Affect as Experience: Possibilities for Transformation

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Introduction

In *Foxfire*[1], a fictional account of an adolescent girl gang written by Joyce Carol Oates, Maddy, the protagonist, in speaking of her deceased father as a representation of a collective, internalized Other who has stirred feelings of shamefulness towards her gender, thinks to herself, "*I hate them all* not knowing exactly who they were but knowing, goddamn, how she felt." This tension, expressed as anger generated in the split between self-perception and the perception of the Other, resonates the shame collaboratively formed by Bartky's model and Campbell's bitter person in Boler's essay.

Through a summary discussion of psychoanalytic and social constructionist theories and social science paradigms, Boler has explicated the insufficiency of these binary models to account for the affective dimensions we experience in our encounters with others. She has shown how these theories have privileged cognition and language over emotions and how these approaches fail to assist in our efforts to understand and address the refusal or resistance that currently plague our classrooms. As she poignantly points out "without a language to identify and name the affective dimensions of our disturbances" we are hindered in our ability to reshape the "sense of interest and passion in the educational process." Finally, by illuminating the gap that presently exists in educational theory, she has argued of the urgent need for the development of an "expressivist" theory of emotion that will take these affective dimensions into account.

In an expressivist theory, Boler explains that affects are "expressed at all times through the body" and "map proactive encounters between bodies and forces." She distinguishes among the more subtle expressions of emotions or vitality affects that are characterized in dynamic terms, the more commonly known categorical affects, and a phenomenon she calls "inscribed habits of inattention" which are typically shaped in unequal power relations. Unlike vitality affects expressed in interaffective communications where these attunements may be matched or discrepant, inscribed habits of inattention serve to silence or dismiss the Other rather than provide affirmation and/or space for reciprocity and exchange in relational interactions. A presumed consequence of these inscribed habits of inattention is foreclosure in effective communication and growth.

However, while the quality of the association can be useful to distinguish among these affects what is common to vitality affects, categorical emotions, and inscribed habits of inattention are their public construction. Our emotions are always "about" or "toward"[2] something, there is necessarily an object of our emotions. Yet when we attempt to describe them we tend to characterize them as "feelings" and in doing so we allude to some sensory sensations, such as a blood rush, a tingling across our skin, or an increase in heart rate. Sometimes these sensations are visible to the

observer and seen as a blush or pallor of our complexion, contorted facial expressions or clenched fists. But these descriptions are problematic, incomplete, and partial since they locate emotions as situated and constructed internally and fail to account for the contextual construction of affect. In thinking of the expression of our emotions, questions arise. What does it mean to express emotions, for this seems to imply that emotions are somehow antecedent to their expression. If emotions are not natural but public constructions, where are they located in the association with the Other? By addressing these two questions I hope to further the discussion of how an expressivist theory of emotions can expand our understanding of the affective dimension and then consider how emotions, as discursive constructions, generate possibilities for growth. My interest lies specifically with inscribed habits of inattention which seemingly serve to silence or dismiss the subject while social uptakes or matching attunements aim to reaffirm existing habits and emotions. Also as a way of interpreting lability through a different reading of Dewey's plasticity I would like to consider how the labile Other may remain untamed by inscribed habits of inattention and instead contest efforts to silence and dismiss as a transformative subject and generate possibilities for inquiry and self-development.

To understand what Dewey meant when he said that "emotional reactions form the chief materials of our knowledge of ourselves and of others"[3] and to demonstrate "affect as experience," Bartky's model serves as a useful example. In the act of posing for an artist, a model perceives herself in a purely business relationship with the artist.[4] As long as the artist upholds the model's self-perception, she experiences "feelings" of pride, pleasure or satisfaction in the role she plays in the production of the artwork. This "feeling" is apparent to both the artist and the model in the ease she displays in posing. The ease or its expression takes the bodily form of relaxation. It is seen in her gestures, an absence of tension is noted. But these observable characteristics or their expression are actually secondary or consequential to the noted absence of tension or the presence of harmony. Dewey called these harmonized activities where "existing kinaesthetic images reinforce" one another "frictionless lines of action."[5] According to Boler, these "lines of action" echo vitality affects which are described in kinetic terms, "cross model interactive attunement" where the affective expression is matched by self and other, and where we experience "social uptake." In these contexts, the unity of means and ends permits an outward release of energy.[6] No struggle exists. As long as the artist's desire for his model remains undeveloped or concealed, the model's self-perception remains unchanged. It is not until the artist reveals his desire by some act, that the model's self-perception undergoes doubt. The prior unified activity of perception of both Self and Other and the means and ends of this activity fracture or fall apart. An attempt to coordinate these activities commences and is experienced as a struggle or tension. The prior energy that was released and expressed as ease moves inward eliciting changes. The model then begins to "feel'' change in her bodily expression as she finds herself caught in a shameful act. But it is not that she first identifies the situation as shameful and then feels it. Instead it is the momentary *tension* between her self-perception and the perception of the artist that *is* shame. It is only after the experience, upon reflection, that this affect is cognitively constituted as shame by the

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model. While it is useful to consider the artist's perception as the object of her shame it is not the idea of it that serves as a stimulus for a change in her behavior that in turn elicits the affect.[7] It is rather that shame represents the tension of coordinating the activity. And while the tension remains unresolved for the model, the "feeling" she now identifies as shame perseveres.

To perceive the model's shame as constructed by the Other or as the model's construct perpetuates a binary paradigm and fails to identify this affect as the tension between two subjects. Furthermore, it promotes the view of model as victim and fails to acknowledge other possibilities. In his writings on incompleteness and dependency,[8] Dewey points to our tendency toward interpretations of these vocabularies as a lack of something in place of possibilities of values to be achieved. He makes similar distinctions between the enjoyed and the enjoyable, the desired and the desirable, and the shamed and the shameful.[9] To say that something is enjoyed, desired or shamed is to make a propositional statement, to state a fact of something that is already in existence or true. The model feels shamed, she is shamed. However, in the case of something enjoyable, desirable or shameful what is implied is a question or judgment of the value/feeling. Finding herself caught in a struggle or tension that must be resolved in order to release it, the model may now undergo inquiry of the tension generated by the discrepancy between her self-perception and that of the Other. Prior to shame the model's self perception or habit of belief about her business relationship was static or fixed. She enjoyed her work and this enjoyment, with its intrinsic value, enabled her to continue posing. However, once this expression of enjoyment was blocked, the expression showed itself as uneasiness and doubt concerning her habit settled in. As a consequence of this doubt the model may now engage in reflection of her habit and a set of questions can be generated. This is what Dewey meant by plasticity.[10] Plasticity here means something quite different from the clay or stone that a sculptor fashions into a statue. It is not our capacity to change from external pressure but rather our capacity to learn from experience and retain from this experience something that will help us cope at a later time. Had the artist succeeded in concealing his desires from the model her self-perception would have gone unchallenged, and while she may have been saved from the experience of shame she would have also remained ignorant of the conditions of her work.

The Foxfire girls came to see their shame not as an individual experience but as a systematic experience, an oppression, that they collectively endured. Bonded together by loyalty, fidelity, trust and love, the sorority soon came to be characterized not as a quest for human relationships but rather one of power. Lacking the tools and language to redefine power and their association, the girls assumed power through a masculine lens and appropriated the tools and rules of patriarchy and capitalism. While their effort was successful, the girls discovered that to use this power against itself meant that the line drawn between the oppressed and the oppressor necessarily became blurred. In their search for self meaning within the language of a patriarchal world, the girls learned that if their goal was to become more human they could not achieve this goal by merely reversing the terms, by

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simply changing the poles.[11] Ultimately, through their new experience as oppressors and in feeling a loss of their own humanity, violence became unacceptable to them.

Maxine Greene[12] reminds us that in modern times feelings of domination and powerlessness are almost inescapable and that in our own conscious endeavors we can think about the world and its conditions, inquire into the forces that appear to dominate us, and interpret these experiences as they occur day to day. In order to develop autonomy and a sense of agency required of living a moral life, we must make sense of what is happening to ourselves. Yet decisions about autonomy and agency when viewed out of a social context have no meaning. We live a moral life, make moral decisions, and receive our moral education in relation to others. And it is also in relations to others that a need for autonomy and agency arises. It is our perspective and the space generated by the tension in our experiences with the Other that inform our interpretation and the new categories we create, that engender growth.

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1. Joyce Carol Oates, *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* (New York: Plume, 1994), 65.

2. John Dewey, "The Theory of Emotion," *The Early Works 1882-1898*, vol. 4, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 173.

3. John Dewey, "Ethics", Reprinted in *The Later Works 1925-1953*, vol. 7, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinios University Press, 1985).

4. Sandra Lee Bartky, "Shame and Gender" in *Femininity and Domination,* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) 86.

5. Dewey, "The Theory of Emotion," 156.

6. Ibid., 156.

7. Ibid., 174.

8. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; reprint, New York: The Free Press, 1966) 41-53.

9. John Dewey, "The Construction of Good"Reprinted in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. John J. McDermott (1929: reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 580-82.

10. Dewey, *Democracy and Education,* 44.

11. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970; reprint, New York: Continuum, 1993) 38.

12. Maxine Greene, "Wide-Awakeness and the Moral Life" in *Landscapes of Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978) 43-44.

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