How Things Feel
Biblical Studies, Affect Theory, and the (Im)Personal

Maia Kotrosits
Denison University, USA
maia.kotrosits@gmail.com

Abstract

This essay is an intellectual history, one of affect theory both within and without biblical studies, rendered as an ecology of thought. It is an “archive of feelings,” a series of thematic portraits, and a description of the landscape of the field of biblical studies through a set of frictions and express discontentments with its legacies, as well as a set of meaningful encounters under its auspices. That landscape is recounted with a fully experiential map, intentionally relativizing those more dominant sources and traditional modes of doing intellectual history. Affect theory and biblical studies, it turns out, both might be described as implicitly, and ambivalently, theological. But biblical studies has not only typically refused explicit theologizing, it has also refused explicit affectivity, and so affect theory presents biblical studies with both its own losses and new and vital possibilities.

Keywords

affect – affect theory – biblical studies – feminist historiography – queer theory – new materialism – emotion

Introduction

To be invited to write for a publication called Research Perspectives in Biblical Interpretation, first of all, seems to me to be a rather happily exploitable opportunity. The words “research perspectives” encapsulate what is probably my favorite, abiding (and deeply productive) tension in the field of biblical studies: that between the empirical and the subjective.
“Research” implies rigor, a certain air of being informed. It denotes due diligence. “Perspective,” however, leaves (at least) a slip of room for most modern disciplines’ ball and chain: that necessarily evil, and occasional axis of inspiration, “the personal.” I can’t decide if offering a “research perspective” on affect theory—most succinctly described as social theories of emotion, or theories on the “force of encounter” (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 2)—is more ironic or apt, since affect theory’s main motivations have been not only to submit that category of experience we call “feeling” into critical consideration, but to notice how thoroughly and unavoidably “feeling” is part of our critical considerations.

My “research perspective” on affect theory, then, is that any intellectual history, let alone one centering on affect, will have to be something more—more complicated, more satisfying—than a genealogy of ideas or a tracking of publications, not least because any academic knows that what gets committed to print and when is only a fraction of the story. It will have to account for a wider ecology of contexts, most significantly felt contexts, which have given shape and texture to affect theory’s ongoing moment within and around biblical studies. Affect’s relationship to psychoanalysis and the somatic reminds us that the “facts” or most relevant details of any intellectual history not only exceed what gets committed to paper, but actually might reside elsewhere as well: the indefinite electricity of interpersonal moments; the temperature or mood of any given room; the hyper-particular situation in which something is said or the way in which something unfolds; the historical and cultural force fields and unconscious desires that coalesce people, give ideas traction, or sweep possibilities away.1

I should note (or, rather, I want to note) that my curiosity and then devotion for affect theory happened over the course of my professionalization as a scholar. It is therefore impossible to untangle from my deepening investment in not just biblical studies and the disciplines touching it, but the institutions in which I logged time and, most significantly, my personal associations. To put it more pointedly, I won’t attempt to separate my professional, institutional, and

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1 At the time I began writing this piece, I was reading Adam Phillips’ biography of Freud, in which he performs a Freudian reading of Freud’s own life, including making recourse to Freud’s suspicion of the genre of biography. Regarding the “facts” of personal history, Phillips writes, “The facts of a life—and indeed the facts of life—were among the many things that Freud’s work has changed our way of thinking about. Freud’s work shows us not merely that nothing in our lives is self-evident, that not even the facts of our lives speak for themselves; but that facts themselves look different from a psychoanalytic point of view” (2016: 4). As it will become clear as this essay proceeds, though, my approach is additionally (and quite heavily) influenced by feminist historiography, asking after those things that might have been left out, covered over, or ignored by traditional histories.
relational histories from this account of affect theory within biblical studies, not only because to do so would deprive this essay of any kind of meaningful “perspective,” but because we are more or less starved for models of intellectual history that do justice to the fully relational ways in which thoughts unfold, the way disciplines and institutions enable and constrain, and the incidental and sometimes circular fashion in which insights pop up.

This essay is thus an attempt to do an intellectual history as an ecology of thought. It is an “archive of feelings,” a series of thematic portraits, and a description of the landscape of the field of biblical studies through a set of frictions and express discontentments with its legacies, as well as a set of meaningful encounters under its auspices.2 That landscape is recounted with a fully experiential map, one drawn with as much capacity for precision and self-relativizing as I can muster, and one that also intentionally relativizes those more dominant sources and traditional modes of recounting intellectual history. I’ll characterize affect theory outside of biblical studies, of course, but mostly through its relevance to biblical studies—connections made, and sometimes missed.

Part 1: Intensity, Potentiality, and Epistemologies of Awe

“... I wish to entertain the idea that the violent discourse of the text viscerally and affectively reorients readers with respect to the kind of power relations that produce violence,” Erin Runions writes in a response to a collection of essays on Jeremiah (2011b: 235). The title of her piece is “Prophetic Affect and the Promise of Change,” and she uses the work of Brian Massumi in Parables for the Virtual (2002) to offer a new angle on the ambivalence of prophetic language and suggest that there may be more capacious ways for understanding that language than simply revenge or hope (still two of the most overused concepts for considering the desires that coalesce around prophesy). “If affect is central to cultural and political reasoning, as cultural and queer theorists have recently been suggesting, then it is important to consider how cultural texts such as the Bible are purveyors of feelings and bodily responses that both support and subvert violent relations of subordination” (Runions 2011b: 237).

In this piece, Runions carefully differentiates Massumi’s notion of affect, one indebted to Deleuze, from dominant understandings of emotion (Runions 2011b: 238). Massumi describes affect as nonconscious, pre- or im-personal

2 This is a concept coined by Ann Cvetkovich (2003), and one on which I will elaborate in what follows.
sensation that operates below the level of representation—an anxiety-inducing description for even casual cultural constructivists. Affect in the Deleuzian mode is intensity that operates—less for Massumi than for Deleuze—as almost pure possibility. In this way, it offers a way to liquify the solid ground upon which we pin and locate subjects, destabilizing the “grid” that theories of social construction since the linguistic turn have inadvertently stabilized (Massumi 2002: 2–5). Affect allows for change at an ontological level.

“Massumi’s conceptualization of affect and the possibility for change opens up a way for thinking about the tension between violence and hope in Jeremiah and its afterlives,” Runions proposes (2011b: 239).

If affect gestures to something like pure possibility, emotion, on the other hand, is a cognitive enclosing of affect, an apprehension that constrains affect’s true potentiality. As Runions writes,

Many of these strong emotions about which these papers speak—disgust, fear, shame, rage, revenge, terror, powerlessness, despair—‘capture’ affect. These are emotions that we imagine the poet to have been feeling or trying to provoke. We imagine it, perhaps, because that is what we feel when we read the text; which means that the text is affecting us. Perhaps these prophetic fantasies of violence produce a certain set of movements in our bodies—non-conscious, autonomic remainders of their signification. (2011b: 3)

3 Massumi indeed positions himself as a response to cultural constructivism, as broadly adapted from Michel Foucault and, especially, Judith Butler. As he writes in his introduction:

The project of this book is to explore the implications for cultural theory of this simple conceptual displacement: body—(movement/sensation)—change. Cultural theory of the past two decades has tended to bracket the middle terms and their unmediated connection. It can be argued that in doing so it has significantly missed the two outside terms, even though they have been of consistent concern—perhaps the central concerns in the humanities. Attention to the literality of movement was deflected by fears of falling into a “naïve realism,” a reductive empiricism that would dissolve the specificity of the cultural domain in the plain, seemingly unproblematic, “presence” of dumb matter…. But this thoroughly mediated body could only be a “discursive” body: one with its signifying gestures. Signifying gestures make sense. If properly “performed,” they may also unmake sense by scrambling significations already in place. Make and unmake sense as they might, they don’t sense (2002: 1–2).

4 Seigworth and Gregg describe affect in the Deleuzian/Spinozist vein as the “yet-ness” of the body: “Cast forward by its open-ended-in-between-ness, affect is integral to a body’s perpetual becoming (always becoming otherwise, however subtly, than what it already is), pulled beyond its seeming surface-boundedness by way of its relation to, indeed its composition through, the forces of encounter” (2010: 3).
While the affectively powerful images in the text contain a kind of emotional coding—“Perhaps we instinctively flinch at the stripping of the monstrous female. That flinching congeals into the emotion the text also dictates—shame” (Runions 2011b: 3)—there is inevitably something leftover, something not containable that interferes with any predictable response. Runions suggests that “while prophetic language can be dangerously conducive to emotions that authorize violence, misogyny and imperialism, it perhaps also opens up possibilities for reorienting emotional and bodily responses. The ambivalence of a prophetic text like Jeremiah creates openness to the contradictory possibilities of affect, in ways that might move people and thought beyond the expected.” She concludes, “This new orientation of affect is something a little different than the teleological expectations of hope. It revels in ambivalence rather than reducing it. It is an ambiguous, unpredictable hope” (2011b: 242).

Although published in 2011, this paper (or an earlier version of it) was originally presented in 2008 at a panel on Jeremiah at the Society of Biblical Literature’s annual meeting. I hardly remember the papers themselves; I was there to see Erin, named to me by my then-doctoral advisor as a resource for doing gender theory in biblical studies. I had read her book Changing Subjects (2001), and had become a fan with that level of earnest ardor and dorky fawning so distinctly displayed by young academic newcomers (I was a first-year doctoral student at Union Theological Seminary in New York City at the time). With understated delivery, and under the flat, vacuous lighting of a conference hotel ballroom, I remember her uttering the words “affect theory” with a list of names parenthetically attached: Massumi, Puar (2007), Ahmed (2004), Clough (2007). Or was the fourth name Sedgwick? In any case, I approached her nervously after the session, introduced myself, and gushed that I was reading affect theory, too. I had just read Eve Sedgwick’s Touching Feeling (2003), and I think I may have mentioned that it changed my life (it did). What did she
think of *Touching Feeling*, I wanted to know? I don’t remember what she said, but I asked Erin for a copy of her response, which she generously gave to me: pen scribbles, impromptu adjustments, and all. I’ve lost that paper by now, but Massumi, Puar, Ahmed, and Clough became my new, if brief, bibliography.

While Erin was probably the first in the field of biblical studies to bring affect theory up at all, and she is certainly the first to have published on it, it should be said that Virginia Burrus’s *Saving Shame* (2007) appeared a year before that SBL meeting. While not interested in or aware of “affect theory” as such just yet and not technically falling under “biblical studies,” Virginia’s *Saving Shame* borrows from Sedgwick’s discussions of shame in *Touching Feeling*—particularly the theatricality of shame and its relationship to identity performance (Sedgwick 2003: 35–64)—to theorize the spectacular self-exhibitions and transformations of shame in early Christian literature. Virginia I had also seen in person for the first time at an American Academy of Religion annual meeting; she was responding to Amy Hollywood’s latest book.8

There, too, a crowd of us gathered for a discussion about gender and sexuality (and, oh yeah, Christianity) were easing our way, unbeknownst to us, into that murky territory of feeling: with her characteristically lyrical writing, accompanied by a subtle, physical sway, Virginia held forth on the various virtues and/or shortfalls (nothing of which I recall, save for the phrase “lesbian, but not yet queer”) of a book entitled *Sensible Ecstasy* (Hollywood 2001). Hollywood’s *Sensible Ecstasy*, like *Saving Shame*, thematizes affect without engaging much of the burgeoning “affect theory” (and doesn’t quite fit the narrow parameters of this biblical studies essay, either).9 *Sensible Ecstasy* follows so much theory within or emanating from French philosophy—George Bataille, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Lacan, Judith Butler and others—and indeed many of these thinkers set the scene for affect theory within cultural studies and literary theory. For instance, not only is *Powers of Horror* (Kristeva 1982) a book length chronicle of disgust (see Ahmed 2004: 82–100), but Kristeva’s understanding of the semiotic (Kristeva 1980), a bodily/instinctive force operating below and beyond the level of language, is echoed in especially those theories of affect that seek to differentiate affect from the blunt linguistic instruments of designated emotion (e.g., Massumi 2002). Butler, like Sedgwick, had been theoriz-

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9 Burrus’s does make recourse to “affect theory,” but the affect theory of Silvan Tomkins, rather than the broader and more recent work of Massumi et al. that now is implied by the term.
ing (and, I think, simply creating space for) grief and loss around the cultural and psychological domains of gender and sexuality for decades before “affect” was a buzzword or widespread interest.10 As Kent Brintnall has observed, Bataille describes fascist political ideology and its resistance in affective terms (Brintnall 2015).11 And while Lacan’s work at large hardly seems interested in emotional/affective life,12 the heavy (and famed) emphasis on *jouissance*, theorized by Irigaray and Kristeva, among scads of others, is part of what Sedgwick is pushing back against in her own turn to affect as a way of accounting for the intricate, and often humdrum, range of experience:

> A disturbingly large amount of theory seems explicitly to undertake the proliferation of only one affect, or maybe two, of whatever kind—whether ecstasy, sublimity, self-shattering, *jouissance*, suspicion, abjection, knowingness, horror, grim satisfaction, or righteous indignation. It’s like the old joke: “Comes the revolution, Comrade, everyone gets to eat roast beef every day.” “But Comrade, I don’t like roast beef.” “Comes the revolution, Comrade, you’ll like roast beef.” Comes, the revolution, Comrade, you’ll be tickled pink by those deconstructive jokes; you’ll faint from ennui every minute you’re not smashing the state apparatus; you’ll definitely want hot sex twenty to thirty times a day. You’ll be mournful *and* militant. You’ll never want to tell Deleuze and Guattari, “Not tonight, dears, I have a headache.” (Sedgwick 2003: 146)

Most histories of affect theory often find a genesis in two signal essays, both published in the same year: Sedgwick and Adam Frank’s “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold” (1995) and Brian Massumi’s “The Autonomy of Affect” (1995). This produces a genealogy in which Sedgwick, in her recourse to Melanie Klein and Sylvan Tomkins, holds down the “emotion” end of affect theory, while Massumi, in elaborating Gilles Deleuze’s work (which is in turn indebted to Baruch Spinoza), garrisons the “something more” and immanent potentiality

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10 Butler’s explicit interest in loss and grief (2004; 2009) is in continuity with her earlier work (e.g., 1997: 131–50). There are so many affective subtexts in other essays in Butler 1997 as well, despite Massumi’s polemical claim that Butlerian discursive bodies are not “sensing” bodies. This is perhaps what Michael Hardt is suggesting in offhandedly citing “feminist theory that focuses on the body” as a precursor to affect theory (2007: xii n. 1).

11 Brintnall summarizes that for Bataille, “[r]evolutionary and anti-fascist politics . . . depend on understanding the affective attractions of particular social formations” (2015: 1–2).

12 Pushing back against this general notion that Lacan’s psychological schematics make no recourse to or no room for affect is Shepherdson 2008. See also Soler 2015.
of affect. I’m often surprised at how regularly and how strongly these two strands of affect theory are opposed to one another—and how limited this is as a genealogy. First, this genealogy manages to assume Massumi’s rhetoric, and erase affect theory’s connections to Butler, Kristeva, and others, as I’ve suggested above. Second, this narrative of affect theory’s ostensible two strands takes the astonishing combination of Tomkins and Klein in Sedgwick for granted, as if those two might be an obvious or natural pair of thinkers for theorizing affect. Sedgwick uses both Klein and Tomkins in a highly contextualized fashion in order to relativize poststructuralist and Foucaultian epistemologies, as well as to aid in her own enthralling phenomenology of specific experiences (Sedgwick 2003: 123–51; 2011: 123–63). The anecdotal dimensions and piecemeal theorizing of Sedgwick’s work on affect never gets quite enough due from my perspective, even while piecemeal (or “accretive”) processes are themselves foregrounded in Sedgwick’s work (e.g., Sedgwick 2003: 123–51; 2011: 69–122).

Finally, this strong narrative differentiation of Massumi and Sedgwick ignores the parallel impulses driving their respective interests in affect. Both Sedgwick and Massumi critique received theories of identity as constrictive, for instance, and express dissatisfaction with poststructuralist epistemological assumptions, which seem to have stewed in their own juice for a little too long (e.g., Sedgwick 2003: 123–51; 2011: 69–122). Sedgwick tires of the incessant (paranoiac) unveiling of latent essentialisms (2003: 123–51), and Massumi is frustrated by theories of social “construction” that, almost ironically, imagine a frozen or solid subjectivity while still being anti-materialist (2002: 1–2). Both Massumi and Sedgwick additionally find themselves resisting dominant theoretical tendencies by borrowing from biological models or concepts. Perhaps more compelling yet is what Massumi and Sedgwick both express as an animating desire in their turn to affect: they both explicitly claim a desire to honor or recover senses of wonder, surprise, and pleasure in renderings of the world as a necessary part of the critical and theoretical endeavor.

13 The surprise of putting Tomkins alongside Klein is in pairing the concerted biological and classificatory interests of Tomkins, who famously designated six, or occasionally nine, distinct affects grounded in the human biological constitution, with the dark drama of Kleinian mother-infant relations.

14 See also Sedgwick’s interest in the “middle ranges of agency” in Sedgwick 2003: 13–24.

15 In contrasting the paranoid and reparative positions, Sedgwick notices that paranoid knowing (exemplified by the hermeneutics of suspicion) is a strong theory that tries to account for all (terrible) possibilities as inevitable, and to forestall (painful) surprise. In so doing, it not only disavows its own affectivity, but leaves no room for the “heartbeat of contingency” that characterizes life in general, and queer readings in particular. She
up the academic hat of critical self-seriousness, set aside the intemperate arrogance of debunking—and enjoy?” Massumi opines (2002: 13).

A longing for a different theoretical disposition, a posture less cranky and grim (though no less unvarnished) than the one taken by the reigning post-Foucaultian theories of subjectivity and language, while not universal to affect theory, is something of a persistent refrain, and wonder, enjoyment, and vitality/aliveness are the terms that seem most often circulate around that longing. “The ordinary,” Kathleen Stewart writes, “is a shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges, a scene of both liveness and exhaustion, a dream of escape or of the simple life… Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they’re also the stuff seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give circuits and flows the form of a life” (2007: 1–2). She opposes this to more structural or ideological analyses that leave systems “looking like dead effects imposed on an innocent world” (2007: 1). Yet another example: in Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things (2010), Jane Bennett articulates her understanding of affect as a kind of capacity inherent to materiality (much more Spinozist than Massumi’s) as related to an almost child-like state of awe in which the world is imbued with aliveness. Sara Ahmed, too, claims wonder, and like Sedgwick, connects pain and wonder. However Ahmed proposes a return to wonder not as relief from intense disillusionment as much as catalyst for it. Describing the way her encounter with feminism made her see the world anew, Ahmed writes:

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highlights close reading and camp as reparative practices that have no more optimistic a picture of the world, but are more closely attuned to surprise, humor, and hope, “extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (2003: 146–50). Massumi writes that the emphasis on “process before signification or coding… brings ‘wonder back’” into theories of signification and coding. “‘Miraculation’ should figure prominently into the semiotic vocabulary” (2002: 7).

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16 A few examples of major titles about affect that aren’t specifically worried about particularly grim postures would be Berlant 2011; Brennan 2004; and Puar 2007. It’s not that these books are “cranky,” obviously, but that affect in these books doesn’t get put to work to intervene in sinister macrotheories.

17 Bennett explains, for example, that her use of the term “Thing-Power perhaps has the rhetorical advantage of calling to mind a childhood sense of the world as filled with all sorts of animate beings, some human, some not, some organic, some not” (2010: 20). See also her recourse to childhood in 2010: vii or Bennett 2001, which expresses a resonant desire to reanimate the world.
I felt like I was seeing the world for the first time, and that all that I took for
granted as given—as a question of the way things are—had come to be
over time, and was contingent. It is through wonder that pain and anger
come to life, as wonder allows us to realise what hurts, and what causes
pain, and what we feel is wrong, is not necessary, and can be unmade as
well as made. Wonder energises the hope of transformation, and the will
for politics. (2004: 181)

For Ahmed, wonder is about the hope for change; in Sedgwick, it is about an
openness to surprise. In both cases, it is about the (painful) admission that
things didn’t have to turn out the way that they did (Sedgwick 2003: 136–38).

I don’t at all wish to reductively symptomize all of affect theory under the
same sentiment, let alone one that resonates as romantic or, perhaps, as some
kind of nostalgic desire for innocence (as wonder might very well do). But it
does seem that if we take the genealogical histories of ideas, and more par-
ticularly the tight theoretical differentiations made by intellectuals them-
selves, too seriously, what we miss is the yearnings and losses that give rise to
such theoretical phenomena in the first place. The history of ideas, of course,
also heroizes individual thinkers for their innovations (which, frankly, I can’t
say I’m entirely opposed to), but, again, at the cost of rendering the texture
of the very landscape in which such ideas are generated. Indeed Bennett’s
work, since it typically get filed under political philosophy or a trend termed
“new materialism” rather than “affect theory,” suggests that we might under-
stand the turn to affect, however “affect” is defined, not as a theory or set of
theories at all, but rather as a network of recurrent (and concurrent) impulses
and interests. It seems a little blithe to simply notice the prevalence of, say,
the Deleuzian “assemblage” in her work, connect it to Puar and Massumi, and
move on. Instead or alongside of that observation, we might, for instance, con-
nect Bennett’s “new materialism,” which honors the agency of the ostensibly
inanimate, with Sedgwick’s affective iteration of texture in which materials
have a kind of agency in their intractability, impinging on us and our fanta-
sies of power. And while Massumi strongly differentiates his work from social

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18 Sedgwick, in contrasting her theoretical writing with her artistic work with textiles,
writes:

Yet how different it is to set to work with physical materials—especially for some-
body, like, me, who isn’t overendowed with either natural facility of acquired skills for
fashioning images and objects. Melanie Klein argues that it can be a relief and relaxation,
rather than a big tragedy the way it is in Freud, when one manages to get disabused of the
fantasy of omnipotence, together with the reflex fantasy of utter impotence. One has at
theories of emotion (like that of Sara Ahmed), one might notice that Massumi’s interest in affective dynamics and feedback loops of media transmission isn’t all that far away from, say, Ahmed’s reading of certain kinds of nationalist or patriotic language as affective-political vehicle (Massumi 2002: 46–67; Ahmed 2004: 71–80, 130–41).

There are more themes that seem to travel in affect’s sidecar: archive (e.g., Cvetkovich 2003; Stoler 2010), diaspora (e.g., Eng 2010; Axel 2002; Cho 2007; Puar 2007; Cvetkovich 2003),19 ruination (e.g., Stoler 2013; Navaro-Yashin 2009),20 and posthumanism (e.g., Chen 2012; Weheliye 2014)21 are the four to which I’m most drawn, and the first three of these (sometimes all four) additionally foreground questions of nation-building, suggesting that “the affective turn” is not only driven by a certain longing for wonder, but a distinct set of awareness about the micropolitics of national sovereignty as well. Ann Cvetkovich seeks to “disrupt celebratory accounts of the nation” with her archive of diasporic, sexual, homophobic, and racial traumas (2003: 105). Sara Ahmed takes on not only the unrequited love of patriotism and the nationalist politics of shame, but the “promise of happiness” that entices national/citizen subjects to live normative lives (2010). Ann Laura Stoler attends to colonial anxieties and to the bonds of attachment within colonial relations (2002), and Judith Butler’s Frames of War (2009) specifically asks about the national stakes of what constitutes a life worth grieving. Both Jasbir Puar’s Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times (2007) and Erin Runions’s Babylon Complex (2014a) deal much more with questions of national sovereignty than affect, but nonetheless periodically situate their critiques of national sexual politics within affect’s theoretical frameworks. The notion of feelings as symptoms of cultural forces (Cvetkovich, Ahmed, Stoler) and that of transmission of politics through sensations in the body (Massumi, Stewart, Puar, Runions), are, of course, intervening in Cartesian fantasies of the self-contained and autonomous...
subject. But in doing so, they additionally unbind the nationalist fantasies of political autonomy on and through which the Cartesian subject is imagined. The nation concretizes itself not as boundary as much as collection of forces, even while the national body appears soft and hopelessly diffuse.

The recourse to wonder, awe, or even—as in Runions’s *Babylon Complex* (2014a)—the sublime, is hardly a nostalgic or romantic impulse then, even while it is tied to a certain willingness to entertain an almost incomprehensibly open horizon. Wonder involves a tacit acknowledgment that the trajectory of social life, however over-determined, is not an inevitable one, and so while it allows for a hopeful take on the social body, it is not one without sinister implication. As Ahmed puts it, “[T]he very orientation of wonder, with its open faces and open bodies, involves a reorientation of one’s relation to the world. Wonder keeps bodies and spaces open to the surprise of others.” Shifting from major to minor key, she adds: “But we don’t know, with such bodies, what we can do” (2004: 183).

Affect and the wonder inspiring it posit an open social body for which the forces and factors moving it, pressing on it, are not only largely unmanageable, but also practically supernal. The appeal to wonder is one expression of an epistemology of awe funding so much affect theory; and it has almost painfully obvious theological resonances. One might imagine that this has something to do with Spinoza’s primary place in the history of theories of affect, since Spinoza’s understanding of affect is fundamentally theological. Spinoza posits a wholly immanent God—not an anthropomorphized God that has a body or emotions, but rather a “first affector” who moves through bodies: emotions for Spinoza are movements of the body that then affect the mind (Runions 2014b). As Erin has pointed out, it is easy to see Spinoza’s influence on Deleuze (and then Massumi after him), since “[e]motions are no longer a thing of interiority then, but something that pass through surfaces” (2014b: 4).

Runions discusses Spinoza’s theory of affect in the context of the contradictory and ambivalent political uses of Psalm 139. She notes that Spinoza borrows Psalm 139 to suggest that prophetic words are limited imaginations (rather than revelations), and to oppose the notion that God should be understood anthropomorphically. But she also elegantly sews together Spinoza’s accounts of scripture, God, and affect:

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What then of language? It seems that for Spinoza the mind can also be assisted or checked by memory of bodily impacts, which can be conveyed through language. The mind can also remember those things that move the body to greater activity and so pursue them (III, 12). Indeed, the mind can imagine “external bodies as if they were present to us,” (II Prof 17, Schol). Imagination and images therefore affect the body—including, one can infer, the imagination that is scripture. At the same time affective states produce images in the mind. Here we have one way of thinking about how words and signification work in relation to affect: words can recall to the mind bodily affections or words can represent one’s own bodily affections. Word-images can move us because they remind of us external bodies; likewise, the motions of our bodies can be represented in word-images, which when read or heard can in turn affect other bodies. So we can see how these pieces of Spinoza's thought fit together: God as first affector, scripture as imagination and the body in motion. If God “speaks” through scripture, it is only in so far as bodies are in God, and that bodies respond to other bodies and to the physical memory and imagination of other bodies, which may be rendered in words. (Runions 2014b: 5)

Although it might disappear into the annals of SBL panel history, Runions’s reincorporation of Spinoza into the project of biblical studies (he is its forefather after all, as she points out) is highly suggestive. The fact that Spinoza’s elaboration of affect is thoroughly theological provokes us to consider not only that some problematically theological ghost of Spinoza haunts affect theory, but also that the turn to affect itself represents a kind of theological impulse. As that which returns us from the abyss of disillusionment and again to wonder, that which is deeply personal but also impersonal and even transpersonal, the force beyond us that touches and moves us, that horizon of endless possibility, always bringing things into new and changing arrangements and affiliations, affect is perhaps the closest thing some of us non-theists/post-deists have to God. As such affect might very well represent another iteration of secularist presumption folding in on itself. After all, the Cartesian dissociation of the cognitive and emotional was also, and not incidentally, an attempt to disjoin the body from the soul.

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23 Runions does not include her work on Spinoza in her re-write of the same piece (Runions forthcoming), but I’m grateful she’s allowed me to quote and cite it here.
Part 2: “I’m Just So Mad” (The Palliative of the Empirical)

“I think my life over the last eight years or so has been interwoven with affect theory, first Sedgwick, then Ahmed, then others (though they are still my favorite). I don’t think of this as ‘my life with affect theory’ so much as ‘my life with these amazing writers who helped me think what I was trying to think’…” Jennifer Knust writes to me in an email, responding to my request for any unpublished pieces she wrote that deal with affect theory.

Jenny and I can hardly write anything without citing Sedgwick, which is just a symptom of the entire orientation change Sedgwick’s work kicked off in us, each of us have constructed whole essays around seemingly marginal Sedgwickian sentiments. Indeed, my first real interpersonal moment with Jenny outside of the formality of conferences was a set of email exchanges in which I sent her a draft of a paper on affect and the Corinthian correspondence (Kotrosits 2011), and she sent me a draft of her paper on the Maccabean martyrs. Both cited Touching Feeling’s spot-on and basically embarrassing critiques of the “paranoid impulse” that rules so much of what is called simply “theory” in the post-linguistic turn.

Jenny’s paper asked if the paranoid mode with which we typically view Jewish-Christian relations, especially in a post-Holocaust world, does justice to the full set of possibilities and mixed affiliations between “Jews” and “Christians,” especially evident around traditions celebrating the Maccabean martyrs (2015). I used Sedgwick’s affect theory only superficially, but was driving for a more deeply relational understanding of Paul’s letters and a more complicated way to understand their emotionally turbulent tone. Doesn’t this interfere with so many ideological readings of Paul? I asked. What if we truly read Paul as caught in the mess of his relationships? In that paper, I follow Sedgwick less in her theorizing around affect than in her turn away from the traditional Butlerian model of “identity performance” which, she suggests, collapses the “internally complex field” of performance, and her turn to a space-oriented and more “ecological” one (2003: 9). Touching Feeling, like so much

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24 Jenny has also used Sedgwick’s essay on paranoid and reparative readings in Knust 2014.
25 Re-reading that Corinthians essay, I notice now that this word “ecological” has been an epistemological preoccupation of mine on and off for quite some time. As I wrote then:

Studies as well as popular readings of Paul’s letters typically view these affective changes and his relationships as functions of his ideological principles. The particularities of relationships are more often the crucible in which seemingly trans-situational principles are born and die, and it requires no special pleading to suggest that one’s commitments and speech vary wildly in different relational contexts. In this way, Paul as ideologue
of Sedgwick’s work, offers so many big concept changes that one can’t even quite characterize *Touching Feeling* as belonging to one strand of thought, even one as motley as “affect theory,” since under the auspices of affect it addresses such a wild assortment of topics and assumptions, ranging from considerations of texture and material/affective impingements to marriage as theatrical spectacle, and even her cat as Buddhist pedagogical model.

A few days before I had emailed Jenny for her affect work, we had met for drinks in Cambridge with Alexis Waller, a Doctor of Theology student in New Testament at Harvard who was a good friend and colleague of mine since our overlapping time at Union. I explained to them my idea for this article, proud of my cleverness and exhilarated by the possibilities of writing an affective/anecdotal intellectual history. I read to them my first paragraph, composed on my iPhone on the flight to Boston. Jenny picked up right away on the desire to think more about tensions between the empirical and the subjective. “Why am I so attached to old-fashioned biblical scholarship?!” she said, palms and eyes turned up in exasperation. To know Jenny is to know a scholar who can give a cool, seasoned extemporaneous account of, say, textual variations or manuscript traditions with a level of precise detail uncanny for even biblical scholars, and then break instantly into an impassioned plea, asking why we are not thinking about X, X being exactly the thing all of us in the room have been taking for granted. If I had answered her “why” in that moment, I probably would have said, “Because you’re so good at it!” It’s true—Jenny is thoroughly practiced at some of the most conservative methods and streams in biblical scholarship. Jenny also, however, keeps the epistemological stakes of any given argument always in sight—this basically defies all expectations for a discipline in which material details and big picture significance are diametrically opposed, if more in practice than in theory.

I had just read Jenny’s recent essay on the adulteress woman in the Gospel of John, for instance, in which she considers (and complicates) feminist receptions and interpretations of John 7:53–8:11. It is a story, Jenny suggests, which also appeals (problematically) to the notion of a unitary, coherent and autonomous subject whose conscious commitments over-determine his speech and interactions. It not only places Paul “above” and “outside” of the shaping effect of his relations, but entirely outside of Corinthian practice. (2011: 134–35).

In fact, I brought the term “ecology” into a biopolitical reading of the letters of Ignatius of Antioch at the very same meeting for Westar Institute’s Christianity Seminar that Jenny presented her revised version of “Jewish Bones and Christian Bibles” (Kotrosits forthcoming). I also notice that this Corinthians essay is my first recorded discontentment with “identity” or “identity performance” as an optic, a discontentment to be played out ad infinitum over the next several years.
only reiterates the woman as inert object of male interchange (Knust forthcoming). She borrows from Sedgwick’s *Between Men* (1985), which includes not only a critique of structuralism within and relative to feminism in academic circles, but also a theory of male homosocial desire, a kind of bonding that gets disavowed and enacted through, for example, rivalries over women, and is a constitutive factor of the culture of modernity. But Jenny also incorporates Sedgwick into a thorough ancient contextualization of the story, placing it among other ancient stories of adulteress women whose fates are similarly negotiated by men. In a mode absolutely distinct to Jenny, she incorporates the meticulous text-critical questions about the pericope into a handful of artfully rendered personal stories, ones which associate herself implicitly with the adulteress woman, to produce her feminist deconstructionist inquiry into the story and its reception. What this essay turns out to be, aside from a careful and idiosyncratic lacing of methods and style, is a reflection on a moralizing God’s disabling vacillations over a “suspicious” woman’s fate—Will God save her? At what cost to her agency?—and a longing for divine indifference. Jenny ends the piece with a description of her experience looking upon the cherubim in the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul:

I’ve never actually seen these cherubim, except in pictures, but they visited me one night, or rather I visited them. They were stretching their wings out across a vast deep, with their feathers just barely touching, feather within feather, crossed at the tips, more than I could count. It was dark, maybe just before dawn or maybe just after sunset, and all around were the stark outlines of tall trees, hemlock and white pine stretching into the sky. The light behind the trees glowed a faint dusky pink, placing the rugged pines in high, dark relief. On the deep, the moon made patterns of pale light on the calm waters, creeping under the feathers, and reaching beyond the cherubim, who didn’t mind letting the light shine through. A person could just rest quietly on the tips of the feathers, I thought, and stop trying so hard, and the vast world will continue, one way or another. The cherubim aren’t worried about good and evil. They aren’t thinking about me. Their feathers rustle in the wind while they remain absolutely still, holding up the world for a distant god who is so far away that only they can see him. Sometimes there is a loon call. The cherubim like that. (Knust forthcoming)

The cultural force and sexual politics (or theopolitics) of shame are repeatedly considered in Jenny’s work. She does so most directly in her first book *Abandoned to Lust* (2006), a chronicle of the rhetoric of sexual slander in early
Christian literature, and in *Unprotected Texts* (2011), a public audience book which delineates all the ways the Bible does not match up with contemporary expectations of so-called family values (and plays out the high stakes around the Bible’s misuse as a moral guidebook). Jenny indeed begins *Unprotected Texts* with a story about growing up in the Midwest, having become the unlikely target of slut-shaming after moving to a new school. I assign *Unprotected Texts* to my first year “Bible, Gender, and Sexuality” students, and whatever else they connect with in that book, Jenny’s anecdote is, according to them, far and away the most powerful and provocative takeaway.

As much as Jenny delights in Sedgwick, and *Touching Feeling* in particular, she does not take up Sedgwick with regard to shame, even while questions of shame infuse and suffuse Jenny’s scholarship. And while the sexual politics of shame and the perils of paranoid readings are perhaps some of the most obvious preoccupations repeating themselves in Jenny’s work, there are other, less overt ones, gently pressing towards the surface: namely, a certain smallness of the subject (often, herself) in the face of things much larger—the Bible, history, discourse, God. One of the things I’ve come to appreciate most about Jenny and her work is the constant location of her appeals to her own experience alongside reflections about how relative we ourselves are to the meaning of those experiences. For instance, in a SBL response to the volume *Bible Trouble* (Hornsby and Stone 2011)—a volume in which Erin Runions contributes the sole essay devoted to affect theory (2011a), Jenny begins her piece with a quote by poet Karl Kirchwey: “The city does not have, has never had you, in mind.” She goes on:

> The past two months I have had the tremendous privilege of living and working at the American Academy in Rome, after somehow managing to hoodwink a few funding institutions and my home university into sending me there. I mention this because I don’t see how I can respond to the essays in *Bible Trouble*, with their fearless determination to read from somewhere while simultaneously refusing to accept that one must read biblical texts from any one place, without situating myself in what has become my particular city at my particular moment, this city that, the poet Karl Kirchwey reminds me, never had me in mind. Listening to Karl read his poem a few weeks ago, it struck me that this is also a problem shared by Bible scholars or, perhaps better, readers of the Bible in general:

> The Bible does not have you, has never had you, in mind.

> To which I might add: Of course it doesn’t. And of course it never will. (Knust 2012: 1)
Here relativity means a relaxing anonymity underlined by a sort of divine indifference—not unlike her description of the angels, but somehow more sinister, closer to (but not the same as) the sinister and distant indecision of God. The bigness of the Bible and the powerful aura of shame it casts over the very others it constructs are her prompt for the “it’s not about us” recognitions. This is both ironic and intuitively perfect. In Jenny’s work, her/our pain, her/our injury, is the vehicle for better understanding the Bible, history, discourse, and God. But the singularity of that pain also diffuses (though not completely) in the face of them.

“The empirical is palliative,” writes Brian Massumi, describing an experiment in which scientists tried to isolate visual perception from the other senses (2002: 161). They could not, it turns out. Subjects in the study couldn’t see anything, because the senses don’t operate in isolation; they cross-reference each other:

The newly visioned blind do not see things. They feel a pain in their eyes. . . . With more experience, the feeling of the effect comes to be identified. Reactions in different sense modes are cross-referenced. . . . The experience has been determined, objectified, empiricized. . . . With that passage, and that determination, the pain is ( provisionally) assuaged. (Massumi 2002: 161)

Seeing, as metaphor for the empirical, is tied inextricably to feeling.26

That quote by Massumi is how I began the body of *Rethinking Early Christian Identity* (Kotrosits 2015c). For me it was a poetic capture of the ways in which empiricist modes of scholarship function for historians of the Bible and early Christianity (Kotrosits 2015c: 21–26).27 Neither in the book nor now do I mean to identify particular people with empiricist modes, as if I do not hold dear to them periodically. Indeed, this is what makes Jenny’s scholarship such an important instance for reflections on empiricism. Wary of the shortcomings of biblical scientism, Jenny fully integrates them into some of the most vulnerable, most genuinely open self-reflections in the field as it stands, as if the former allows for the latter. “Why am I so attached to old fashioned biblical scholarship?” Jenny herself later answered her own why: it’s not just about mastery, it’s about mastery in the face of injury, injuries in which the Bible is

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26 I have written about seeing and affect in Revelation and ancient visual culture in Kotrosits 2014a.

27 I should have noted, however, that Massumi’s own interest in “the empirical” is a bit more complicated than that quote might suggest. See for instance, Massumi 2002: 208–256, where he advocates for an “expanded empiricism.”
fully implicated (and of course, these aren’t just Jenny’s injuries). “I’m just so mad about the Bible.”

I sympathize with Jenny’s anger, of course. Though not cutting as close to the bone for me at the moment, and frequently appearing more as grief, my own sense of helplessness about the Bible derives (I think?) from the combination of its seemingly benign and genial reception among my immediate family members, and then a belatedly learned history of the intense kinds of shame coalescing around it for other members of my family. In particular, I was troubled and stunned to learn of a great uncle who had committed suicide—his depression and his cultural queerness (if not homosexuality) compounding each other, haunted and perhaps funded by his/my family’s conservative Mennonite biblicism. I began my book with Hal Taussig, *Rereading the Gospel of Mark Amidst Loss and Trauma* with a brief, unadorned reflection about his death and the way it figured in my family. But the reflection was told, somewhat unsurprisingly, in the distant comfort of the third person (Kotrosits and Taussig 2013).28

“We all have ways of protecting ourselves,” Carly Daniel-Hughes observed with a kind of warm resignation, “Jenny arms herself with knowledge.” We were at the 2015 Westar Institute’s Christianity Seminar meeting. It was a casual conversation about being a woman in the male-dominated field of biblical studies, and we had just seen Jenny present on manuscript traditions. In Jenny’s later exasperation over her attachment to more empirical-seeming modes of scholarship, she expressed admiration and perhaps envy for my ability to flout tradition and dive all in to the wild possibilities and utterly messy half-transformations of reading theory. But at this moment in my scholarship, I am less sure of those virtues. I’m not less sure that an ability to creatively “forget” disciplinary mechanisms and lose oneself into a sea of experiential and aesthetic possibility is a virtue, but I’m certainly less sure of my desire and ability to perform it. If this present piece is more thoroughly entrenched in the aesthetics, mess, and experiential ground of affect theory, it is because it stands in contrast to a sudden re-investment on my part in more traditional forms of history. As of late, I find myself making recourse to things like dense philologies and concrete social practices, and suddenly caring a lot about, say, the set of highly specific political circumstances dominating Antioch, Syria, and the

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28 I reflect on the third person and pain, in fact, in chapter three of that book, waxing at length on the sculptures of Louise Bourgeois and the way Jesus’ breaks into discussion of the “son of Man” when describing his own suffering (Kotrosits and Taussig 2013: 41–56).
impact that might have on the letters of Ignatius.\(^{29}\) I can’t predict whether or not those interests will dominate my cultural studies inclinations, and I wonder about the vague, and probably largely imagined, promises for recognition and advancement that becoming more conventional might hold. Frankly, it is a toss-up which dimensions of anyone’s work—the experimental or the orthodox—will be rewarded or forgotten, so I’m not losing too much sleep over it. But it is worth noticing that affect theory figures for both Jenny and I as a much-needed intervention in the epistemologies in which we’ve been trained, ones which we resent, but ones to which we are deeply attached because they enabled some kind of mitigated engagement with an object of widespread cultural trauma—an object that never had us in mind.

**Part 3: History between Women**

It occurs to me as I write this not only how much affect theory is funded by and subtended by discussions of gender and sexuality, but how a certain homosocial force field surrounds affect theory in biblical studies as well. I can’t seem to frame my experience with affect theory without recourse to my admiration, even adoration, of certain colleagues and scholars, nearly all of whom are women (some of whom I know personally, some of whom I do not). It is indeed a homosocial *force field* in part because the desire, the eros, that imbues it, doesn’t always or even usually have a clear object or direction. Shared attachments seem to intensify mutual admiration, for instance, as in the case of Jenny’s and my joint love of Sedgwick. With Erin, too, I felt a sense not only of mutual attachment, but that we were onto some kind of “theory secret,” which was only confirmed by the tiny SBL sessions, both public and sparsely attended, in which we were participating.\(^{30}\) So is it only true that shared

\(^{29}\) Questions of sense and feeling, and the capacity to be moved, still accompany these other historical impulses, of course. But as I suggest (a little more cautiously) in *Rethinking Early Christian Identity* (2015), the shrugging around questions of “what it was really like back then” that typifies discursive criticism in the vein of Foucault feels so distanced and shy to me—why not dive in and speculate (because history in any form is, after all, highly qualified speculation)? The answer is, I suspect, because we know that we can’t ever be *right* about “what it was really like” and the ledge onto which we might step is just a little too high and narrow.

\(^{30}\) Case in point, and perhaps the first session in SBL history to be formed around affect theory was for the Bible and Cultural Studies Section in New Orleans in 2009, and attended by only three people in addition to the presenters. Two of the attendees were Stephen Moore and Jenny Knust. It was in this session which Erin presented her first iteration of
attachments intensify mutual admiration? Or is it also true that my admiration for Jenny and Erin, as scholars in whose molds I wished to cast myself, intensified my love of affect theory? Admiration is, of course, always an unstable cocktail of identification and desire, and in my own scholarly circles, admiration seems to propagate itself unevenly as a network of intimacies with books, ideas, and people alike. As Sedgwick so perfectly poses it: “What does it mean to fall in love with a writer?” (2003: 83).

Shared theoretical attachments provide a common language for experience, creating a textural ambiance for relationships and heightening the possibilities for recognition within them. In April of 2013, the month I defended the dissertation that would become Rethinking Early Christian Identity (Kotrosits 2015), Alexis forwarded me an email from Bluestockings, a feminist bookstore on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It publicized an event featuring Carolyn Dinshaw and Ann Cvetkovich speaking about their most recent books: How Soon is Now? (Dinshaw 2012) and Depression: A Public Feeling (Cvetkovich 2014). Alexis and I and a couple of other Masters and Doctoral students from Union and Drew Theological School made our way downtown and sat among a modest audience of 25 or so others, and listened to Dinshaw and Cvetkovich recount not only their writing processes, but also some bits and pieces of their relationship over the years. They noticed the funny coincidence of bathrobes appearing in both of their books: for Dinshaw it was a bathrobe-wearing dilettante Medievalist who provokes her to wax on the queer virtues of the amateur, and for Cvetkovich protesters in bathrobes provided a signal instance of the power of making depression a “public feeling,” one closely linked to the conditions of late capitalism.

Dinshaw and Cvetkovich are historians, and each of them has offered their own contributions to rethinking the historiographical enterprise. Dinshaw’s work in Getting Medieval (1999) addresses modern uses (including misappropriations) of medieval texts and figures to suggest that history represents a queer desire to “touch across time” (Dinshaw 1999: 3), a desire for affective community. Dinshaw goes on in How Soon is Now? to propose some ways of


31 For a forum of published remarks by a group of religion scholars responding to Dinshaw 1999, see Elizabeth, Hale, Hollywood, Jordan, Pellegrini, Zito, and Dinshaw 2001. I’m embarrassed to say that I only found out about Getting Medieval belatedly, and upon
occupying time queerly, thus interrupting the normative presumption of the linearity of time; she also proposes more specifically that time itself is queer (Dinshaw 2012).

Cvetkovich’s book *Depression*, like her earlier *An Archive of Feelings* (2003), takes not only a concertedly social approach to feelings—a move she associates with the second-wave feminist axiom, “the personal is political”—but a fully depathologizing one (2014: 3–10). In *Depression* she does so in order to intervene in the dominance of medical diagnostics and pharmaceutical treatments for depression, historicizing it by also connecting it with the contexts and uses of the Latin term *acedia*. In *Archive of Feelings*, her depathologizing, historicizing approach to trauma works as a critique of so many dominant theories of trauma, such as the oft-cited work of Cathy Caruth. Caruth’s work is, as Cvetkovich notes, informed by Holocaust studies, and thus tends to imagine trauma as a single catastrophe, the memory of which disappears, causing certain epistemological conundrums (Cvetkovich 2003: 18). As Cvetkovich writes,

A PTSD clinical diagnosis defines trauma as an overwhelming event that produces certain kinds of symptoms in the patient. Poststructuralist theory defines it as an event that is unrepresentable. I want to think about trauma as part of an affective language that describes life under capitalism. I’m interested in how shock and injury are made socially meaningful, paradigmatic even, within cultural experience. I want to focus on how traumatic events refract outward to produce all kinds of affective responses and not just clinical symptoms. Moreover, in contrast to the individualist approaches of clinical psychology, I’m concerned with trauma as a collective experience that generates collective responses. (Cvetkovich 2003: 19)

Cvetkovich’s histiographical approach then is one in which “constructing the history of the United States from the vantage point of trauma produces a critical American studies, one that revises a celebratory account of the nation and instead illuminates its emergence from a history that includes capitalism and economic exploitation, war, colonialism and genocide of native peoples, and slavery, diaspora, and migration” (Cvetkovich 2003: 36). She not

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32 Cvetkovich talks about “feminism as affective turn.” For my own read on how affect might help us think anew about feminist politics and “solidarity,” see Kotrosits 2013.
only addresses national trauma history from the “unabashedly minoritarian perspective of lesbian cultures,” but also reads cultural texts as “repositories of feelings and emotions,” thus providing “a point of entry into a vast archive of feelings, the many forms of love, rage, intimacy, grief, shame, and more that are part of the vibrancy of queer cultures” (Cvetkovich 2003: 7). Importantly, trauma challenges not only dominant or triumphalhistories, but also what we consider the material for doing history. It “puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation,” and demands an “unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma’s ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral” such as memories, letters, photographs, or sentimentally invested objects (Cvetkovich 2003: 7).

While *Depression* actually takes up questions of “the sacred” and theological language, it was, in fact, *Archive of Feelings* with which most of us theological students who had gone to Bluestockings that evening were most in love. After the event we headed to Death and Co., a dark bar in the east village, and enthused over *Archive of Feelings* with prohibition-era cocktails in hand—not (just) because we felt somehow, somewhere voiced by Cvetkovich, as if suddenly the many reverberations and seemingly minor felt significances of our complicated lives and the lives of so many we loved were given their due. As I recall, we were primarily taken with the notion of an archive of feelings, at large, as well as the notion of negotiating the past through beloved, if seemingly marginal, objects and our perhaps baroque attachments to them.

About six months later, a handful of us would use Cvetkovich’s apparent theological interests in *Depression* as leverage to wrangle her into what we imagined was an improbable small-group conversation with us, a bunch of theological school students, at Union’s courtyard. (She graciously and with great interest agreed.) Three of us were incorporating, to different extents, Cvetkovich’s work on history and trauma. My recently completed dissertation was a reading of late first- and early second-century literature in and around the New Testament (including the Gospel of John, 1 Peter, Acts, the Secret Revelation of John, and the letters of Ignatius) not as “early Christian” literature, but as responses to the traumas of colonization and political divestment constitutive of Judean (diasporic) experience (Kotrosits 2015). The dissertation abandoned most categorical and traditional theological associations with these texts in favor of a “between the lines” close reading approach that attended to

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33 This is what I remember, but is this true? Lindsey Briggs, for example, had just done her Master of Divinity thesis project on *Depression*. But I also remember a long conversation with her in which we each stated, without any sense of hyperbole, that *Archive of Feelings* was a mind- and practice-altering read.
affective resonances. It specifically leaned into Cvetkovich’s interjection into “celebratory accounts of the nation,” bringing that same philosophy and strategy to triumphalist accounts of Christianity (whether that triumph is seen to be sinister or justified).

Tiffany Houck-Loomis was a doctoral student in both Hebrew Bible and Psychiatry and Religion at Union, and was in the middle of producing a re-reading of the Deuteronomic Covenant and its counter-narrative in Job in relation to traumatic experience (2014).34 Alexis was writing about the Gospel of Mark and *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* (a text from the Nag Hammadi codices) as affective archives representing collectivities constructed around and responding creatively to spectacular colonial violence. She was building on (and giving more edge) to readings Hal Taussig and I produced of those texts (Kotrosits and Taussig 2013; Taussig, Calaway, Kotrosits, Lillie, and Lasser 2010), and was providing a refined historical reorientation to them that includes the ways these texts might bespeak and produce certain traumatized publics and counter-publics, as well as the ways they “make a particular sphere of affective life visible to history” (Waller 2014: 471).35

Alexis, like and with me, saw more than a single-shot interpretive lens in Cvetkovich. Cvetkovich’s *Archive of Feelings* represented, and still represents, for us an entirely novel set of historical sensitivities. What kinds of experiences (not just people) are we automatically attuned to when we read ancient literature, and what kinds of experiences might leave traces that demand enlargement and elaboration? What is the felt subtext of certain kinds of representation and expression? As Hal’s students, albeit a few years apart, we had read and thoroughly internalized Vincent Wimbush’s introduction in *African Americans and the Bible*, which already had us reading ancient literature “darkly” (Wimbush 2001).36 But Cvetkovich’s form of account accommodated so much. Periodically autoethnographic if not fully engaged in memoir, distinctly literary, and consistently offering a deep and sympathetic attention to the objects, moments, and people otherwise rendered negligible, it was simultaneously plump, sonorous, and delicate. Cvetkovich’s commitment to

34 Tiffany, however, didn’t use cultural studies as much as depth psychology in the Jungian tradition.

35 Alexis had presented this work as a paper at SBL in Baltimore in 2012 at the Reading Theory and the Bible Section. She later published this piece (Waller 2014) as part of the *Biblical Interpretation* issue formed around that session (Koosed and Moore [eds.] 2014). Also in that issue, and deriving from that session, along with Koosed 2014a and Knust 2014, is Cottrill 2014.

36 Cvetkovich’s historiographical approach, if I were to clumsily assimilate it to biblical studies, would be something like putting Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s work in a pot with Vincent Wimbush’s work and stirring vigorously.
and sophisticated re-upping of lesbian feminist politics met up with a certain implicit refusal to enter the theoretically hot discourse of transcendental queerness, around which we too sometimes felt skepticism and exhaustion. Quite simply, we both loved her, and we adored her just as much in person as in her writing.

Alexis and I first encountered each other as teacher and student: I was her teaching “fellow” (pardon the term) for Brigitte Kahl’s “Introduction to the New Testament” class. Alexis was failing, and doing so brilliantly, at traditional historical critical methods and exegesis. She wrote in large, black, artists’ notebooks, collecting quotes from readings and class, sometimes scrawling drawings in the middle of the page. (I noticed this because in my first two years of graduate school, I had done something like this, too.) In our meetings about her incomplete work, she expressed good-humored but stubborn resistance, and only a little regret, over not “getting it.” But her observations about the texts we were reading melded razor-sharp observation with dreamy elaboration; she read lovingly and with frustration, one feeling seemingly and continuously giving way to the other. Her notebook was a collage of associations, carefully curated: a portrait of evocations.

I pressured her to stay in the class, and gave her a handful of essays and chapters from less traditional biblical scholarship to read, one of which, I remember, was the first third or so of Stephen Moore’s *God’s Gym* (1996), another of which was, of course, Vincent Wimbush’s “Reading Darkness, Reading Scriptures” (2001). She stayed, perhaps out of my coercion and reassurance, but perhaps also (or more so) out of the magnetism and frustration incited by her first encounter with biblical studies. Could any combination of feelings be more sustaining?

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37 On my own hesitations about transcendental queerness and an affective reorientation to some of the contexts for queer theory, see Kotrosits 2016 (forthcoming).
38 Both of these readings are cult classics for biblical studies, at least in my world.
39 Not incidental to this is that Alexis came to Union having heard Hal talk at her mother’s church about *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*. Hal exudes (and regularly voices) an almost wondrous combination of gentle, somewhat distanced, love and frustration with the field. Hal’s love seems to come in the form of a nurturing appreciation for both the complexities of people’s personal motivations, and the crystallizations of ideas in and among relationships (my loyalty to him in this essay, specifically, is quite clear). Brigitte’s own love for and frustrations with the field were (and are) quite different, given her attachment to traditional forms of biblical scholarship, and her deployment of those forms to empire-critical ends (e.g. Kahl 2010), what was a highly taboo move at the time of her own doctoral training in East Germany.
40 For more on history and frustration, see my response to the work of Burton Mack in Kotrosits 2015b.
Over the course of several more semesters spent in the same classroom, and with constant cycling between informal mentorship and a more collegial, affectionate mutual admiration, Alexis and I were regular, riveted conversation partners. If Hal was the most enabling authoritative presence in my life while writing *Rethinking Early Christian Identity* (Kotrosits 2015), Alexis was my co-conspirator. I gave a mini-lecture on affect theory in Hal’s “Christ and Cosmos” course, an unfortunately graceless one, but Alexis joined me in my sense of possibility about how seriously affect theory changes, well, *everything* about the way we do biblical studies. I remember being in the throes of infant parenting, in the haze of dissertation-writing and unprecedented levels of sleep loss, one hand holding my son Rocco’s head in place as he breastfed, the other hand simultaneously pressing open a book and texting Alexis long quotes from that book (the book being Cvetkovich’s *Archive of Feelings*). We spent perhaps the most time talking about that book (though if you counted Sedgwick’s combined work, *Archive of Feelings* would have to come in second).

I sometimes have a hard time remembering if it was me or Alexis who first had a certain idea (a phenomenon I have with others, including Hal, and my husband). “Touching Pasts, Loving Things” I recently asked her, “was that you or me?” It was a subheading I was considering for the present essay. “I dunno,” she wrote, “maybe just a combination of people we love?” (She was right, at least partially: “Touching the Past” is the title of Dinshaw’s introduction in *Getting Medieval.*) Indeed I believe (correct me if I’m wrong, Alexis) that I had the very idea for this form of intellectual history, an ecology of ideas generated in the messy cauldron of relationships, while walking to Death and Co. post-Cvetkovich. Then, as now, Alexis’s ability to join me in playing with ideas (as she would put it), her constructive idealizations (as she, through Adam Phillips, would also put it), easily sweeps me up into a dense, creative vapor. And yet the words of others figure large in our relationship: she often responds to my ideas, my dogged pursuit of the new, my relentless desire for a twist or turn on the old, with a quote from someone else—a writer, an artist, a blogger. Often these quotes are minimally contextualized. Relationally, Alexis is at her most elegant when coaxing out the latent possibilities of other people’s waxing, usually doing so with an almost wild and provocative attentiveness: that is, her sense of “what’s there” bleeds seamlessly into a sense of “what’s more.”

But on the question of the words of others: how often it is that we negotiate, and mitigate, desire through objects of mutual affection—to paraphrase Sedgwick in *Between Men* (1985)—in this case, ideas. I mean the “we” of academics/intellectuals at large, probably, but with special attention to the loose collection of people with whom I think about affect. “Have you read *A Dialogue
on Love yet (Sedgwick 2000)?” I recall either Jenny or Alexis or someone else insisting while grabbing me by the hand or shoulder. However, not unlike the women circulated in male homosocial relations, ideas are not inert objects; they have their own lively agencies that collaborate with (or interrupt) the agency of those who circulate them. Ideas take flight within relationships, and relationships take flight in the exchange of ideas. Fawning or rhapsodizing over the words of others, over wine or otherwise in those smaller relational spaces we carve out within more formal stalwarts of academic life like conferences, we invite our conversation partners to recognize and play with us. We not only show what we love, but ask them to love what we love. While not thinking especially about affect, Jane Gallop’s The Deaths of the Author reminds us of the intense affective and splintered intersubjective dimensions of reading and writing. She performs a close reading of Roland Barthes’s Sade, Fourier, Loyola (1976), in which she finds articulated a transmigration of the author, in bits and pieces, into the life of the reader: “Living with an author is having ‘fragments’ from his text in our dailiness” (2011: 49). Of course we incorporate not only the author in bits and pieces, but also the vehicle through which we first heard that author, the voice that repeated those words to us, over dinner, in a cab, or sitting against the wall on the industrial carpeting between conference sessions. That is to say, in speaking the beloved words of others, we ask our conversation partners to take us in, to consume us too.

I fear falling into some idealized narrative of relationships between women in academia. All of the relationships I will have recounted here, ones with men and with women, have been fortifying, creative, constructive, endearing, vital, and integrity-saving for me—but sometimes also tinged with awkwardness, strain, power imbalances, and/or minor relational failures. And I do want to point to the ways the idiosyncratic fringe movement of the burgeoning of affect theory in biblical studies was not “just” about expressions of frustration with the field, grief relating to the Bible, senses of attachment and/or eros. If male homosocial relations are at the crux of the culture of modernity—and let’s firmly place the male-dominated discipline of biblical studies within this homosocial production of modernity—then let’s just for a moment also notice the intellectual significance and culturally productive power of the gendered ecology I have rendered here, one not just begetting or explaining affect in biblical studies as if it is some kind of trend, but one about making history differently as well. My perspective, as one with a decent amount of access to the emergence of affect in biblical studies, has afforded me the chance to witness impressive, if underplayed, breakthroughs in the historiographical enterprise, and these breakthroughs are thoroughly planted in the mud of so many complex intimacies between (mostly, but not exclusively) women.
I am particularly sensitive to this notion of affect theory as a trend. Not only does the notion of an intellectual “trend” relegate profoundly meaningful developments, ones which might force certain epistemological changes of tide to the ephemeral, making them destined for disappearance over and against the more steadfast and unchanging modes of operation. Calling something a “trend,” or treating it as such, in other words, is the easiest way to avoid substantively dealing with it. Affect theory as trend in biblical studies has a subtle way of then making some impressive historiographical and epistemological moves, again ones mostly (and not incidentally) propounded by women, seem like a blip on the screen, a distraction from the “real issues” of biblical studies.

I must admit a certain defensiveness, even possessiveness, around affect theory, and this is not unrelated to the history between women entangled in it. At the 2014 SBL annual meeting in San Diego, the Bible and Emotion Section underwrote a session on affect theory. It was composed entirely of invited panelists: Erin Runions, Jenny Knust, Jennifer Koosed, Stephen Moore, Amy Cottrill, and myself. Stephen Moore and Erin Runions offered papers, with Jenny and I responding to Stephen’s paper, and Amy and Jennifer responding to Erin’s. It was at this session that the stakes of affective considerations in biblical studies most crystallized for me. The session’s organizers had contacted Stephen to see if he would be interested in offering a paper, and if he could recommend other participants. Stephen, who had been my mentor and regular conversation partner for maybe seven years, who had served on my dissertation committee, and had for most of that time affectionately entertained my near-constant recourse to Sedgwick, Puar, Ahmed, and others, forwarded me the email. “I’m thinking of doing it,” he wrote.

41 I’ve probably called affect theory a trend, somewhere, and probably even in print. Maybe several times. And as Hal recently reminded me, it was this very “trend” factor that made me hesitate in engaging theories of affect so specifically in Rethinking Early Christian Identity (Kotrosits 2015). I feared not only being over-identified with a theory (“that affect theory scholar”) that would, some day, simply have been a flash in the pan, but also needed the real historical propositions I make to be understood as such.

42 He showed interest, of course, too. In fact, Stephen invited me to visit his “Revelation” class, at Drew Theological School in Spring 2013, to talk about my article on Revelation (now Kotrosits 2014a), a draft of which he assigned. I remember him doing a close reading of the paper in class, expressing variously subtle curiosity, surprise, and gentle appreciation regarding my affective intervention on ideological readings of Revelation. Alexis was taking the class, but there were other Drew Theological School students in the course who had already expressed an interest in affect theory. One was Paige Rawson, a doctoral student in biblical studies, who was part of the group who saw Cvetkovich at Bluestockings,
Stephen was and is famous, of course, for calling attention to whatever set of theories or foci were sweeping up the Modern Language Association at the moment, and setting them loose on New Testament literature. But he had hardly published or presented on affect, and it was his single paper on affect theory that had drawn the organizers’ attention. The story was painfully predictable: two men contacted another (well-situated) man to enlighten them on “This New Theory,” one on which half a dozen women had already quite extensively published. When asked for a list of possible other participants, Stephen named those of us who had been working with affect theory in the first place.

Erin’s paper, the piece on Psalm 139 and affect (parts of which I summarized and quoted above), was typical for Erin in both its understatement and significance (Runions 2014b). She waxed on the very different, and unlikely, political uses of Psalm 139—as scriptural sponsor for both pro-LGBTQ politics and pro-life politics. In particular, pro-life activists use the psalm to advocate for mandatory ultrasounds for women seeking abortions. “You have searched and known me” (Ps. 139:1), while gesturing to recognition for queer-identified people, also gestures to the surveilled womb, and figures a God whose “love” is not as much unbridled acceptance as deliverance from that God’s own threat. It was not only critically and analytically compelling, but also haunting. In this theopolitics, God chases, pursues, and if we’re lucky, relents.

Jennifer’s response picked up on the affective life and theopolitics of surveillance:

We all like to be watched, despite any protestations to the contrary. Especially in our current age of social media, the first line of Psalm 139 resonates: “You have searched me and you know me”—searched, Googled, and who spoke with Cvetkovich in the courtyard at Union. Another was Karen Bray, a theology student, who was writing a dissertation on affect theory. Stephen was later one coordinator of the Drew Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquium (along with Joe Marchal and Kent Brintnall) devoted to queer temporality and affect (much more the former than the latter), in which I participated. Indeed, there is another TTC at Drew in the Spring of 2016 which is solely devoted to affect theory, including (from biblical studies and this article) Erin Runions, Jenny Knust, Stephen Moore, Alexis Waller, and Joseph Marchal alongside Mel Chen, Patricia Clough, Ann Cvetkovich, Eugenie Brinkema, and Gregory Seigworth. The volume of essays produced from the Spring 2014 TTC is Brintnall, Marchal, and Moore 2016 (forthcoming).
spied. We lay ourselves open through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, for all to see and for corporations and the government to survey. You are all now watching me. Do I like it? Your surveillance could bring, if not love, then approval, but it also threatens. What if you don’t like what you see, what you hear? I am caught between these two potentialities. (Koosed 2014b:1)

In her piece, Jennifer noted that both those for and against mandatory ultrasounds appeal to emotion for their arguments. Pro-life activists imagine an ideal maternal affective response upon seeing the ultrasound. But representatives of Planned Parenthood claimed that mandatory ultrasounds were trying to shame and demean, even terrorize, women. Koosed observed:

Where one side imagines a maternal response of love and protection, the other side imagines the surveillance of the womb eliciting feelings of terror and shame. Provoked by the ultrasound image, how will the bodily intensities circulate; provoked by the textual image, how will the oscillations of Psalm 139 resolve? (Koosed 2014b: 5)

She went on:

What bodily posture could be more shame-inducing than lying on your back, naked from the waist down, legs raised and split in stirups, genitals exposed, the folds flattened, and a foreign metal object thrust into your body against your will? Where do you look? Do you turn your head around to see the screen? Do you avert your eyes, a classic posture of shame? Who is the surveyor of your womb? You, the doctor, the state, God? The machine is merged with the human body, the subject position of the woman shifts and slides, as Runions points out, in an ironic post-humanist, post-deist form of subjectivity. Certainly, shame in the sense of exposure and disapproval and prohibition can be experienced here. (Koosed 2014b: 6)

Interestingly, however, and against pro-life assumptions, a woman seeking an abortion is not really dissuaded by seeing an ultrasound of her fetus. “Some even found the ultrasound pictures reassuring because a fetus in the very early stages of pregnancy (37.8% of abortions happen at or before the fetus has reached the gestational age of four weeks) is very small and really doesn’t look like a baby” (Koosed 2014b: 3). Why can’t pro-lifers imagine this possibility? Koosed concluded:
Perhaps the inability to read and accept the data that demonstrates that the political energies of anti-abortionists are misplaced in their advocacy of mandatory ultrasounds is also the inability to read Psalm 139 negatively and face the threat of God's surveillance. That in the interminable oscillation between love and threat, that the resolution is less often on love and more often on threat—and even worse the threat is not a result of divine malice but because God looked upon our innermost parts, and found us strange. And it is this divine indifference that ultimately leads to our destruction. (Koosed 2014b: 6)

I was devastated by her response—not just the content of it or the sensory experiences she conjured, which are so clearly devastating themselves. As I try to parse why, or what about it caused me to vibrate psychologically for days afterwards, I think it has something to do with her voice. She paused uncomfortably as she took to the podium. It was a medium-sized room, with the usual fluorescent lighting and grey walls. It was not terribly different than the antiseptic and clinical feel of the doctor's office Jennifer was describing, the one with the ultrasound machines and stirrups, the clinician who might insist that you turn your head and look. Was her voice shaking a bit? She didn't seem nervous, exactly. I remember not just the shaking, but the dare and provocation with which it was paired: “You are all now watching me. Do I like it?” She paused again. I was watching her, and her vulnerability was riveting. “Your surveillance could bring, if not love, then approval, but it also threatens.”

Stephen wrote about disgust in the Gospel of John, and it was entitled, “More Than a Feeling.” As he wrote: “The Johannine narrative is replete with understated—indeed, unstated—affect, one affect in particular, as we are about to see. That affect is not love, I would argue, despite the frequency of love-language in the narrative. . . . The Fourth Gospel . . . is structured by disgust” (2014: 19–20). With aptly sensorial description, Stephen's reading thrust his reader into the fleshy, terrible mess of the Gospel of John—our hands in the wounds, as it were—where flesh is, as he puts it “always already rotting, even in life” (2014: 21). He made sure his readers felt at least a hint of John's disgust.

My gut response (pardon the pun), however, was confusion. Before Stephen's paper, I did not feel disgust coming from John. I've felt other affects coming from John, and those things have changed over the years: disillusionment, pain, desperation, moralizing self-righteousness, and wonder in the Gospel, but not yet, or at least not very much, disgust. “It could be that I'm not as close a reader as Stephen—which is not a bad bet to take—and thus I haven't quite
been able to notice how much disgust shapes the Gospel of John,” I wrote. “But this poses some questions about affect and textual life, however. If disgust structures the Gospel of John, why did I not feel it until I read Stephen’s paper? What does it mean that a text ‘structured on disgust’ doesn’t feel disgusting to a given reader?” “Even now,” I continued,

I’m not sure how much my sense of disgust arrives from Stephen’s paper and how much from the Gospel. While I’m happy to trust Stephen’s reading, at least as much as my own, I do notice Stephen’s penchant for finding disgust circulating in and around New Testament literature: not only in his most recent article on Revelation, but who can forget his rendition of his work also as “slicing up corpuses” and thus resonant with his father’s profession as a butcher; the images of his father’s butcher shop filled with “basins of blood;” the floor “littered with hooves;” and its relationship to the violence of Jesus’ crucifixion; or the Good Friday rendition of the crucifixion, during which he “vomited gratefully”? A sense of disgust or, perhaps, a longing to provoke disgust—possibly so we share his experience, faint with him in the church—certainly structures that book no less than the Gospel of John. As for me, I’ve written two books on trauma and loss, so on the question of penchants for certain affective states, I’m hardly less guilty than he is. (Kotrosits 2014b: 1–2)

The disjoint between Stephen’s affective reading of John and my own experience of John might push one to consider the more procedural, might we say methodological, question: How do things make one feel? Not just “what” does one feel or why, but what is the machinery, or magic, by which one is moved?

Stephen had used the work of film theorist Eugenie Brinkema. Her book The Forms of the Affects (2014) was something of an outlier in its approach to affect. But Stephen appreciated it for its exegetical possibilities, possibilities that, by his own account, were hard to cull from most other texts falling under “affect theory.”44

Brinkema seeks a “post-spectator” reading (of film) that challenges the “expressivity hypothesis” by which affect represents a communication between

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44 As Stephen writes, “I begin this time with a different book, the book on affect theory for which I have, in fact, been waiting. Eugenie Brinkema’s The Forms of the Affects addresses a question that has perplexed me this past year or two: Can affect theory yield strategies for textual analysis, even for close reading? This may sound like a strange question to ask in the context of an SBL panel made up of people who have all already published affective analyses of biblical texts…” (2014b: 4).
film and viewer. She is both “reading for forms” and “reading affects as having forms,” and suggests that it is “only because one must read for it that affect has any force at all” (2014: 37–38). With a patently polemical tone, Brinkema seeks an account of affect that counters what she describes as a confessional, interiorizing, and almost histrionic reception of affect in film theory; a game in which, she says, “the most affected theorist wins” (2014: 32).

Brinkema uses the term “solipsistic” regularly to characterize these spectacularly over-affected critics (a word and a worry that Stephen evoked in his paper as well). In what is an exceptionally narrow idea of how to reflect on or perform one’s subjectivity in one’s own writing, Brinkema wields a frustrated, almost anti-feminist rhetoric against the “touchy-feely” dimensions of affect theory. Gosh, can’t we just get back to the “real business” of what things say instead of all this personal reflection? Brinkema seems to complain. “The turning to affect in the humanities does not obliterate the problem of form or representation,” Brinkema writes (2014: xiv). This is undoubtedly true. But that statement also clearly mischaracterizes so much of affect theory’s relationship to representation, particularly the work of Cvetkovich, Ahmed, and Sedgwick and others who aren’t working in the Deleuzian vein. Sedgwick, for instance, wants to expand the way we think about what and how things might mean in order to avoid “reifying or mystifying” linguistic kinds of meaning (Brinkema 2014: 6). (One would think that that could have helped Brinkema’s project of film analysis.) If, as Stephen notes, Brinkema enables exegetical readings better than other kinds of affect theory texts, it is in part because the very term exegesis implies a recourse to the “truth” of texts, a truth recoverable largely through proper diagnosis of its form and structure.

Stephen’s recourse to straightforward reading strategies and his implicit desire to return to formalist readings was a distinct departure from so much of what he had published before. One might wonder: is this the same person who so brilliantly skewered the field in *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar*?

Methodology is what is meant to maintain the dividing partition between sermon and scholarship, and prevent the lecturer’s podium from morphing into a pulpit. The homily has long been the constitutive other of biblical criticism, in other words, and methodology the enabling condition of such criticism—“methodology” here being a cipher for “objectivity,” “neutrality,” “disinterestedness,” and all of the other related and foundational values of biblical studies as an academic discipline. These values are rarely trumpeted these days…but continue to hold sway, seemingly, over most practitioners of the discipline anyway…. But our quarantining of the biblical-critical from the homiletical has not occurred without a cost.
Most obviously, our obsession with method has made for a mountainous excess of dull and dreary books, essays, and articles: here, first, in numbing dry detail is my method; now watch and be amazed while I apply it woodenly to this unsuspecting biblical text. (Moore and Sherwood 2011: 40–41)45

But speaking on a purely methodological level: how does one read for affect without themselves being affected? What organs of perception are being engaged to treat a text or image in such an aloof fashion? How might one relate to an image, a word, a phrase, on its formal level without the subtext of the viewer's or reader's affective disposition or the sense one gets from a text? Despite her theorizing on affect, Brinkema might be said to be reinvesting in the Cartesian project of cognition as over and above, and vehemently separate from, emotion. Poised on a thin line between the cutting edge and something almost retrograde, Brinkema seeks an account of affect “without bodies,” emblematized by her reading of the famous shower scene in Psycho, finding not a tear on the face of Marion, but a “lachrymal drop”; an ambivalent form not belonging to Marion, but rather a “stark little star” set against the cold white tile of the bathroom (Brinkema 2014: 21).

Contra Brinkema, though, how one understands something—how something “makes sense”—doesn't necessitate a model of naïve expressiveness, intentionality, or communication between text (or film) and reader (or viewer). One might well say Brinkema's intervention itself reduces the reading process to the reader and what's being read; it's just an unfeeling reader she posits. But the ways in which we are moved by things is more than a one-way, or even two-way street. It is not only a multi-sensory experience; it is a many-dimensional

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45 In fact, in his own (co-authored) introduction to the issue of Biblical Interpretation dedicated to affect theory, he and Jennifer Koosed write,

[A]ffect theory does not yield a ‘method’ in the standard biblical scholarly sense of the term. … Understandably unaware of how theory has tended to function in biblical studies, Seigworth and Gregg ask: “Isn't theory—any theory with or without a capital T—supposed to work this way? Operating with a certain modest methodological vitality rather than impressing itself upon a wiggling world like a snap-on grid of shape-setting interpretability?” Into the wiggling worlds of biblical texts—narrative world, reception-historical worlds—these six affect-oriented articles descend. Whether they are equipped with snap-on grids of shape-setting interpretability or more delicate writ(h)ing instruments capable of matching the shape-shifting movements of these wiggling worlds and words, we leave the reader to judge” (Koosed and Moore 2014: 387).

Indeed.
experience that includes not only the text and the reader as part of a signifying process, but questions of history and materiality, and neither history nor materiality are cloudless or easily decipherable categories. They, too, must be “read.”

By history, as it should be clear by now, I mean not simply “what happened” as much as the uncertain traces of pasts, the forces of impingement—both those deemed more “personal” and those deemed more “collective”: from quirky and highly individualized wisps of association that are evoked by a text, to the political and ideological impositions or histories of interpretations that erupt into readings we might figure as “our own.” Materiality is no obvious or calculable category either. How the book feels in my hand, my impression of its cover, its font—or in the case of the Bible, its heft, its gold embossed letters, the familiar and thin paper, or even its heavy presence in U.S. politics and, say, one’s parents house, that enter the mix of how any given content reads or feels to us. Language, too, has a textural unevenness that “feels different” depending on what other bodies or histories come into contact with it. The Bible as material object is, as Stephen suggested in his paper, already mixed up in our materiality. It is also mixed up in many uncertain histories, those both more and less our own. Despite so much of Stephen’s work which speaks to the highly-affected contrary, his use of affect theory, at least in this paper, reduces it to interpretive exigency and momentary fascination: in short, a fad.

But reading with attention to affect is considerably less interesting or important as a shiny new mode of truth production around texts than a way of getting in touch with how impressionistic all our readings and perceptions of texts and their elements actually are, whether or not those readings engage affect specifically. Impressionistic isn’t an insult or a limit—I actually think our subjectivity, ranging from our highly variable moods and dispositions to our sense of history in its idiosyncratic detail and disconcerting nebulosity, can surface important dimensions of texts. I just think it usually does so in a way that’s at odds with, or at least to the side of, our strivings:

Attending to affect is, or at least can be, a way of asking critical questions about contemporary motives and investments in texts and practices, of disabling the distancing techniques that are the bread and butter of enlightenment modes of critique—and our discipline in particular—in favor or the tender admittance that, yes, I feel something, whatever it is, when I read this, and that is emphatically about me, but also about the forces and histories that form me, about the collectivities that claim me and that I perhaps claim back. It is the recollection that meaning is a deeply subjective, textural, volatile enterprise that nonetheless yields
moments worthy of particular analysis, even if that analysis risks being unhinged into the oblivion of relativity—or, shall we say, solipsism. (Kotrosits 2014b: 4)

The combination of Stephen’s disruption (as the male senior scholar invited by other male scholars) of the homosocial scene of affective history-making, and his reading of affect against some of its constitutive epistemology, hints at the field’s aggression toward both real change and women’s collaboration and contributions. His interest in affect as another trend may even hollow it of its urgency as expressed by so many of my close colleagues-in-crime. And what for? Why did Stephen care about affect? Phil Harland, a dear colleague whose work on the social history of early Christianity found its way into affect theory through my book’s integration, attended that session out of curiosity. After the papers had all been read, he raised his hand, stood up, and self-effacingly posed a question to Stephen: “I don’t know anything about affect theory,” he said, “so I might just be totally ignorant.” A few people in the room chuckled. “But what is the point of talking about affect and ancient texts? To find out what the original authors were feeling?” Stephen, holding tight to his poststructuralist guns, smiled wryly: “No.” But he then sat in suspended silence. He had no answer to “what is the point.”

Of course my longings for the subjective to appear more concertedly in biblical studies has a direct relationship to Stephen’s many beautiful writing experiments doing just that, as well as to his many stringent, hilarious critiques of the guild. Indeed it is with a debt to Stephen that I can even say that the disgust Stephen feels and the trauma and loss I sense in so much biblical literature may or may not tell us the “truth” about the texts we read, at least in any narrow or traditional sense. But where, one might ask, was the Stephen for whom the cold application of exegetical method was a joke, and for whom the text was a body indecipherable from his own?

“We are knit into texts, and their affectivity is ours,” I wrote, “not because we have projected our feelings onto them as if they are passive recipients of our affectivity, though, or because we have unmediated experience of their sense-making, as if texts are bodies that themselves are unaffected by our touching of them.” I concluded:

To draw from Jane Bennett’s understanding of “affect” in Vibrant Matter (2010) as a quality of all material life: a text’s very capacity to make sense is linked to the way in which it makes contact with us, or the way in which it collides with the wider atmosphere or elements of any given moment. Its composition, the materiality of its meaning, is altered with
the strange accruals of time; and, of course, it is altered with our touch, even as that contact magnetizes and reassembles parts of us through the very interaction. In fact Jane Bennett’s book, *Vibrant Matter*, is subtitled “A Political Ecology of Things,” and perhaps the phrase “political ecology” may be useful to remind ourselves that affect is neither “here” nor “there” but in the complicated knots between people, objects, forces, and all kinds of other things. Affect is indeed “more than a feeling,” but—to allay any fears of solipsism, Stephen—its “more” is tied ineluctably to the fact that our feelings are about a whole host of things other than us, anyway. (Kotrosits 2014b: 4)

Part 4: “I Do Feel Things about Inscriptions” (Objects, Materiality, Experience)

Touching evokes perceptual openness and a relationality that confounds dualistic notions of interiority and exteriority, even as it also is the sense that most viscerally marks the boundaries of our bodies. The sensory and affective multivalence of touch makes it an expansive and slippery sort of metaphor even as (and/or because) it is grounded in experiences of material embodiment, with all its concrete possibilities of sturdiness and fragility (Waller 2013: 5)

Alexis’ thesis, *Touching Philip* (2013), observes the way images of texture and craft-related material processes lend meaning to the Gospel of Philip, but also the way metaphors of texture and touch work in scholarship on Philip.

The *Gospel of Philip’s* fragmentary feel has led to debate about whether it is a collection of diverse, loosely knit textual strands or, rather, a unified composition with an underlying narrative and theological coherence waiting to be decoded. Some scholars contend that *Philip* is a collection of sayings compiled from diverse and sometimes conflicting sources; others argue that it is a composition by a single author with a coherent theological point of view; and yet others suggest something in between, for instance, a tightly knit collection edited by a redactor or redactors with clear intentions. (Waller 2013: 6)

Reading Sedgwick’s *Weather in Proust* (2011), which contains Sedgwick’s reflections on how her own artistic interest in textiles informs her non-dualistic, non-identitarian, and non-narrative epistemologies, Alexis notices how limited
our epistemological resources are for understanding Philip’s lack of narrative coherence. What if, Alexis proposes, we took Philip seriously as a collection, as an archive, for which narrative coherence was not a criterion for meaning at all?

In “Making Things, Practicing Emptiness,” Sedgwick describes her own love of textiles and her love of making things with her hands as a counterpoint to making theories through language and thought. But she also sets about imagining “language and thought as a medium, one with texture and materiality, comparable to other artistic media, that can be manipulated through various processes to show new aspects.” Feeling and narrative are linked: to perceive texture is to reach out and touch, which means also to be “immersed in a field of active narrative hypothesizing.” Questions scholarship asks of the text are often like the questions we ask of a texture we are in the act of perceiving: not only, as Sedgwick imagines, do we ask “What is it like? nor even just How does it impinge on me?” but also “How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?” (Actually, I think most biblical scholarship generally preferences “How did it get that way?” over the other the questions Sedgwick asks.) So, what if we treat texts (in a sense) like textiles? What if we interrogate texts in (imaginatively) tactile ways? (Waller 2013: 6)

So much of this thesis entertains questions of touch alongside issues of intracability (materials that don’t do what we want them to, such as the difficulty of translation) and attachment (what we want out of our sources, why we keep coming back to them). One of the most memorable lines in this thesis is the very first one: “Sometimes I just love things for a long time before I understand why I’m drawn to them” (Waller 2013: 4).46

Alexis’s thesis prompts me to consider the affectivity in the “material turn” in biblical studies—the renewed interest in architecture, codex fragments, manuscript variations, visual representation, and epigraphic culture. Laura Nasrallah’s book Roman Responses to Christian Art and Architecture (2011) is one engagement of the material turn in biblical studies. In it, she mildly chides the fields of early Christian studies and classical studies for not engaging each other’s respective focuses on literary texts and visual and material culture. “We have not been able to recognize how themes such as power, justice, piety, and culture and part of far-ranging ancient conversations that are manifest not

46 It is a thoroughly Freudian recognition: we do not always know what it is in the beloved that we love.
only in literature but also in archaeological remains,” she writes (2011: 8). “We are like blindfolded people in the fable who surround and touch the elephant, each characterizing the object of his or her interest according to limited knowledge. The elephant’s side is a wall, the leg is a tree, the trunk is a snake, the tusk a spear, the ear a fan, the swinging tail is a rope” (Nasrallah 2011: 8). She later explains her analogy: “Of course, by reading Christian and non-Christian texts together, and by bringing together both literary and archaeological remains, my own reconstruction of the second century cannot entirely capture the elephant that we, blindfolded by the limits of our sources and methods, touch. All of our historical reconstructions are provisional and partial, and all inevitably and happily the best attempts of our imaginative enterprise” (2011: 9). History is something we can touch, but something we can never see. In this analogy, history is an object of imagination cultivated through tactile experience.

What is it about these materials that we find so attractive? I find myself interested in ancient inscriptions and epigraphic culture as of late, as well. (“Interest”: the blandest of intellectual euphemisms.) I came to be attached to inscriptions through Phil Harland. As a social historian (but not, he cautions, a social scientist), Phil has doggedly cast his own work in empirical terms. History and theology for him are absolutely separable enterprises: he deals in “evidence.” And yet despite our basic differences, so many of his scholarly mediations have been, like mine, ones that ferret out other scholars’ investments. Indeed both of us seek less exceptionalist historical narratives about “early Christianity.” His entire body of work places the people we call “early Christians” as full and ordinary participants in the social structures and politics of the ancient Mediterranean: they had no special characteristics or politics, and virtually no distinct practices (e.g., Harland 2003; 2009). His interest in diasporic populations in the ancient Mediterranean enabled my application of diaspora theory, though his take on diaspora focuses on the thorough assimilation of diasporic people in the Greco-Roman world rather than their disjoint or disillusionment. But I have ribbed him repeatedly on his recourse to “data” and other cold, informational, objectivist terms. His slipping into the affect session was a gesture of curiosity and characteristically good will toward a set of ideas—and perhaps a colleague—with which he agreed broadly but, he confessed, he didn’t know quite what to do with.

His stubborn insistence on the compartmentalization of theology and history, and my stubborn hyper-integration of them; his emphasis on the cozy assimilation of “Christians”/Judeans in the Greco-Roman world and my emphasis on the social traumas inherent in diaspora conditions, has meant we’re intrigued readers of each other’s work. But it also means that we’re constantly sending each other articles and books to coax each other along in each
other’s direction or, alternately, to demonstrate that we have been successfully coaxed. Phil had just recently finished two book projects on inscriptions in Asia Minor, and following the affect session in San Diego, he sent me an article on affect and inscriptions by classicist Angelos Chaniotis (2013). I quickly read it, and noting Chaniotis’s conclusion, one that carefully delineates his interest in affect as purely historical, I replied via email:

I don’t know if you read it, but I like his approach in merging questions of affect, social bodies, and public life. (That last paragraph of the article is a funny kind of disclaimer, though: WE SHALL NOT SEEK UNDERSTANDING ABOUT EMOTIONS THEMSELVES.)

The article met up with—maybe even triggered?—some initial reading I had been doing on ancient and contemporary ruin-gazing and ancient laments for fallen cities. A few months later I sent Phil an outline for my next monograph, tentatively entitled “Sovereignty in Ruins,” which included some fragmentary reflections on contemporary scholarship’s love of the artifact. I thanked him for bringing his social historian’s eyes to it, and joked that my reading of his book outlines would probably be something like, “But Phil, how do you feel about the inscriptions?” He replied to my quip with a smile icon and then wrote, among other things, “I do feel things about inscriptions, especially the epitaphs of kids.”

Maybe our attraction to material culture is not just a fetishization of the past, at least in any simple or romanticized sense. There is, of course, something satisfyingly touchable about inscriptions (though I have probably only once actually touched one). Maybe it is that their concrete specificity gives some texture to that relatively abstract concept of death, or that even more abstract concept of history. Or maybe we just love that there is something to hold onto, something that, against the odds, remains: the ephemera of lives rendered into an impression, a mark on a stone. They are palpable signs of the past that touch and move us, even if we cannot, or at least generally do not, touch them.

There are few things more evocative and, I would add, socially expedient, than ruins. They evoke nostalgia, fascination, a sense of adventure, melancholy, and longing, among other things. Indeed ruins may actually be a fertile metaphor for theorizing affect, as Yael Navaro-Yashin has suggested (2009). Noting the tendency of cultural theory to enact its radicality by tossing old paradigms aside in favor of new ones (trends!), itself a particular form of ruination, Navaro-Yashin wants to resist the Deleuzian framework’s opposition of
the rhizome to the root—one that contrasts the flat, mobile, horizontal landscape of surfaces (the “plateau” of *A Thousand Plateaus* [Deleuze and Guattari 1987]) against the vertical, discursive field and grid of subject-location. In other words, for Navaro-Yashin, Deleuzian theory’s turn away from the subject and towards non-human agents and a “cartographic” imagination—as Nigel Thrift (2000: 220) terms it—toward assemblages and ecologies is shortsighted:

Rather than casting the roots against rhizomes, through my preferred metaphor of “the ruin,” I would like to suggest another kind of orientation. We said that the root is vertical, whereas the rhizome is horizontal. The ruin, however . . . is both and neither. A ruin is rhizomatic in the sense that it grows in uncontrollable and unforeseen ways . . . But a ruin is also about roots, because it is sited as a “trace” of a historical event, it is remembered, it is kept, lamented, and cherished in the memory of those who left it behind, it is sited and noticed by those who uncannily live in it or in its vicinity, it leaves marks in the unconscious. (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 14)

She borrows and fills out Bruno Latour’s object-oriented philosophy (2005a) in an ethnographic account the Turkish-Cypriot relationships to the abandoned homes and objects of Greek-Cypriots during the war of 1974. She articulates a “thingliness of politics,” in which affect is understood both in terms of landscape and in subjective terms:

Paradigm-setting has cast subjectivity against affect, as if one cancels the other and as if one had to choose between camps of theoretical approach: a subject-centred or an object-orientated one. But neither the ruin in my ethnography, nor the people who live around it are affective on their own or in their own right, but both produce and transmit affect relationally. (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 14)

The horizontal versus the vertical—or the “flat” versus the “deep”—is an opposition also made in what Heather Love deems “the descriptive turn,” which (again, following Latour) resists the inherent humanist orientation, despite all claims to the contrary, in the linguistic turn’s faith in the endless richness and profundity of the text (Love 2010). Love suggests that “at the intersection of sociology and literature is a turn away from the singularity and richness of individual texts and a concomitant refusal of the ethical charisma of the literary translator or messenger” (2010: 374). She cites Franco Moretti, for instance, who produces a strong sociological critique of the literary value of
close reading, which he calls a “theological exercise,” opposing it with “distant reading,” that defines itself in distinctly empirical terms: scientific knowledge, authority (Love 2010: 374).

Love herself takes a more moderate approach, wondering about the “possibilities for a method of textual analysis that would take its cue from observation-based social sciences including ethology, kinesics, ethnomethodology, and microsociology” (Love 2010: 375). These are fields which have “practices of close attention, but, because they rely on description rather than interpretation, they do not engage the metaphysical and humanist concerns of hermeneutics” (Love 2010: 375). We can and should, according to Love, find modes of reading that are “close but not deep.”

I first came to this essay because Brock Perry, a theology doctoral student at Drew Theological School, suggested that my book on the Gospel of Mark (Kotrosits and Taussig 2013) was an example of this close but not deep reading. After reading Love’s article, I found this both flattering and surprising, since I would probably describe myself as something of an unrepentant humanist. But Love’s essay intrigued me for the conversation it staged between literary theory and sociology, two disciplines that register as different ends of the biblical studies spectrum. (I promptly sent it to Alexis and Phil.) While Love’s essay doesn’t bring up affect or affect theory, it does triangulate my repeated contrast between the affective and the empirical, and it thus offers a way to mediate what seem to be some intractable differences in values across the field of biblical studies.

Love evokes a contrast between Clifford Geertz and his “thick description,” a favorite term of the social historians I know, and Erving Goffman’s refusal of questions of experience, seeing a compatibility between Latour and Goffman. Following Latour, Love values a “constructive sociology [which] aims to show ‘what the real world is really like,’” but she is clear that no description is pure and devoid of interpretation:

As much as this project might seem to return to a naïve empiricism, Latour insists that empiricism is inadequate as a means for accounting for the world. He writes, “Empiricism no longer appears as the solid bedrock on which to build everything else, but as a very poor rendering of experience. This poverty, however, is not overcome by moving away from material experience, for instance to the ‘rich human subjectivity,’ but closer to the much variegated lives materials have to offer.” (Love 2010: 377)

Love’s search for a mode of description that is not a phenomenology—that eschews experience for not just the real, but also the really real—feels like a
friendlier (more compelling, less cynical or polemical) version of Brinkema’s fear of solipsism. It’s friendlier because it comes from an earnest longing to make contact with the world, and the textural language in her quote from Latour reminds me of Alexis’s thesis: he/she wants to be “closer to the much variegated lives materials have to offer.” Of course, the reading and historical practices associated with empiricism and other more objectivist modes of analysis have always been critiqued as ways of trying to get out of oneself; to evade the subjective. (I’ve just landed this critique above, in fact.) But Alexis’s thesis, especially alongside Laura Nasrallah’s elephant analogy, might invite the following consideration: what if the concertedly descriptive, non-hermeneutical impulses in what are typically empiricist or objectivist modes of analysis are understood more sympathetically, as (sometimes) a kind of reaching out? The materialist turn, the affective turn, the descriptive turn: one place where these revolutions converge is in texture, and thus in the sense of touch, in the thickly valenced curiosity—the wonder, the fascination, the attraction—in the question: how do things feel?

Strikingly, Love’s prime example of a text that exhibits this value of “close but not deep” is Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987), and particularly the scene in which Beloved is murdered, in which the narrative occasionally (but not universally) takes on a “blankly descriptive point of view that is ascribed to no one in particular”—a “purely descriptive” or “neutral” perspective alternating with the “rapacious, dehumanizing” perspective of the slave catcher in the scene (Love 2010: 384–85). There is a “documentary aesthetic” to Beloved, Love argues, and “reading Beloved at the surface allows us to see Morrison’s project as registering the losses of history rather than repairing them” (Love 2010: 386). A lot could be made of this example. For instance, what if we think of the “flat” description not as “neutral” but as the affect of the traumatized? Who is the presumed recipient of this account of history, for whom are these losses registered? Is this not also concertedly humanist?

I wonder if it mattered that over the time I was writing this article, I was embroiled in a six-month intensive introduction to mindfulness practice and meditation, which produced a series of consciousness changes, including an ability to more often “see things as they are.” My distrust of the pretense of the phrase “seeing things as they are,” paired with the real sense of attentiveness that experience accompanied, likely enabled my observation about the longing to “reach out” and make contact with the material world and all of its variegated glory that I see in Heather Love’s essay. But my new investment in loosely Buddhist practice also finds precedent or compatibility in Sedgwick’s later work: she wrote about Buddhist teachings and practice in relation to art and non-identification (e.g. Sedgwick 2011: 69–122). Alexis’s use of Sedgwick 2011 for its theorization of texture and touch likewise carries the subtext of attraction to Buddhist practice: Alexis has been...
In another corner of biblical studies, as I recently discovered, there were others working at the intersection of feeling things and the empirical, one of whom is Colleen Shantz. Colleen had been working on affect from a cognitive science perspective, and asking affective questions about Paul, as well as about what we call “religious experience” (2009; 2012; 2013). She is a Canadian colleague of Phil’s (he introduced us), but I had not heard of her work on emotion. I presume that is because it didn’t show up on the cultural theory radar on which affect has been registered.

Although within biblical studies “affect theory” has almost universally meant the cultural theory instantiation (thus devoid of any sticky entanglements with the sciences), since its ostensible founding with Massumi and Sedgwick/Frank, affect theory has always had a kind of creative friction or curious entanglement with scientific/scientistic, empirical, and objectivist discourses—discourses stereotypically aligned with one another. While Massumi theorizes the empirical as palliative, he nonetheless bemoans the stubborn refusal of the sciences and the humanities to speak to each other, and on numerous occasions in his book engages biological and cognitive science experiments (not uncritically) to ground his own theorizing of affect. In Sedgwick and Frank’s reading of Tomkins, they too, express a confounded exhaustion with cultural theory’s broad skepticism of the kinds of scientism one finds in Tomkins:

If anything, his scientism seems to interpret as an alternative and far coarser scientism the theory that would find his so easy to dismiss. The scientism of “theory,” indeed, can become visible in this light as a different product of almost the same, very particular technical moment as Tomkins’s. The fact that one, today, sounds cockamamie and the other virtual common sense… may reveal less about the transhistorical right-

bugging me for years to try meditation, usually to my scoffing resistance. Last I checked, Phil, too, is taking up mindfulness practice. “Sounds obvious but new to me,” he posted on Facebook the other day, “thoughts, judgments, and emotions just come and go. Watch them come, notice them, then let them go. No need to do anything about them.” And I wonder if it matters that my interest in mindfulness practice arose as a strategy for dealing with my own trauma-induced paranoia and anxiety; as well as a way of being at peace with what I initially experienced as an unbearable barrenness and sense of entrapment in my new landscape of central Ohio, where the tender monotony of the Midwest meets the industrial ruins of the rust belt. This, too, may be obvious, but the question of “what’s lost” in this history of affect theory, and my attraction to the losses of history at large, are uncomfortably knit into the losses in my history—uncomfortable because I never seem to fully or precisely answer the question of “what’s lost” no matter how doggedly I go at it.
Without having addressed much of the (cultural studies) affect theory canon, Colleen’s work shares Sedgwick’s and Massumi’s vexation at the humanities/sciences divide. At SBL in the November following our introduction, I saw Colleen present on Romans 7:15–25, which begins, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate to do” (Rom. 7:15). She read the passage for its “strong set of anthropological dualisms,” and as bespeaking a very physiological set of phenomena: the multiple, interactive, but incoherent systems that help produce human experience (Shantz 2015). In other words, Paul speaks to, and from, “the parts into which we are split” (Shantz 2015). This “experience of fracturedness” that Paul describes in his language of struggle between members (melos) and mind (nous), or between flesh (sarx) and spirit (pneuma), might be understood phenomenologically, or even simply in resonance with what cognitive science has theorized, as a “conflict among neural systems” (Shantz 2015).

The exemplary instance of the fractured human, the struggle between parts of oneself, that Colleen chose? Love. Love arrives out of three neurological systems (sex drive/mating, attraction, and attachment/nesting), each of which developed separately but all are integrated only by the “I.” “No part of our brain sees what all the parts are doing,” Colleen observed (2015). Whether it be love or something else, the “I” arbitrates in decision-making between systems at odds with one another. In religious experience, Colleen suggested, the “I” becomes stronger. Thus, Paul’s “I” is the one who “knows best.”

Colleen’s presentation was my foray into the cognitive linguistic wing of SBL, and to be honest, the rest of the session left me a little cold. I was struck not only by Colleen’s charisma, which simultaneously engaged and relaxed me (and perhaps the entire room), but also by what Colleen was speaking about; it was fascinatingly similar to themes and experiences so many of us in another corner of biblical studies have also theorized, though with psychoanalysis and cultural studies as our schemas: the internal incoherence of the subject and the place of the “I” (or, in Freudian language, the ego) in attempting to mediate or contain all those parts and pieces. In speaking about the history of scholarship on ecstatic experience, she characterized a familiar arc from essentializing /

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48 Of course, Mel Chen’s Animacies (2012) and Jane Bennett’s Vibrant Matter (2010) also both stretch outside the expected humanities bias.

49 Quotations from Shantz 2015 are all based on my notes that I took during her oral presentation at the 2015 SBL Annual Meeting.
universalizing claims about these kinds of experiences to strong cultural constructivist modes (exemplified by Wayne Proudfoot 1985). For Colleen, who has biological science in her educational history, cultural constructivist approaches were an “overcorrection” and cognitive approaches engage some universal or “panhuman capacities,” but ones that “collide with culture” (Shantz 2015). Colleen uses cognitive science to recount the complexities of experience, on the many planes in which experience is grounded. Colleen, too, is attached to the materiality of human experience, the “thingliness” of the human—the human as feeling thing. I was likewise struck by Colleen’s suggestion that she had a theological interest—an interest in “meaning-making”—and her statement that “theological readings don’t need to be imposed readings” (Shantz 2015). Felt ones, impinged ones, but not imposed.

Part 5: What’s Lost? Biblical Studies and the (Im)Personal

The appearance of theories of affect in biblical studies, from my perspective, has less to do with any kind of trend in cultural studies than with how biblical studies has historically (and defensively) defined itself—as value-neutral reading, impartial history, “legitimate” science, Eurocentric, and over-determined by male presumption—and the reverberations those definitions have in biblical studies to this very moment. Importantly, though, that is not to say that biblical studies itself is “fixed” by affect theory, especially since obviously affect theory can get caught up in some of those same values, histories, and presumptions. Theorizing affect does not save us from any of the usual self-deceptions or muscularities. But the other reason I hesitate to say that affect theory performs some kind of “fix” for a broken discipline is that (it seems to me) those forms of reading and history that might engage stereotypically empiricist or value-neutral forms of knowing, ones which might seem to align with biblical studies as it has traditionally been defined, are sometimes imbued with highly affective or affected subjective/experiential negotiations, if not always overtly, as well as with a certain kind of sincerity of investment, a humility before the world and before others. If epistemological presumption can be found anywhere, so can epistemological modesty.

In fact it turns out that there is no single or easily characterizable relationship between various forms of scientism and affect, affect theory, or the subjective—or, more generally, between “the empirical” and the “experiential.” They are rhetorical categories from the start, as Latour notes (2005b: 136–37). What changes about biblical studies, though, when we notice this? Hopefully, one effect might be a softening of rhetoric and scholarly self-identification with
single, ideologically defined systems of thought. Another effect, an important one, might be a willingness to notice the serious epistemological eclecticisms working across biblical studies—or, differently said, our intellectual incoherence to ourselves, in which the “I” is constantly mediating and trying to contain uncontrollable experience (hi, Colleen), while at the same time we long to make contact with, to touch, something outside of ourselves.

I’ve often wondered how to express gratitude for a discipline both so enabling and so short-sighted. For me and so many other scholars I admire, the field’s refusals have also been its openings, at least under some circumstances, some of the time. What a relief that there is an impersonal historical or exegetical voice into which we can slip when the weight of claiming the personal on its own terms is too intense or the circumstances too uncongenial, even for those of us whose work has sought to loosen and transgress those distinctions. Many of us were drawn to the field for the chance for sideways or buffered engagement with especially searing injuries, attachments, and frustrations that took/take place in the vicinity of the Bible and under the heavy hand of a biblical culture. But our own exegesis and rigorous contextualizations fail us when they are most successful, leaving us with a sense of, well, something lost. But that is the strange landscape into which these iterations of affect theory erupted, as relief from relief, as it were, and as a sumptuous, creative, and relational space carved out in a discipline that gave even as it was taking away.

Affect theory in all kinds of instantiations rings with the question of “what’s lost”—what’s lost in the linguistic turn, in our accounts of the nation, in our renderings of ideology at large or capitalism specifically? Where is our wonder? Where is the mobility? What about the world or the body as such? Whose experiences don’t make the official register? Affect theory is neither the first nor the last set of theories to try to speak against disciplinary machineries, nor to attempt to ask what’s been lost to them. That is native to any kind of “turn”: an address to what is felt to be missing, what feels conspicuously or perniciously absent, an invocation of what we need and haven’t yet found. “All the new thinking is about loss,” Robert Hass once wrote, “In this it resembles all the old thinking” (1999: 4). Attending to affect does—or, at least, can do—many things, but one of its most profound contributions is that it can help us move that subtext of loss to the foreground by privileging and giving a conceptual language for those potent and hazy experiences that are most basic and endemic to our living. Every theory, every story, may well have loss (or injury or fear or desire . . .) in it; talking about affect might help us better entertain those experiences in all their terrifying and unwieldy force, even to the point of being lost to them. For all that we’ve lost, though, attending to affect might be able to give us, if we can stand it, closer contact with the world in all its
gravel, in all its polychromatic forms of vitality, movement, and sensation. And therein lies the critical difference.

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