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Conference Paper: "Thinking Feeling: Gender and Emotion in 2008 Presidential Campaigns"

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What has been called the "affective turn" at this year's MLA reflects a growing interest in questions of emotion and affect in humanities research. My own work makes use of theories of emotion and affect to think about modern and contemporary poetry, and my feminist approach to this research has led me to seek out theories of affect that account for gender, or to critique or reformulate theories that don't. I will give a brief account of what I have found in this area of theoretical research, and demonstrate how I think it can add dimension to political analysis through a look at the gendering of emotion in the recent election.

Emotion can be distinguished from affect in the following way: emotion belongs to a subject and has a history and a canon. Most of my research has been on one of these canonical emotions, anger, in its connection to women and to feminism; I have found that anger has been figured as an overheating or overflowing of emotion to which women are particularly prone, and which is considered dangerous, while potentially righteous in the right hands (which are usually male, sometimes motherly). It appears in a narrative at the moment a judgment is made possible, linking cause to

course of action in a narrative chain. Demeter could be seen as the archetype of all that is scary and out-of-control, yet potentially just, in women's anger.

Affect, on the other hand, is often discussed as something like drive or orientation, the affinity or repugnance that motivates bodies to move toward or away from objects. Before forming into emotions that are definitively placed in a narrative series of cause and effect, affects are undefined, unnamed, visceral, corporeal. What is so interesting about this conceptualization of affect is that it does not have to be the property of a subject in relation to an object, but can account for groups and bodies politic. Major theorists include Sara Ahmed, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Sianne Ngai, Brian Massumi, and Rei Terada, and they draw on traditions as diverse as Spinoza's philosophy and Freud's or James' psychoanalysis.

Not everyone agrees on making such a distinction; while Massumi, for example, wants the affect/emotion distinction to be categorical, Ngai approaches it as more of a sliding scale. I agree with her on that, but still consider the distinction a useful one to make. There are different insights available depending on one's choice of emotion or affect as analytic tools. My contention is that through examining the history of canonical emotions we can see a clear pattern of gendering, while affect provides a way to consider the body politic formed by dissenting groups, such as feminists, in ways that escape existing narratives or subject/object relations and register emergent political formations.

Here's an example of what emotion, with its history, its narratives, and its canonical figures, can do to shed light on a political situation: when Hillary Clinton is called

overly emotional in one campaign stop, we can recall a history of discounting women in politics that includes discussions of whether or not women, thought to have periodic mood swings, should have access to 'the bomb'; we can even go as far back as fearful figures of women in power from antiquity. Such an approach can place Clinton into a number of possible sexist narratives and figurations, explaining how in 2008, amazingly enough, the country was not ready for a woman president, lacking perhaps the narratives through which to be able to take such a phenomenon seriously. Narrative framing can do a lot, as well, to explain a phenomenon like Sarah Palin, who was written into McCain's campaign as a string of readily available clichés: castrating bitch, unworldly but self-righteous soccer mom, etc. Nothing new, Palin is written in as the woman who proves that power is best wielded by those more accustomed to it.

George Lakoff, in his book *The Political Mind*, uses exactly such a mode of analysis; he asks, "Is Hillary going to be framed as the long-suffering wife, the model of the competent, deserving woman, or the calculating bitch? Do we see her possible presidency in terms of the Dynasty narrative – a dynastic return to the Clinton years? Is it possible not to see Hillary in terms of cultural narratives? I think not." (34) Interestingly, Lakoff argues that such narrative tropes have been hardwired into people's brains by repeated exposure, and that though easily found and charted, they are not at all that easy to combat. He mentions feminist attempts to construct new narratives for women, and notes the difficulty of getting these narratives inscribed as indelibly in anyone's brain as the more ubiquitous narratives with which we are surrounded. Lakoff's theory, while it does a great job of accounting for

the frustrating slowness of social change, puts perhaps too much faith in narrative's ability to align seamlessly with experience. I am as committed as Lakoff is to a material, corporeal account of emotion, and yet I think that the linguistic side of his account is basically structuralist. Because I study non-narrative forms, I have noticed that there can also be a considerable amount of dissonance between feelings and stories; this dissonance can take the form of textual indeterminacies that pull against narrative interpretation, causing static and interference.

This is where affect differs from emotion. In considering affect, while we lose some of the benefit of literary or tropological analysis, we gain a way of thinking about bodies politic, which is increasingly useful in analyzing the complex voting practices of larger populations. Demographics and other non-humanist modes of analysis already do this; however, affect is available to the humanities too as a way of talking about human affinities and behaviors that exceed or escape the conscious control of the human subject acting in the narrative. Affect can help to account for the feelings of those Sara Ahmed terms "affect outlaws," people of oppositional consciousness to whom the available cultural narratives feel jarringly wrong.

I want to look, then, at an example of the gendering of affect that remains more fluid, more difficult to analyze than cultural narratives.

(show women/men line in presidential debate)

I'm sure you're all familiar with this video I'm showing of CNN's coverage of the vice-presidential debate on Oct. 2, 2008. The device used to produce the lines you see at the bottom of the screen is called a "perception analyzer dial". Labeled

"Uncommitted Ohio Voters," the chart is actually measuring the responses of 32 audience members, who are divided, as you can see, into "men" and "women". Gender seems to have been considered by CNN the most salient grouping in a debate between a male and a female vice-presidential candidate. What is interesting to me about these gendered lines is that they are lines measuring nothing more specific than "positive or negative response" – in short, affect.

Blogs discussing CNN's use of the "perception analyzer dial" tended to take issue with two things: the potential of the lines to affect the at-home audience, and the indeterminacy of what the lines measure or mean; these boundary crossings are both characteristic of affect. The blurring of the boundaries between televised audience and at-home audience is feared, in that it blurs subjective boundaries; one's "proper" judgment becomes more difficult to discern, just as the opinion-holding subject is potentially affected, and thus transgressed by, the feelings of others. The indeterminacy of the lines is also characteristic of affect; what, we may ask, are audience members reacting to in what they are hearing or seeing? A reading on the chart at any given moment could mean many different things and could be narrated and explained in many different ways. The only thing consistently told to us by the lines is that the group labeled "men" differs from the group labeled "women" affectively, and not in ways that line up with the gender of the candidate speaking in any direct way.

One gendered issue that comes up during the debate with interesting results is Biden's claim to equal authenticity as a parent (referring to Palin's self-portrayal as

having direct and authentic access to the concerns of all women in the country based on her own experience as mother). Biden describes his experience raising children alone, becoming teary-eyed at one point. The affective response of the "women" line is very positive. A question that arises for me here is what a "perception analyzer dial" might have told us "men" and "women" felt about Clinton's teary-eyed exhaustion at a campaign stop during the primaries. CNN preferred to narrate that event according to well-worn narratives, debating whether the emotion was "genuine" or whether she was being "calculating", as women are wont to do. Such a framing insisted that emotion could only be used to sway opinion, dishonestly, as if political decisions would otherwise be made with unemotional rationality (something Lakoff insists is impossible). Biden's display of emotion, in this debate, doesn't get framed as calculating, but it is certainly gendered.

In sum, a consideration of affect as non-narrativized feeling does some interesting things with gender, as I hope my example has shown. While never entirely free from narrative, but on the less determinate side of the scale, the affective lines of the "perception analyzer dial" in the 2008 CNN vice-presidential debate coverage begin by positing a clear division based on gender. What they end up doing, though, over and over, is transgressing lines of gender, revealing affective loyalties and dissonances that are not only difficult to interpret, but that violate the gendered narratives that we are supposed to tell about these two candidates and ourselves.