective transmission. In other words, Brennan moves far beyond interpersonal frameworks of the social in order to arrive at an affective sociality.

## Topos 2: Articulations and Political Affect

Brennan's text, which emphasizes physiological and neurobiological dimensions of affect, marks one extreme in CAS. Few other texts in cultural theory engage the same level of physiology as *The Transmission of Affect*. However, many other arguments in CAS are still firmly grounded in theories of materiality and the body. Sarah Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* is one, and it is among the best recent contributions to CAS. Perhaps what makes Ahmed's text much more satisfying in some ways than Brennan's physiological exploration is that it ultimately gets to the question of politics (as her title promises), although it is a far different politics than rhetorical theory has come to know. The essays in Ahmed's book all touch on one central question that serves as a metapolitical investigation: why are we invested in certain discourses and beliefs, even when they are injurious, personally devastating, or just plain fallacious? In response, Ahmed argues that the roots of belief are not located around actual statistics or evidence that is weighed by autonomous individuals. Instead, beliefs are

constituted through circulating signs and discourses that have been stuck together in a metonymic slide.

Both Ahmed and Brennan show us that belief is neither internally produced nor simply imposed on us from external ideological structures. However, unlike Brennan, Ahmed does not locate affective investment in the physiology of chemical transfer. Rather, she theorizes how language affectively articulates a social imaginary within which political discourse is lodged. Ahmed explains that belief and adherence to particular structures are affectively invested in, rather than cognitively weighed. We are stuck to those beliefs like wooden sticks glued together. We are so strongly invested in (or glued to) certain structures of belief that they seem like part of our own identity. To borrow Kenneth Burke's well-worn term, we are "identified" with structures of ideology through an affective investment. Ideology is not internally agreed to, therefore, but neither is it externally imposed on our otherwise autonomous selves.

One of Ahmed's strongest arguments appears in her chapter "The Organisation of Hate," which addresses how emotions like hate "work to secure collectives through the way in which they read the bodies of others" (42). Examining online hate sites like the Aryan Nation's website, she notes that racist groups often distribute the focus of their discourse across multiple groups and threats: blacks, Jews, immigrants, gays, and feminists. These figures slide together into a kind of metonymic threat of loss: lost safety, bodily purity, job security, and so forth. For such racists, the threat of a Jew and a gay couple is the same, which is to say that the object of hate does not specifically reside in the figure. Ahmed points out that this hate "is economic; it circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement" (44).

Moreover, signs accumulate and build up affect in their circulation. Ahmed illustrates this point by recalling the 2003–04 scene of anti-immigration rhetoric in Britain. When several members of the British parliament railed against asylum seekers by repeatedly claiming that the nation was being "swamped" and "overwhelmed" by bogus immigrants, the effect was an accumulation of affective value where these figures were concerned. Because these politicians argued that "any incoming bodies *could be* bogus," hate was never reduced to a particular body. Instead, it circulated economically among many different bodies, including illegal immigrants, asylum seekers, and anyone who might seem vaguely foreign (47). These affective/economic accumulations are illustrated in Conservative Party leader William Hague's juxtaposition of two speeches in Parliament. Hague's first speech railed against the unfair imprisonment of a man who shot a burglar caught entering the man's home. This speech was immediately followed by an anti-asylum rant against people who were lying in order to gain entrance into the country. The proximity of these two speeches articulated a common metonymy for the British public: bogus conmen are working their way into your country much like burglars are working their way into your homes (47–48). The result was a national rhetoric of the right to (self) defense, which affectively collapsed a number of issues that took on a relationship through an affective economy.

The politics of affect—perhaps better identified as the affective dimension of politics—reveals something about how rhetorics cohere in(to) publics. Rhetorics emerge less from exigencies than from a kind of accretion of linkages (immigration–job loss–security loss–danger–crime) wherein an individual is only a single node. Therefore, instead of arguing that a person either buys these racist beliefs wholesale or has them imposed wholesale, we find that we are talking much more about the articulations that come to be stuck together in and through circulating discourses. Consider the following online comment from an anti-immigration website as an example:

I live in NJ, and I know I've seen a dramatic increase in the number of Mexican, Central and South American nationals, especially Brazil. We now have shops on Broadway with signs in Spanish or Portuguese, neighborhoods that used to be nice, clean homes have turned into rental units with who knows how many of these people living in them. Used to be, you didn't even bother to lock your doors, but not anymore. I keep a locked and loaded .45 acp [sic] within reach at most times. . . . If God forbid, you hit one running across the Freeway during rush hour trying to elude arrest, you will be sued. And if your insurance doesn't cover the costs, there goes your home that you have worked so hard to build or buy.<sup>8</sup>

Much like British politician Hague who stuck together private threats to one's home and the threat of immigrants, this writer operates in a network of articulated discourses. In this brief passage, he juxtaposes the changing linguistic character of neighborhoods (Spanish as “the unfamiliar”), sanitation, fears of crime, and economic endangerment from liability issues. There seems to be no obvious connection between bilingual shop signs and U.S. tort law, yet he understands them within that metonymic slide. They are thus affectively articulated in a “single” issue in which the writer is only one node. At the same time, these circulating discourses orient him as a seemingly autonomous subject. They give him shape as *defender extraordinaire*: protector of his neighborhood's landscape and sanitation, personal possessions, and the property of others.

The politics of affect are associational, then, and not developed out of the private deliberation of or external imposition on an individual. Although Ahmed uses the vocabulary of emotion, she breaks away from the “inside out” model (where I express my internally felt emotions to those outside of my own skin) as well as the “outside in” model. The “outside in” model may be more recognizable as a rhetorical take on emotions, since this model assumes that emotion resides in the social sphere and is later learned, or internalized, by an individual. Instead, Ahmed proposes that emotions are the acts of orientation between bodies. She explains, “Emotions are relational: they involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’ in relation to . . . objects” (8). Fear is not a property that one possesses, but is instead a means of orientation between one body and another. When a child experiences fear at the sight of a bear, the encounter repels the first body away from the other. This repelling movement is an orientation that gives shape and definition to surfaces (fearsome bear, fearful child) (8). Emotion, or affect, is thus an orienting device that shapes the political contours of our social imaginaries.



### Topos 3: Affective Economies

While Ahmed emphasizes the metonymic economies between ideological figures and political investments, other theorists have explored new forms of economic production and the changing lines of global flows among bodies, capital, and information. These two emphases deploy different senses of economics, yet issues of circulation connect both threads in CAS. Patricia Ticineto Clough's collection, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, is a good example of how economic production and circulation can be read through affect. In the introduction to the collection, Clough identifies what she calls an "affective turn" (2), which marks a material change in the relationships of bodies, technology, media, and social relations. The essays in Clough's collection emphasize that affect is generated in interactions among bodies. This generated affect is not reducible to the content or significations comprising that interaction. It is copresent without being coterminous. The various authors in this collection focus on new forms of economic production of bodies, new forces of economic direction, and new forms of (surplus) labor. More than Brennan's and Ahmed's works, this collection emphasizes affective articulations on global scales of circulation and transmission.

For example, in "Always on Display: Affective Production in the Modeling Industry," Elizabeth Wissinger describes the work of modeling as a circulation of affective energy that drives new forms of capitalism: "a primary goal of production [in modeling] is to stimulate attention and motivate interest by whatever means are possible, to produce affect in a volatile or turbulent situation" (238). Wissinger argues that images of supermodels do not produce a consumable content, but instead produce continued interest in consumption as such. Models produce the circulation of consumptive energies in general (not merely sex). As Wissinger writes, "the stimulation of affective energy is the goal of much modeling work" (241). Sex sells, in other words. What it sells is attention to and an investment in the act of consumption itself. Her statement can be expanded, however, to highlight a key thesis of CAS: the stimulation of affective energy is the goal of the economy in general. Economic channels are no longer a means but have become themselves an end. Consumption is possible—even mandatory—to sustain endlessly by endlessly delaying its achievement.

Working from this same premise, other authors in the collection argue that new forms of life redirect surplus energies into a state of non-consumption. For example, David Staples makes a compelling case that the value production of labor is increasingly displaced onto affect (124). Staples frames this theory of affective labor in terms of "women's work," since women have so often been the figures whose excess labor is redirected into affect, rather than a source of value (125). Although Staples does not use the example of the teacher, his argument illustrates the teacher's condition quite well. The teacher, working for a small salary and asked to put in always more hours, does not receive value in return for her surplus labor. Instead, the excess is displaced into an affective state: she "feels good" that she is "helping" students by her extra hours of work. It is a sign of her dedication, her care, her

concern for teaching. The excess labor itself can therefore be endlessly displaced into such a black hole of good feelings.

Similarly, in “More Than a Job: Meaning, Affect, and Training Health Care Workers,” Ariel Ducey traces the relationship between the growing field of continued vocational education and affect in health care industries. Her study finds that low-waged, low-skilled health care workers often frame their jobs within a vocabulary of “meaningfulness.” Although a nursing assistant may be an entry-level job, Ducey finds that workers interpret their work as important because it is “meaningful.” That is, caring for others is meaningful (to the patients and their families) and therefore valuable. The search for “meaningfulness” simultaneously drives these workers to seek additional training in order to achieve a more “meaningful” status in the eyes of others. As Ducey puts it, “if meaningfulness is the measure of particular jobs, then the education and training industry . . . creates credentials that confirm the presence of meaning and proceeds to credential people—for a fee” (194). The desire for more “meaningfulness” generates endless consumption of (or desire for) vocational education that promises to increase one’s credentials and therefore one’s professional “meaning.” Once again, circulation is the *telos* within this economy.

#### **Topos 4: Language Beyond Official Content**

The connections among Brennan, Ahmed, and the authors in Clough’s collection are seemingly tenuous at times. Affect is (re)incarnated as many things—from physiological changes to structural economic channels. In this confusion, the significance of affect theories for rhetoric might get lost. However, theorist Denise Riley skillfully summarizes the most important dimension of affect in the title to her short collection, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect*. Riley’s collection encompasses nine short meditations on language, sociality, and the affective dimension of communication. Although this small text is not native to rhetorical disciplines, either in communication or English studies, her subject matter should be familiar to those of us who study issues of language, communication, and orientation to others. Each of her essays meditates on the affective dimension of language, or the way that language often works “outside of its official content” (5). Riley unpacks the affective elements of language that outrun the communicative protocols that we prefer—language that submits to communicative intentions. The previous three texts likewise reflect dimensions of life that have tangible effects apart from what Lawrence Grossberg calls “meaning effects.”<sup>9</sup> Social, political, and even economic production are all shaped by language working outside of its official content. This is the realm of affect.

Riley considers the strange life of language, whose affect forms an “outward unconscious which hovers between people, rather than swimming upward from the privacy of each heart” (4). Her essays begin in such mundane but complex scenes as being the target of “bad words,” the impossible question “Why me?” and even the familiar strangeness of one’s own name. In each of these scenarios, language shuttles back and forth between deeply personal and impersonal realms. For example, Riley

imagines that one's own name is an experience of language's extimacy: "I pull [the name] inside me to make it mine, drawing it in from the outside" (115). In much the same way, our tendency to break out in swear words reflects the affective proximity between inner and outer worlds. When swearing, I seem to reach down deep inside and pull out the personal dregs that reveal something about me and my mental state. These curses are what Riley calls "imported sociality" or the social tropes that have become the stuff of my subjectivity (19).

Language does indeed serve the representational and expressive goals of its speakers, therefore, but it also exerts a strange torsion on those who "use" language. The observation "language speaks us" perhaps needs no further championing, and Riley certainly does not stop with this overwrought phrase. Instead, she stays carefully within the zone of a public intimacy—or a realm of impersonal passions—where the sociality of language becomes the material of our most personal sphere. As Riley writes, "If language exerts a torsion on its users, it does not immobilize them, let alone strangle them. Quite why it doesn't, and how, is a main preoccupation of these essays" (3). Her conclusions suggest that language is neither firmly within the grasp of personal agency nor is it a tool of ideological oppression. Language, like one's own first name, is an experience of being "outed." That is, we must carve an inner life from the social material that was given to us from the outside. Rather than reifying an inside/outside distinction, however, Riley argues that we are "outside from the start" (52).

### **Use and Value: Why Should Rhetorical Studies Care About Affect Studies?**

Scholars across disciplines have already begun to incorporate theories of affect into more traditional disciplinary inquiry. In anthropology, for example, Kathleen Stewart has explored how discourse among West Virginia coal mining communities often incorporates what Riley calls "a tangible affect in language which stands somewhat apart from the expressive intentions of an individual speaker."<sup>10</sup> Susan Harding's *Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* offers a sociological investigation of the affective dimension in Christian fundamentalist discourses.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, scholars in history, the sciences, and traditional economic fields are slowly beginning to account for rhetorical dimensions of their disciplinary questions. Rhetorical studies in general can also benefit from the theories emerging around affect, and by way of concluding, I will briefly make the case for one area—public rhetoric—where affect studies may inform more complex understandings of rhetorical issues.

First, affect theory can have a significant impact on how we conceptualize the public sphere, whose discursive spaces do not mirror the normative public sphere that some theories suppose. Even after bracketing the Habermasian ideal of critical-rational discourse, we still find that much public sphere theory is informed by a conversational model that imagines a back-and-forth civic discourse among multiple participants. If we account for the communicative context that Brennan and Ahmed explicate, then we find that "deliberative spaces" do not neatly originate with a

*kairotic* exigence that sparks multiple voices responding to each other. Rather, as Ahmed argues, public spaces comprise numerous articulations between images, discourses, and feelings. In the example of anti-immigration publics, a number of articulations are already in place for participants: fear of economic downturn and job insecurity, fear of personal violation, a disdain for “lawyer sharks” who are out to ruin citizens, and a monolingual linguistic range that limits communication across cultures. Therefore, the public rhetoric surrounding immigration issues was not necessarily born from a single exigence, or even from subsequent conversations about illegal immigration. Instead of framing the public through its deliberative conversations, anti-immigration rhetoric seems to be an outgrowth of many prior articulations. In Ahmed’s terms, anti-immigration public rhetoric is simply a number of figures “stuck together” in a loose collective. This kind of public rhetoric is perhaps less conversational and deliberative than it is additive and associational.

Consequently, rhetorical theory can engage a new question for public discourse: how can we critically intervene in those rhetorics that are powered through affective linkages and articulations? For example, how can rhetorics effectively counter discourse emerging from anti-immigration publics? Theories of affect suggest a process of disarticulation, or an unsticking of those figures that seem to be glued together, followed by a rearticulation, or a new way of linking together images and representations that is less oppressive. This dual strategy is evident in counter-rhetorics launched against AIDS discrimination. When popular rhetorics about AIDS circulated the myth that AIDS was a “gay” disease, or that the virus was linked to “immorality,” a counter-campaign actively fought to disarticulate these figures. Moving away from the articulation of AIDS and death, many activists began to articulate AIDS and HIV with life, including the HIV-positive lifestyle. Magazines like *Poz* and *HIV Plus* feature colorful images of smiling men and women of all races, sexual orientations, and ages. Their stories are upbeat and generally positive, careful not to overemphasize feelings of despair. Likewise, in an effort to rearticulate AIDS with a kind of normalcy, the Hope’s Voice 2006 educational campaign featured posters with attractive young people surrounded by the words: “Does HIV look like me?” The answer, of course, involves a disarticulation of prior associations of HIV with death, abnormality, and otherness.

Certain threads of CAS also encourage us to rethink the *telos* of rhetorical publics. Public sphere theories often presume that public rhetoric aims to generate deliberative talk resulting in a civic judgment about issues. Nancy Fraser describes a public sphere as “the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs.” Similarly, Gerard Hauser describes the public as “a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them.”<sup>12</sup> This framework encourages rhetorical theorists to look for the deliberative characteristics that constitute a given public. That is, a public is defined by the conversations that teleologically aim toward a judgment about its affairs.

Consider, too, the deliberative talk currently surrounding modern midwifery. Across the internet and other public spaces, women and men are participating in

conversations about alternative birthing choices, including home delivery by midwives. When Missouri lawmakers attempted to outlaw homebirths by midwives, a number of blogs, listservs, local talk shows, letters to the editor, and even a documentary film all served as “discursive spaces” where groups discussed a mother’s autonomy over her own birthing decisions. The *telos* of this deliberative space appears to be an attempt at reaching common judgments about where the law begins and ends, as well as whether birthing should be considered a medical procedure.

However, theories of affect encourage us to complicate this reading. If affect is something produced through interactions between bodies, then public deliberation probably also produces something that does not coincide with the *telos* of civic judgment. For instance, online midwife supporters are arguably invested in an ongoing circulation of talk. That is, the talk itself—attention and investments in the act of communication—is also a *telos*. This is the “affective circulation” of publics; talk itself becomes a *telos* even beyond the official content of that talk. Blogs devoted to midwifery issues frequently feature posts that relate to a number of other concerns: motherhood, feminist issues, political candidates, breastfeeding culture, and even reflections on spirituality. Comments on these blogs do not always fall into the neat classification of “deliberative.” Many are epideictic (“I just want to say I LOVE your honesty”) or simply phatic communications (“Wow . . .” “Ouch!”).<sup>13</sup> Therefore, in some sense, the talk itself holds together a public even when that talk does not have direct bearing on the common affairs being deliberated. Perhaps this is even more obvious in the publics oriented around national politics. The idea of being a “news junkie” is worth considering. There is an affective investment that goes beyond the content of these conversations.

In short, the notion of affect poses an interesting question for rhetorical studies: is discursive deliberation sufficient for talking about the constitution of publics? On the one hand, publics are not possible without discourse. On the other hand, deliberation generates affects that do not neatly conform to the signifying elements of that civic discourse. Public participants get something from deliberation *beyond* deliberation. This is why some people get energized from a public debate about a political issue, or maybe why some people actually experience the academic conference scene as intensely invigorating. Thus, what underscores civic or rhetorical deliberation is arguably an affective element. It is unclear whether merely accounting for this characteristic will lead to more critical analyses, although expanding our understanding of public affect might help us understand why certain rhetorics retain powerful circulation.

Moreover, the promise of CAS for rhetoric is not limited to a new reading of publics. Other emergent topics include a more complex understanding of *pathos* (beyond emotion), increased attention to the physiological character of rhetoric, and a rethinking of ideological critique. Even these few topical intersections suggest that CAS is relevant for rhetorical scholars. After other buzzwords of the moment have faded from favor, affective energies will still remain part of rhetoric, discourse, and communication. Theories of affect are worth our time and our attention, even if not yet our full agreement.

## Notes

- [1] jrb223, comment on “What is affect?” on *Ask MetaFilter*, comment posted September 15, 2006, <http://ask.metafilter.com/46567/what-is-affect/>.
- [2] Jennifer Seibel Trainor, “From Identity to Emotion: Frameworks for Understanding, and Teaching Against, Anticritical Sentiments in the Classroom,” *JAC* 26 (2006): 645.
- [3] Julie Lindquist, “Class Affects, Classroom Affectations: Working through the Paradoxes of Strategic Empathy,” *College English* 67 (2004): 187–209; Amy E. Robillard, “We Won’t Get Fooled Again: On the Absence of Angry Responses to Plagiarism in Composition Studies,” *College English* 70 (2007): 10–31; Laura R. Micciche, “More Than a Feeling: Disappointment and WPA Work,” *College English* 64 (2002): 432–58; Donald Norman, *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).
- [4] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 25. Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995).
- [5] Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 44–45.
- [6] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 9.
- [7] By naming these texts, I am drawing a circle around secondary literature that tends to rely on a few central texts dealing with affect. No study of affect is complete without a thorough reading of Deleuze and Guattari, Henri Bergson, or the original theorist of affect, Baruch Spinoza. What I am calling “critical affect studies” is a group of texts that borrow from these primary sources.
- [8] Joes.45acp, comment on “Crime Surge on Border,” *California Political News and Views*, comment posted September 9, 2007, <http://www.capoliticalnews.com/s/spip.php?breve2664/>.
- [9] Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out*, 44.
- [10] Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 5.
- [11] Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- [12] Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 110. Gerard Hauser, *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 61 (emphasis in the original).
- [13] From the *Navelgazing Midwife Blog*, <http://observantmidwife.blogspot.com/2007/10/thighs-lows.html/>, February 1, 2008.