

Affective Relations

Thinking Gender in Transnational Times

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The Transnational Politics of Empathy

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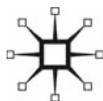
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Affective Relations

The Transnational Politics of Empathy

Carolyn Pedwell
Newcastle University, UK

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2014 978-1-137-27525-7

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First published 2014 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-1-349-44610-0 ISBN 978-1-137-27526-4 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9781137275264

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

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Acknowledgements

Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy was written in numerous cities in five countries across three continents. The project began during an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Department of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2008. Many of the ideas with which the book engages grew out of stimulating conversations with Sara Ahmed during this time and my sincere thanks go to Sara for her mentorship and continuing intellectual inspiration. The majority of the book was written at the School of Arts and Cultures at Newcastle University, aided by a faculty research grant and the immense support and stimulation of colleagues in Media and Cultural Studies, especially Deborah Chambers, Chris Haywood, David Baines, Darren Kelsey, Liviu Popoviciu, Denise Laidlaw, Daniel McNeil, John Richardson, Tracey Jensen, Gareth Longstaff and Anne Graefer. The project was completed during an AHRC Early Career Fellowship in 2013/2014, where I was based as a Visiting Fellow at the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, University of Sydney and at the Centre for the History of Emotions, Queen Mary, University of London. My thanks go to Kane Race, Elspeth Probyn and Anna Hickey-Moody at the University of Sydney and Elaine Swan and Ilaria Vanni at University of Technology Sydney for making possible such an enjoyable and productive visit to Australia and to Thomas Dixon, Miri Rubin and Katherine Angel for providing such a welcoming and stimulating research environment during my time at Queen Mary. I would like to thank Diana Paton for her mentorship during the Fellowship and Chris Whitehead and Peter Stone at Newcastle for their advice and support in preparing my AHRC application. Significant portions of thinking, writing and editing were also undertaken during winter and summer holidays in Toronto and Muskoka, Canada and I commend Laurie and Dave Pedwell for providing top-notch working facilities and research assistance as well as home cooked meals!

I am grateful to the editors of the 'Thinking Gender in Transnational Times' series at the London School of Economics for inviting the manuscript and for their invaluable advice throughout the project. In particular, my gratitude goes to Sadie Wearing for her careful reading, incisive feedback and outstanding support during the writing and publication process. Sadie's knowledge and expertise have been invaluable for many

years, as has her friendship. I am also indebted, as ever, to Clare Hemmings for her intellectual enthusiasm, astute advice and mentorship. Clare's exciting work on affect and feminist theory has shaped my own research in innumerable ways and I thank her for sharing it with me over the years. Thank you also to my other wonderful mentors, colleagues and friends at the LSE's Gender Institute, and particularly Anne Phillips, Diane Perrons, Rosalind Gill, Mary Evans and Hazel Johnstone, and my many genderlicious PhD and MSc comrades now spread out across the world. I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to Philippa Grand and Naomi Robinson at Palgrave Macmillan and Vidhya Jayaprakash at Newgen for their interest in the manuscript and all of their effort and support throughout the publication process. Many thanks also to the anonymous reviewers of the book for their astute feedback and helpful ideas for additional reference material, which no doubt made for a stronger manuscript. All remaining weaknesses, gaps or errors in the book, of course, remain my own.

Many of the arguments the book makes, as well as the materials and examples it draws on, emerged from ongoing intellectual and political conversations with Angharad Closs Stephens, Monica Moreno Figueroa, Neelam Srivastava, Anne Whitehead, Beckie Coleman, and Amy Hinterberger. I am very lucky to have colleagues who are also such amazing, inspiring and generous friends, and who have always been willing to read my work and offer unfailingly incisive and productive insights. My intellectual environment has also been nourished and invigorated immensely by the members, past and present, of *Feminist Theory's* editorial board: Stacy Gillis, Celia Roberts, Jackie Stacey, Sarah Kember, Kate Chedzoy, Tracey Jensen, Maureen McNeil and Katie Cooper, as well as those of Newcastle University's Gender Research Group. Thank you all for providing such a stimulating and supportive feminist research community (in the midst of everything). I have presented material from the book at many conferences and seminars across the UK and internationally and I would like to thank my colleagues and friends at the University of Sydney, University of Technology Sydney, University of Western Sydney, Humboldt University, Ghent University, University of Lapland, London School of Economics, Durham University, University of York, Leeds University, University of Leicester, University of Warwick, Queen Mary and Goldsmiths for their extremely thought-provoking questions and comments.

I want to extend my love and thanks to the dear friends in Newcastle, London, Toronto, Sydney and elsewhere who provided phenomenal motivation, support and much needed distractions throughout the

writing process: Angharad Closs Stephens, Rhodri Davies, Monica Moreno Figueroa, Beckie Coleman, Neelam Srivastava, Anne Whitehead, Michelle Houston, Ben Houston, Meiko O'Halloran, Simon Susen, Amy Hinterberger, Marina Franchi, Rebecca Lawrence, Christina Scharff, Deborah Finding, Joanne Kalogeras, Patrizia Kokot, Maria do mar Pereira, Jonathan Dean, Diane Farmer, Stacy Gillis, Diana Paton, Kate Chedgzoy, Rachel Jones, Martin Farr, Elena Spaventa, Simon Grimble, Cate Degnen, Felix Robin Shultz, Xavier Guegen, Pedro Ortiz, Anna Goulding, Jen Bagelman, Matt Perry, Tracey Jensen, Chris Whitehead, Jessica Ringrose, Anna Hickey-Moody, Jen Tarr, Elaine Swan, Faith Armitage, Gwen Beetham, Maki Kimura, Roisin Ryan Flood, Silvia Posocco, Katherine Barton, Adrian Mucalov, Melanee Brathwaite and Carlie Ladner.

Any finally, I am more grateful than ever to my family for their love, support and faith. Thank you to Laurie Pedwell, Dave Pedwell, Greg Pedwell, Berkley Harper and all the other wonderful Pedwells and Harpers... for everything.

Earlier versions of the chapters have appeared as follows, and I thank the publishers for permission to reprint here: 'Economies of Empathy: Obama, Neoliberalism and Society Justice', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30(2), (2012): 280–297; 'Affective (Self)-Transformations: Empathy, Neoliberalism and International Development', *Feminist Theory* 13(2), (2012): 163–179; 'Affect at the Margins: Alternative Empathies in *A Small Place*', *Emotion, Space and Society* 8, (2013): 18–26.

Preface

Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy

Empathy, it would seem, has become a Euro-American political obsession. In *The Audacity of Hope*, President Barack Obama argues that the United States is suffering the effects of an ‘empathy deficit’ and calls on Americans to develop more empathetic attitudes towards those less advantaged than themselves as a means to create a global society built on greater respect, cooperation and equality (2006a: 67). For the popular philosopher Roman Krznaric, empathy ‘has the power both to transform our own lives and to bring about fundamental social change’ (2013: ix). Indeed, he argues, ‘Empathy can create a revolution’ (ix). Feminist and anti-racist theorists have also long advocated empathy as an important affective ingredient in projects of social justice. Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman (1983), for example, have urged feminists to cultivate empathy as an affective basis for transnational feminist theory that is critical of cultural imperialism, while Kimberly Chabot Davis argues that ‘cross-racial empathetic identifications in the private sphere could play a crucial role in galvanizing support for anti-racist public policy’ (2004: 415). Scholars of international relations contend, furthermore, that within the context of long-term political conflict, violence and trauma, the creation of empathy and compassion ‘may facilitate more lasting and ingenuous forms for social healing and reconciliation’ (Hutchinson and Bleiker, 2008: 385).¹ Similarly, within childhood education, empathy has been conceptualised as an affective skill crucial to the development of ‘caring, peaceful and civil societies’ (*Roots of Empathy*, 2010). Media theorists, in turn, ask how television news can cultivate empathy, care and engagement to ‘create a global public with a sense of social responsibility towards the distant sufferer’ (Chouliaraki, 2006: 1). And from the perspective of popular evolutionary science, empathy – as an innate quality that characterises human (and animal) kind – paves the way for refiguring our social and economic models to prioritise connection and care over separation and greed (de Waal, 2010).

As these examples attest, empathy is everywhere and is viewed, by definition, as positive. Understood in shorthand as the ability ‘put oneself in the other’s shoes’, empathy is, according to these narratives,

what ‘we’ want to cultivate in ourselves and in others. It is the affective attribute that we want to define ‘our’ society with and that which we hope will characterise our interactions with those living outside our borders. When empathy is lacking or deficient we need to nurture it. Where there is oppression or violence empathy can heal. Indeed, within the contemporary ‘Western’ socio-political sphere, empathy is framed as ‘solution’ to a very wide range of social ills and as a central component of building cross-cultural and transnational social justice. As such, however, empathy can, like happiness (Ahmed, 2010), become a kind of end-point. Precisely because it is so widely and unquestioningly viewed as ‘good’, its naming can represent a conceptual stoppage in conversation or analysis. Thus, the most pressing questions tend less to be ‘what is empathy?’, ‘what does it do?’ or ‘what are its risks?’, but rather the more automatic refrain of ‘how can we cultivate it?’ And yet, despite the potentially stultifying, and sometimes dangerous, ways that empathy is taken for granted as necessary, there remains something powerful about it – a sense that it carries some enduring promise or force that we can’t quite pin down but don’t want to dismiss or give up on. The very fact that empathy is so widely linked with visions of social justice and transformation, I suggest, signals a need to examine the nature of this intertwinement in further critical depth. In *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy*, I address some of the questions posed above by examining how, and with what critical implications, empathy is *differentially* felt, constructed and mobilised across a range of key sites where issues of social justice and transnational politics are at stake – including Obama’s political memoirs and speeches, best-selling business books, international development training literatures, postcolonial literary works, popular science and feminist, anti-racist and queer theory.

The question of how we might understand the concept of ‘the transnational’ in relation to the politics of emotion and affect is vital to my analysis. The book argues that although a number of commentators insist that empathy can play an important role in mediating relations between different social and cultural groups and across national and geo-political boundaries, relatively scant attention has been paid specifically to what ‘the transnational’ signifies in this context or how we might theorise the relationship between empathy and transnational politics. As such, we have little insight into how empathy emerges and flows through global circuits of power, and the complex ways in which it transforms and translates as it travels between diverse cultural, social and geographical contexts. My understanding of transnationality

follows from the writing of feminist and postcolonial scholars such as Aiwah Ong (2006) and Inderpal Grewal (2005) who analyse transnational relations of power as constituted by shifting networks and ‘connectivities’ that interweave social, cultural, political and economic relations and within which gendered, racialised, sexualised and classed ‘subjects, technologies and ethical practices’ are created (Grewal, 2005: 3). Drawing on a range of critical theories of transnationality and international geo-politics, *Affective Relations* explores some of the complex ways in which emotions and affects are generated within, circulated through, and productive of transnational processes of empire, colonialism, slavery, diaspora, migration, development, globalisation, neoliberalism, global media, international security paradigms and biopolitics. As such, I examine both how emotions are produced through transnational relations of power and, in turn, how transnational politics work through the circulation of affect.

Bringing together critical literatures on emotion and affect from media and cultural studies, visual culture, sociology, politics, philosophy, history, literature, anthropology, psychology and neuroscience, I understand empathy as a social and political *relation* involving the imbrication of cognitive, perceptual and affective processes. I am particularly concerned with the ways in which empathy is linked with conflict, power, oppression, inequality, transformation and social justice internationally. As such, my approach is most closely aligned with feminist social and cultural theorists, such as Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010) and Lauren Berlant (1997, 2004, 2008, 2011), who explore emotion and affect in the context of postcoloniality, multiculturalism and transnationality from the perspective that ‘feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation’ (Ahmed, 2004: 8). I also draw on the diverse work of scholars of affect and embodiment who focus on the materiality of affective processes at the technological, biological and, specifically, neural levels.² One of the book’s critical starting points, however, is the recognition that, although often assumed to be self-evident, both ‘empathy’ and ‘social justice’ are *highly contested terms* that are constructed and employed differently in different cultural and geo-political contexts and for divergent social and political interests transnationally. It is precisely the significance of those differences, contingencies and translations that *Affective Relations* examines. Through interdisciplinary analysis of an array of geo-political sites and cultural texts, I engage critically with how empathy *travels* across cultural, geo-political and disciplinary contexts, with *varying* implications for how it, and attendant notions of social justice and transnationality, are

formulated, materialised and put to political use. Indeed, my perspective views 'transnationality' as constitutively linked with processes of transportation, translation, and transformation (Ong, 1999).³ I am interested in how transnational formations of empathy produce transformative connections, but also how they generate damaging exclusions, how they involve unevenness, failure and 'translations that go awry' (Grewal, 2005: 24). In turn, I explore how particular affective (mis)translations can be productive, creating new openings to articulate, perform, and imagine transnational social and political life differently.

Examining how the workings of empathy might be reconceptualised when transnational relations are foregrounded, *Affective Relations* poses a range of challenging questions: What are the potentialities, risks and contradictions of figuring empathy as an abiding tool for transnational social justice? How does empathy both arise within, and work to (re)constitute, social and geo-political hierarchies and relations of power? Can empathetic engagement across national, cultural, racial and gender boundaries be mutual and dialogical, or is empathy more likely to remain the purview of those who are already socially privileged? How is empathetic self-transformation valued through neoliberal technologies of governmentality and what happens when empathy becomes an affective skill or capacity with market value? Furthermore, how is empathy understood differently in different times and spaces and how can we conceptualise the possibilities and limitations of affective translation in the aftermath of empire, across transnational contexts characterised by globalisation, diaspora and cultural intermixing? How, and with what implications, is empathy produced through imbrications of 'the discursive' and 'the material', 'the cultural' and 'the biological', 'the social' and 'the psychic' and 'the structural' and the 'ephemeral' within transnational networks of feeling? And, finally, how might thinking through the ambivalence and complexity of empathy open up new, and potentially productive, ways of imagining the relations between emotion, transnational politics, social transformation and solidarity?

In exploring the critical links between empathy and transnational relations, it is important to attend to the geo-political positionality of the concept of 'transnationality' itself. As Ong notes, 'The term transnational first became popular in the late 1970s largely because global companies began to rethink their strategies, shifting from the vertical-integration model of the "multinational" firm to the horizontal dispersal of the "transnational" corporation' (1999: 21).⁴ Within critical theory, and feminist scholarship in particular, however, 'transnational as a descriptor has emerged out of a certain moment in the US and

Canadian academy' (Lock Swar and Nagar, 2010: 3). As Amanda Lock Swar and Richa Nagar argue:

[T]he popularization of and embracing of transnational feminisms as a discourse in feminist/women's and gender studies has coincided with a commitment to address the asymmetries of the globalization process. Yet, it would be incorrect to suggest that the term *transnational* has the same salience in South Africa, India, Egypt, or Brazil as it does in U.S. and Canadian academic feminist studies. (original italics, 2010: 3)⁵

As such, it is vital to acknowledge that the analysis of the transnational politics of empathy this book offers is shaped by my location in the global North, specifically as a Canadian living in the UK,⁶ and that many of the cultural texts I examine have been produced in Europe or North America, and thus bear the traces of these geo-political domains. Nonetheless, all of the key texts analysed in the book grapple in different ways with transnational politics in the context of the 'turn to affect' and, through the dynamics of global capitalism and media, have travelled across numerous borders and boundaries encountering varied contexts of affective reception along the way. Furthermore, many of their authors position themselves as distinctly transnational subjects: while Frans de Waal, the primatologist and author of *The Age of Empathy* (2010), which I look at in Chapter 5, locates himself as a Dutch immigrant to the US, the transnational origins of Barack Obama, whose speeches and political memoirs I read in Chapter 1, have of course been the subject of many reactionary right-wing discourses that seek to position him as not 'truly American'. Moreover, Aminatta Forna, the author of *The Memory of Love* (2010), which I examine in Chapter 4, was born in Scotland, grew up in Sierra Leone, was educated in the US and now lives in England. In this vein, it is worth emphasising that transnational relations can (and should) be studied as flows and connectivities that *exceed* the geo-political boundaries of nation-states. However, the diffuse effects of border-crossing processes (from slavery, to neoliberalism, to multiculturalism) mean that 'the transnational' is also very much *within* what we understand as the 'the national' as well as 'the local'. Furthermore, as Françoise Lionnet and Shu Mei Shih put it, the transnational 'is not bound by the binary of the local and the global and can occur in national, local or global spaces across different and multiple spatialities and temporalities' (2005: 6). Indebted to the rich legacies of feminist, postcolonial and queer analysis of the complexities of both transnationality and emotion,

the book's account of empathy attends to the affective geo-politics of location while appreciating the ways in which social and cultural positions, contexts and relations may shift and reconfigure through the force of feeling.

Juxtaposing mainstream and popular texts with more scholarly and minor literatures, *Affective Relations* highlights the expansive reach of contemporary discourses of empathy across diverse disciplines, genres and audiences, while fleshing out important particularities with respect to affective imaginaries, contexts and languages. Examining presidential politics, international development and popular business and sciences literatures enables me to map the contemporary workings of neoliberal and neocolonial 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 1977), as well as the cracks and openings where such affective dynamics might be resisted or realigned. Bringing these texts into dialogue with postcolonial literary works offer modes of imagining empathy and other affective relations differently, in ways that might move radically beyond the social, political and economic status quo. Attending to trans-disciplinary differences, resonances and entanglements with respect to how emotion and affect are conceptualised allows me to unpack the complex ways in which empathy imbricates 'the discursive' and 'the material', while opening the concept up to its diverse transnational genealogies and iterations. Indeed, throughout the book, I am interested in how empathy might be *translated differently* – how dominant visions, rhetorics and practices of empathy can be reinterpreted in the context of transnational circuits and relations to activate *alternative* affective meanings, practices and potentialities. Reading empathy against the grain, I argue, might allow us to move away from visions of empathetic politics animated by neoliberal and neoimperial logics and towards an understanding of *affective translation* premised on a critical awareness of transnational connectivities – through which we might conceptualise a model of 'social connection' in which 'obligations of justice arise between persons by virtue of the social processes that connect them across borders and boundaries' (Young, 2006: 102),⁷ while nevertheless leaving open the future(s) that affective life might take.

Notes

1. See also Halpern and Weinstein (2004).
2. See, for example, Wilson (1998, 2004), Gibbs (2002, 2010), Brennan (2004), Bennett (2005), Probyn (2005), Clough with Halley (2007), Puar (2008), Coole and Frost (2010) and Wetherell (2012).

3. Transnationality, Ong suggests, signifies processes and relations that are fluid and emergent (rather than static or fixed); it describes 'both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something' (1999: 4). Moreover, it 'alludes to the *transversal*, the *transactional*, the *translational* and the *transgressive* aspects of contemporary behavior and imagination that are incited, enabled, and regulated by the changing logics of states and capitalism' (italics mine, 4). Similarly emphasising the links between 'the transnational' and 'the translational', Grewal argues that making sense of the workings and potential effects of contemporary border-crossing processes requires attention not only to 'the networks' but also to 'the discourses that travel through these networks, how some get *translated and transcoded*, how some are unevenly connected, others strongly connected, and still others incommensurable and *untranslatable*' (italics mine, 2005: 23); see also Lionnet and Shih (2005).
4. See also Appadurai (1996, 2013).
5. See also Grewal and Kaplan (1994, 2002); Alexander and Mohanty (2010).
6. There are interesting questions to ask about how 'transnationality' travels across the Atlantic. See, for example, Evans and Davis (eds) (2011) and Pedwell (2011).
7. See also Alexander and Mohanty (1997), Ahmed (2000, 2004), Grewal (2005), Ong (2006) and Young (2006).