

Entangled States: Putting Affect Theory into Play with

Nnedi Okorafor and Ann Leckie

Whatever your theory and whatever your fandom, you don't have to abandon it to do affect theory.¹ This is because affect theory isn't about telling you which side to pick in an agonistic contest; it's about finding out what a body can do as it moves with other bodies in entangled states, whether or not we notice them. Affect theory offers more fluid notions of subjectivity, more flexible ways of reading, and the opportunity for research to surprise us in ways that science fiction and fantasy surprise us. These entangled states are like what happens in *Star Wars* when a pilot jumps from realspace to hyperspace, or in *Star Trek* when the captain switches from impulse power to warp speed. In those moments everything, including survival, is at stake.

I've been exploring how affect theory works with speculative fiction, and part of my work includes collecting terminologies and finding ways to describe what affect theory does, in academic writing and in the university classroom. The best ways to describe what happens when we do affect theory come from science fiction and fantasy. So SFF is totally cannon for affect theory. Deleuze and Guattari collide bad B-movies with Virginia Woolf, folk music and bird song, math and literature, physics and art, geology and psychoanalysis, philosophy and speculative fiction, including witches, zombies, werewolves, and vampires. So the sentient spaceships in Nnedi Okorafor and Ann Leckie are right at home. It's not that anything goes; it's that affect theory notices things that academics aren't usually in the habit of noticing.

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¹ Find a more formal exploration of these ideas in a forthcoming article in the *Journal of European Popular Culture* 9.1. The three "drop in" hints are discussed in the context of gothic fiction in a forthcoming chapter "Turning Two into Three: Decolonizing the Gothic through Three Habits of Affect in John Burnside's *A Summer of Drowning*." *A Feel for the Text: Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice*: Editor Stephen Ahern. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. See also Humanities Commons: <https://hcommons.org/members/lringer/>.

Sentient space ships are entangled in the Binti and Ancillary trilogies. In Nnedi Okorafor's trilogy, 16-year old Binti travels to Oomza University on a sentient ship called the Third Fish; at 17 she travels on the Third Fish's daughter ship who becomes entangled with Binti's existence. In Ann Leckie's Ancillary trilogy,² Breq is a former ship's AI whose first body was appropriated when she was about 17, though Breq's consciousness is some two-thousand years old. She's now single-bodied after the loss of her ship and fellow ancillaries, Breq uses her networking skills to navigate Radch imperial space. Okorafor's Binti and Leckie's Breq spring from war and destruction, finding new life in mycorrhizal relations on the edge of survival. Both survive through different ways of noticing.

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One of the first things you might notice about affect theory is its complexity. If affect theory had a social media profile its relationship status would be something like "it's complicated." It's not a theory to be applied in ways that foreordain the outcome; rather it's a praxis of nomadic discovery or creating the new within limits. Massumi and Manning call it "research-creation" or "thought in the act." Innovation and survival require the creation of new opportunities within limits for Binti and Breq and for researchers in the humanities.

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Then there is the complication of affect itself. What is it? Breq describes how Radch society separates thought from feeling, treating emotions as a design flaw. "Radchaai . . . assumed that thought and emotion were two easily separable things. That the artificial intelligences that ran large stations, and military ships, were supremely dispassionate. Mechanical [that] . . . The Lord of the Radch had improved AI design, removed that flaw. She had learned otherwise, recently. (Leckie 494-497). Like Radch society, contemporary thought habits make similar assumptions about subjectivity and objectivity, about thought and feeling.

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² Also Imperial Radch trilogy.

Deleuze translates Spinoza: “We speak of consciousness and its degrees, of the will and its effects, of the thousand ways of moving the body, of dominating the body and the passions – but *we do not even know what a body can do*” (Deleuze 17-18). Thinking is only part of what bodies can do, so “affect” engages Spinoza’s *affectus* which is both “an ability to affect and be affected” and “the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (Deleuze and Guattari xvi). Both Binti and Breq are useful ways of thinking about this type of body. Bodies aren’t just ships that you pilot; bodies have ways of knowing that take consciousness along for the ride. Reconnecting with bodies’ immanent experiences decolonizes bodies away from binary habits toward the frontier of whatever happens next.

To further complicate things, affect theory goes by many names.³ Whatever you call it, affect theory tries to avoid becoming habit by, in the language of *Star Wars*, breaking out of realspace and jumping to hyperspace. When piloting a body, affect puts “the drive in bodily drives” (Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth 6). So putting Okorafor’s Binti series and Leckie’s Ancillary series into play with affect theory engages the hyperdrive, so to speak. Jumping with affect puts bodies into play by engaging affect along with thought, without controlling the outcome; in Barad’s language, affect theory initiates quantum entanglements.

Just as the hyperdrive gets Rey, Chewie, Finn, BB8, and Han out of trouble in *The Force Awakens*, Binti and Breq’s ability to initiate quantum entanglements helps them survive where binary thinking would not because binary thought habits reduce three dimensional to two oppositional points. Thought and consciousness create fictions about the world, including the

³ Other terms include: Immanent critique, speculative pragmatism, nomadic thought, rhizomatics, schizoanalysis, pragmatics, micropolitics, quantum entanglements, tentacular thinking, Chthulucene, speculative feminist fabulations, and mycorrhizal relations.

fiction that thought is the opposite of affect and that the self is separate from the other. These representational fictions operate on binary logic. Affect theory reminds us to put binaries like reality/fiction, subject/object, male/female, and human/non-human into play, to improve the odds of survival. In writing or in survival, fiction is entangled in reality, and ‘universal’ habits of seeing fictionalize reality in (almost) un-survivable ways. Haraway and Tsing have emphasized the urgency of breaking old habits to survive the environmental devastations and existential threats wrought by old ways of thinking (Anthropocene, Capitalocene). Deleuze and Guattari joke about the ways reality is a type of conditioned psychosis, an artificial construct purveyed as reality itself or a false consciousness, like in the Matrix films. Bodies are caught between institutionally-conditioned habits and their immanently-experienced versions of reality; they are neuroticized and vulnerable to power structures, isolated from diverse communities, and diminished in agential capacity.

Quantum entanglements engage these oppositional points, powering them with divergent bodily materialities that together might just make it. Tsing observes: “If survival always involves others, it is also necessarily subject to the indeterminacy of self-and-other transformations. We change through our collaborations both within and across species. The important stuff for life on earth happens in those transformations, not in the decision trees of self-contained individuals We must look for histories that develop through contamination” (Tsing 29). If evolution describes and categorizes the ‘pure’ development of species that are clearly describable and discernable; involution describes the messy, interspecies relations (quantum entanglements or ecologies) that – in their disruptions -- make life possible. Affect theory puts evolution and involution into play in what Barad calls “spacetime mattering.”

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When Binti runs away to attend Oomza University, her ship the Third Fish is hijacked, and everyone on board is massacred, except for the pilot and Binti. Survival means picking up Meduse DNA, activating a technology in her own DNA that she doesn't know about because her family is ashamed of it, and the DNA of a sentient space ship. Binti's body modifications distance her from her Himba family, who sees Binti as contaminated, but these contaminations enable Binti to survive in "more-than-human sociality" (Tsing 152). At the centre of Khoush, Meduse, and Himba politics, Binti creates new histories through Tsing's type of contamination.

As an ancillary warrior for the Radch Empire, Breq passes as human but her body used to have another identity. Reanimated, Breq once was one of a unit of twenty ancillaries called One Esk, undead and enhanced foot soldiers linked by a shared consciousness like a wi-fi network. One Esk is tethered to the sapient ship Justice of Toren. Ships like this oversee the colonial expansion of Radch Empire. Breq also used to be Justice of Toren, her existence diffracted across human and non-human bodies over the course of her "two-thousand year existence" (9). Now single-bodied, Breq takes on the Radch Empire.

We don't apply affect theory to Binti and Breq; rather like Shakespearean dramas, we begin *in medias res* or in the middle of things; like snowboarders we "drop in" to their worlds. Whether on set snowboarding courses or the written lines of Shakespeare's dramas, performance happens between narrow margins. We try to flip "we're not going to make it" into "we might just make it." Here are three ways to "drop in" or to survive the *in medias res* of affect theory.

Dynamic Bodies

First, think dynamic bodies. Rather than subjects and objects or signs and signifiers, affect theory treats everything, whether massive or microscopic, as a body operating in three dimensional space. Everything is a body that can impact other bodies and be impacted by them:

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words, characters, memories, texts, ideas, spaces, landscapes, objects, time, weather, animals, artwork, humans, plants, microbes, stories, viruses, emotions, films, technologies, tools, photos, chemicals, and songs this very long list does not end there. Bodies are not reducible to the thought and perceptual habits that make them identifiable. Identifying bodies is our habit, but it misses out on what else bodies can do, especially the bodies we cannot see or the bodies we are not in the habit of noticing.

Bodies have cycles, rhythms, beats, forces, attractions, and movements that affect and are affected by other bodies. The “speeds and slownesses” of affect theory make word-bodies behave more like wave-particles in physics.⁴ As wave-particles, words pierce bodies in the same way that X-rays and soundwaves do. This style of piercing does not pin bodies down to ideological or methodological habits; rather, it makes bodies move to new beats or frequencies. To survive, Binti must pick up Meduse language, and eventually she becomes best friends with the nine foot tall, levitating Meduse Okwu who attacked her ship. Breq discovers a former crewmate nearly dead from hypothermia and drug abuse; in saving Seivarden, Breq forms an unusual sort of alliance. Collisions with other bodies like Seivarden and Okwu change Binti’s and Breq’s trajectories.

Entangled States

Unlike subject/object or sign/signifier, there are no clear boundaries between bodies; they are entangled over time and space. Karen Barad describes entangled states with an example of a hand and a coffee mug. The hand and mug seem to have easily visible boundaries; however, the boundary between a coffee mug and a hand holding the coffee mug is “not a sharp boundary between light and dark but rather a series of light and dark bands – that is a diffraction pattern”

⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand*, (267, 269, 271, 277, 283, and 296).

(Barad 156); this diffraction pattern reveals the atom-level differences from within bodies in entangled states that are always transforming toward other states. In the hand and the coffee mug: “spatially separate particles in an *entangled state* do not have separate identities but rather are part of the same phenomena” (Barad 377). Barad describes the phenomena as embracing “real material differences but without absolute separation” (2007, 89).⁵ Like the hand and the coffee mug, Binti and Breq are entangled with their ships and the bodies around them. Quantum events do not erase differences; rather these moments are powered *by* what each body brings to the entanglement.

Three-Body Problems

Because binary oppositions create standoffs, oppressions, and extinctions, Deleuze and Guattari experiment with ways of turning pairs into triads or the logic of the “and . . . and . . . and” (25). Dualisms reproduce more of the same, so the third component causes relations that are processual, abnormal, “unnatural” and creative (242, 243, 260). Frontier moments are found an attitude or art of generating the new through a habit of “thirdness” that transforms the predictable, colonial doubles of binary systems into unpredictable, decolonized, and open-ended triads. The point is to stop counting and to find out what else a body can do. Massumi explains that according to the laws of Newtonian physics, when two bodies interact, their behaviours follow predictable scripts. The introduction of a third body creates margins of unpredictability and the potential for unexpected outcomes, flipping the bodies’ limits into freedom through their relation (2015, 17). For Binti and Breq, survival hinges not on solo efforts but on their relations with other bodies.

Conclusion

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari refer to these quantum events in a variety of terminologies including becomings and middles (1987), while Brian Massumi explores them as fields of emergence (2002) and three body problems (2015).

Affect theory offers more fluid notions of subjectivity, more flexible ways of reading, and the opportunity for research to surprise us in ways that science fiction and fantasy surprise us. With affect theory attention is not end-driven (teleological) but engaged in the middle. In Tsing's words, "we must reorient our attention" and learn "to look around rather than ahead" (Tsing 22). Like Tsing's looking around and noticing, Haraway's "staying with the trouble" is a way being present and connecting with "ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen – yet" (Haraway 2016, 55), in fiction, in theory, and in reality.

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