What We Talk About When We Talk About Love as an Affect: Framing Love as an Affect in the Process of Self-Formation

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The title of Raymond Carver's short story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" seems to beg the question: *What* do we talk about when we talk about love? Having noted the interchangeable use of emotion and affect to describe love in the final pages of Fernando Murillo's article, a version of this question sprang to mind as I reached its end: What do we talk about when we talk about love as an affect? The term "affect," from the Latin *affectus*, is often understood as relating to "passion" or to "emotion," and thus affect and emotion are frequently referred to synonymously.[1] However, as far back as the fourteenth century affect also finds symmetry with words such as "force" and "influence," as in to affect another or to make an impression upon them.[2]

With this response then to Murillo's thought-provoking article, I endeavor to frame love, and ultimately Murillo's focus on self-love, as an affect not in the form of an emotion, but in keeping with Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg's contention that force does not allow for the subtleties of affect, as an intensity—and in particular, an intensity that sets in motion an unfolding toward the conveyance of emotion.[3] This, it seems, is necessary given the many emotions through which we express love, as made evident in Carver's short story.

With this approach, I situate affect at the start of a spectrum along which physiology and psychology interact—where at one end individuals experience affect as a pre-cognitive "intensity" that in its cognitive state unfolds to become a sensation, an emotion, a feeling, and perhaps eventually a mood. I begin by providing a broader definition of affect. Following which, I turn briefly to Carver to offer a potential counter to love as an emotion.[4] Leading then to my concluding thoughts in which I offer one possibility for the way self-love

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as an intensity may function within the body.

Affective intensities, Seigworth and Gregg observe, transmit from one form to an-other, circulating in and among, as well as through, bodies, objects, and worlds. In doing so, they may be understood to have gradients of bodily capacity that rise and fall with the "rhythms and modalities of [each] encounter."[5] In this way, Eugenie Brinkema furthers, affects possess a certain topology that emotions do not; where the etymology of emotion suggests an outward movement (something communicated to an-other), the etymology of affect—stemming from the ability both to act and to act upon—leaves open the possibility of an affect folding back on itself and "recursively amplify[ing]" itself in a way that an emotion cannot.[6] Affects, in other words, Brinkema contends, are able to act upon themselves and in doing so assume multiple forms.

As the action of Carver's short story unfolds, four friends, while draining a bottle of gin in the day's fading light, debate love's forms. At the story's opening, we are immediately presented with two contrasting conceptions of love. For one character the only true form of love is spiritual, while his wife recollects a man, her previous partner, who one night dragged her across the floor by her ankles while beating her and repeating the phrase, "I love you."[7] In her description of the evening, the woman adamantly refutes any challenges from the others against her interpretation that the man loved her. Meanwhile, love between the other couple is evident in their joy and delight with one another, expressed through their mutual playful teasing. While in a story told by one of the four characters, the husband in an elderly couple severely injured in an accident sinks into a deep depression when in a full body cast he can no longer see his wife. This, we are told, is love.

Love in these examples is demonstrated by a wide array of emotions. Forms that often-run counter to one another. What is held in common among these examples is that as emotions they are forms of love acted out. Returning to Brinkema, affects are such because they can assume multiple forms. Each character acknowledges love as it manifests in an event shared in the story, but in each situation the emotion expressed is different. Love is the point from which the individual acts, but the emotion is as Brinkema observes the outward

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movement of expression. To put it otherwise, love may be understood as an affect as an intensity rather than emotion because it derives from the same point of stimulation, but as it unfolds it manifests in differing forms.

With this in mind, returning to Murillo's article, love as he frames it for the purposes of self-formation (*bildung*) refers to love-of-the-self. The courage that we demonstrate and the risk that we take in being open to self-formation, Fernando tells us, "is an act of love."[8] If, however, to be affected most often necessitates an exchange with an-other—an object, an animal, another human being—what then of the affective experience within the self?[9]

As Theresa Brennan describes, the moment of being affected is a moment of judgment.[10] In that precognitive moment of reading an affect the individual undergoes a process of evaluation that orients them to an-other. Their energies are enhanced or depleted by the affect's intensity, and they experience a physiological change as the affect moves through the body. In this process, the individual may take-up an oppositional stance to the other, or they may become *like* them.[11] In opening space to consider how this may manifest when the affect is originating within the individual, turning to neuroscience as Brennan does, I would like to suggest the possibility of an internal affective process that may be understood as responding to affects in a way that is akin to the physiological response she offers.

What I imagine in the moments that we express love to ourselves is an engagement with love as an affect similar to what we would experience in receiving these affects from another source. If within a social context, as Brennan notes, the physiological change is our hormones responding to that which we have sensed using various receptors, then I suggest that our senses respond similarly when they detect internally the varied intensities (and attitudes) with which we approach ourselves.

Studies have shown that a regular meditative practice helps to enhance the presence of serotonin and norepinephrine in the brain, the hormones responsible for the "modulation of arousal and mood."[12] Conversely, the same hormones may be depleted as we enter in and out of episodes of depression, as

with each episode we become more susceptible to this state as our brain's natural resilience is worn down by the experience.[13] In a similar way that meditation strengthens the brain's resilience, while depression depletes it, it is possible then to think of affects—which impact our hormones, and shape and are shaped by their encounters—as folding back upon themselves and one another within our interiority, thus influencing our sense of self-perception, our capacity for self-love, and consequently, perhaps, our self-formation.

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1 Theresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 3.
2 "Affect" in *Online Etymology Dictionary*, https://www.etymonline.com/word/affect; Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2014).
3 Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1-28.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 2.
6 Brinkema, *The Forms*, 24.
7 Raymond Carver, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," in *Where I'm Calling From* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 128.
8 Fernando Murillo, "Rethinking Affects: Towards an Analogical Understanding of Emotions," *Philosophy of Education 2019*, ed. Kurt Stemhagen (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2020).
9 This becomes of particular importance (and necessarily needs further exploration) when it is taken into account that affect theory is a social theory intended to explain the particularities of our cultural, political, social worlds. See Gregg and Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers"; Sarah Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 29-51.
10 Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*; Ahmed identifies affects as moments of judgment or passing value on things.
11 Someone else's expression of love, contends Brennan, may become another's happiness, while an expression of someone's sadness may become another's depression. This process of mimesis is also known as "entrainment" and is understood as the aligning of organisms to other organisms—groups or individuals—via nervous and hormonal systems, and it relies on an external influence and point of connection.
12 Omar Singleton, et al. "Change in Brainstem Gray Matter Concentration Following a Mindfulness-Based Intervention is Correlated with Improvement in Psychological Well-Being," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8, no. 33 (2014), doi 10.3389/fnhum.2014.00033; indeed, loving-kindness meditation, named so for the ways in which

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it intentionally focuses love of the self, teaches the individual how to engage in a process of meditation that directs loving thoughts back onto the self.

13 Peter D. Kramer, *Against Depression* (New York: Viking, 2005).