

## **Authenticity and Depthiness in the Representation of Affects: Perception and Performativity in Contemporary (Auto)Fiction**

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**Abstract:** This article analyses the tension between the perception and performance of affect in two contemporary texts: Heather Christle's *The Crying Book* (2019) and Christine Smallwood's *The Life of the Mind* (2021). Both subvert the expectation of feminine sentiment and pose questions about the authenticity of affect. Although affects are always mediated in fiction, experimental fictional texts have the potential for greater authenticity than the performative affective displays of the emotional public sphere.

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*Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean*  
Alfred Tennyson

Today's hyper-mediatised age seems to be characterised by extreme emotions and a "surfeit of affect" (Hoogland 2014, 11; Massumi 2002a, 27). We find ourselves bombarded by affect in our lived experience and increasingly in academic references. We live in the age of autobiography and confession. Our newsfeeds and reading lists are awash in trauma, anger, and indignation. Affect seems to have triumphed over critique even in academic discussion. Critical reading has been pathologised as paranoid and sent to the dusty library stacks. We are reading with the grain, reparatively, in enchantment, to mention but a few alternatives proposed to overcome the perceived negativity of academic reading practices.<sup>1</sup> Less attention is paid to theory and methods and more to "new ways to feel about ourselves" when we read, interpret, and write (Kurnick 2020, 351). Affect seems to promise us the immediacy and authenticity from which our media-saturated reality has cut us off. Indeed, in the age of Instagram perfection, Photoshop, and deepfakes, it is increasingly hard to

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1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) proposed reparative reading as an alternative to the traditionally suspicious academic reading that she calls "paranoid." Timothy Bewes (2015), in a similar mode, proposes "reading with the grain," instead of the deconstructive reading against the grain. Rita Felski (2008, 2020) explores reading in enchantment. I engage more fully with the debates on the nature of academic reading in Marling and Marling (2021).

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distinguish what is manufactured and what is real. But we know what we feel. Thus, in our “reality hunger” (Shields 2010), we have made an assertive turn to affect.<sup>2</sup>

Even if the radicalness of this “affective turn” has been exaggerated, as Ruth Leys (2017)<sup>3</sup> maintains in her important critique, affect has become one of the key words of 21<sup>st</sup>-century humanities and not only because of fickle academic fashion. Affect seems to explain many of today’s central issues, from increased socio-political polarisation in a time of hermetic filter bubbles to diverging public reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic. Postmodernism, characterised by the waning of affect, as Fredrick Jameson (1991, 16) famously argued, grew out of service-oriented late capitalism. Today we are living in what Joseph Pine and James Gilmore (1999) have called the experience economy, which, among other things, prizes and commodifies affects. Social media are one affect-producing apparatus, but we have many other examples, such as extreme sports and atrocity tourism. Thus, Brian Massumi (2002b, 233) believes that “affect is now much more important for understanding power [ . . . ] than concepts like ideology.” Indeed, we are becoming increasingly aware of the ideological force of affect. As Sara Ahmed (2010, 216) has evocatively stated, “feelings might be how structures get under our skin.” Therefore, for this article, affects are not just bodily intensities but also “feelings of existence” that are tied to cultural formations and deeply embedded in cultural, economic, social, and spatial contexts (Anderson 2016, 735).

This is why we need to interrogate the tension between the perception and performance of affect. Much of the intense affect that we encounter in the emotional public sphere is performed and deeply performative.<sup>4</sup> This situational performed affect is not exactly fake, but synthetic. The performances are enacted in relation to the social norms that determine what is to elicit joy (weddings, Olympic victories) or

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2 We have also made a turn to realism, but this does not necessarily imply friction with the present-day political status quo (Nealon 2017, 72, 83). This turn to realism emphasises ontology which “necessarily commits it to weak or non-existent political positions” (Nealon 2017, 73). The fact that these debates do not provide us with viable tools for discussing the present political moment has been pointed out by many (e.g., Baumbach, Young and Yue 2016). These discussions are directly linked to affect, one of the most popular ontological theories today; therefore, this article employs critical affect theories.

3 Delving into this critique is not necessary here, but it should be included in any conversation on the politics of affect theory itself. There are several feminist criticisms (e.g., Hemmings 2005), but I would especially like to highlight the work of Ruth Leys as well as the summary of the debate by Clive Barnett (2020, 124) who insightfully analyses how the ontological emphasis of much of affect theory is “so saturated in feeling that it is devoid of meaning.”

4 Indeed, perhaps provocatively, I would argue that affects can also be treated as citational performatives, following Derrida (1977) and Butler (1993), but this theoretical argument will have to be made elsewhere because of space limitations.

grief (death, social strife). This performative effect is achieved by citing previous affective performances that have congealed into an instantly recognisable impression of realness. Citationality is logical in view of the limited time people scrolling through social media feeds or clicking through channels spend on each individual story. Quick and easy recognition of a tragedy or triumph matters in our attention economy; misrecognition comes with many risks, as the emotional public sphere is quick to shame and cancel. The performatives might be citational, but they address others, are perceived by others, and make things happen, even if they are merely performative.

The notion of performativity is even more pronounced in the case of fiction where affects are represented and evoked in the audiences reading them. The perception of performativity does not, however, cancel out authentic response. I will investigate the performance and perception of affect in one work of autofiction/autotheory, Heather Christle's *The Crying Book* (2019), and in one novel, Christine Smallwood's *The Life of the Mind* (2021). Both can be seen as examples of new sincerity in fiction, but both also subvert the expectation of feminine sentiment and pose questions about the authenticity of affect. Like Renée C. Hoogland (2014, 3), I am interested in aesthetic encounters that can be a "potentially disruptive, if not violent, force field with material, political and practical consequences." In this mode, reading is a set of affective relations (Boldt and Leander 2020), not only of disruption but also of recognition and resignation.

### **Authenticity and affect**

It is not accidental that the notion of "authenticity" has reappeared in critical conversation in parallel with the rise of affect.<sup>5</sup> Maiken Umbach and Mathew Humphrey provided us with a cultural history of affect in 2018, almost fifty years after Lionel Trilling's lectures on authenticity at Harvard in 1970 (Trilling 1972). Trilling's lectures contrast sincerity and authenticity. For him, the latter is particularly characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and modernity that celebrates being true to oneself rather than adhering to social norms. As a result, we see the elevation of "disorder, violence, unreason," due to their perceived authenticity as sources or art and our inner being (Trilling 1972, 11). In Trilling's opinion, authenticity to oneself was valorised in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the detriment of public discourse. Today, too, we assume that unreason – where we do not think – is where we can find authenticity. If Trilling's generation looked towards psychoanalysis for answers, we turn to affect the-

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5 A thorough list of references is provided by Julia Straub (2012, 13).

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ory. We are still searching for that authentic self, which we believe can be revealed by affects that, for many people, cannot be faked because they are pre-cognitive. Writers looking for new sincerity are not necessarily following Trilling's juxtaposition but rather arguing against the detached ironies of postmodernism. This article, however, questions the widely accepted conflation of affect with authenticity, arguing that affect can be performative and authentic at the same time.

Anna Gibbs (2001, 1) believes that affects, as feelings of existence, travel, leaping from body to body. They can also travel by leaping from theatre stages, works in an art gallery, or from the pages of a book. This means that we need to take affects and their representability seriously. Affects promise authenticity and depth in a world of surfaces; however, defining that depth is remains a complex issue. As Timotheus Vermeulen (2017) noted, today's life is characterised not so much by depth as by performative "depthiness" that is, among other things, affectively loaded. Affect, as pre-cognitive intensity, has been hailed for being unadulterated by discursive interventions. Research in different fields, however, has shown that affects can be generated by marketing, political campaigns, and memory sites. Affect can be viewed as an almost-tangible commodity bought and sold.

Yet, affect is still linked to its perceived experientiality and its promise to fill our craving for its reality-affirming authenticity. This might explain the hunger for auto-biographies, testimonies, and trauma narratives. These could be called contemporary versions of the confession meant to make a person transparent to God as well as to reading audiences (de Villiers 2012, 5). I agree with Wolfgang Funk (2015, 79) in his assessment that people seek not just authenticity but, one could argue, a broader realism in a time when we must rethink the relationship between experience and representations of experience. This is certainly the case now as we begin to appreciate how impossible it is to grasp what is real and what is a simulacrum. What we feel seems to be one of the few things we are certain about, so it is unsurprising that we are interested in reading and writing about this last stronghold of authenticity in the world of fakeness.

The question of what constitutes authenticity in today's social reality is a complex one. For example, Alison Gibbons (2017, 130) argues that metamodern<sup>6</sup> affect is

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6 This article does not use metamodernism as a periodising device for texts written after and in response to post-modernism. Rather, I am using the work of Vermeulen and his collaborators to reflect on the "structures of feeling" of the 2000s (cf. van den Akker and Vermeulen 2017, 4). They provide an accessible condensation of Raymond Williams' notion of the structure of feeling as "a sentiment, or rather still, a sensibility that everyone shares, that everyone is aware of, but which cannot easily, if at all, be pinned down. Its tenor, however, can be traced in art, which has the capability to express a common experience of a time and place" (van den Akker and Vermeulen 2017, 7).

rooted in an intersubjective encounter: "It is ironic yet sincere,<sup>7</sup> sceptical yet heartfelt, solipsistic yet desiring of connection. Most of all, it is experiential." Gibbons believes the fragility created by a contemporary, fragmented reality makes us yearn for grounding in experientiality and a potential encounter with others.

By contrast, Lee Konstantinou (2017, 98), believes that the trend of new sincerity and postirony "gives us postmodern reality by means of non-postmodern form" through devices like "flatness of tone, rambling plots, autobiographical content and notable lack of interiority" as well as the creation of "the gap between the reader and the writer." In other words, while culture at large craves easily consumable affects, literary fiction has refused this easy legibility and has sought instead to dig into the more opaque affects created by our present moment.

It is the latter point that I find specifically fascinating in the context of contemporary reality hunger. Readers crave the authenticity of affect that is promised by autobiography, true crime fiction, and reality TV. However, that reality is doctored to the extent that its disturbing recognisability is reduced to safe stereotypes. This is why we need to look for authenticity in experimental arts that are not afraid to seek out less legible and therefore more authentic realities. Instead of easily accessible affect, the autobiographical content of literary fiction helps stress what Konstantinou (2017, 100) has called "failures of intersubjectivity," the illegibility of affects and their appropriate interpretation. In this article, I situate my intervention in the gap between the hunger for (vicarious) experience and the failures of intersubjectivity represented by contemporary literary fiction and autofiction/autotheory. Specifically, I focus on the legibility of tears, a frequent marker of affect.

### **Reading tears, reading affects**

Tears are a phenomenon endowed with an aura of authenticity, loss of control, and authority of experience.<sup>8</sup> Eugenie Brinkema (2014, 2) usefully emphasises the origins of the belief in tears as true indicators of our interior states, citing the Gospel according to St. John: "Jesus wept (John 11: 35), *and no more needed to be said*" (italics in Brinkema). For Brinkema, modern tears have become opaque, if not outright suspect. She cites Roland Barthes: "If I have so many ways of crying, it may be because, when I cry, I always address myself to someone [...] I adapt my ways of

7 Trilling contrasts authenticity and sincerity. The latter word for him denotes public-oriented self-representation. This performative version of sincerity has also been taken up by some scholars interested in the so-called New Sincerity in fiction, for example Adam Kelly (2010).

8 A pithy intellectual history of tears can be found in Brinkema. A more historical narrative is provided by Tom Lutz (1999).

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weeping to the kind of blackmail which, by my tears, I mean to exercise around me” (Barthes 2002, 181).<sup>9</sup> Barthes, however, continues by directing the critical gaze inward, wondering whether tears could be auto-affective: “I make myself cry, in order to prove to myself that my grief is not an illusion: tears are signs, not expressions. By my tears, I tell a story, I produce a myth of grief, and henceforth I adjust myself to it” (Barthes 2002, 182). Barthes uncovers the central tension that this article also seeks to tease out: Where is the boundary of authentic and performative affect in situations where we expect sincerity? Does performativity necessarily suggest inauthenticity?

Tears are dangerously ambiguous: we cry in sadness, anger, prayer, in political performance.<sup>10</sup> We also cry while watching movies or listening to songs of sentimental significance. What about those tears that are not interpersonal in the sense that Barthes describes them: not targeted at another human being? It is not surprising that there are actual scientific experiments about the differences between kinds of tears, for example in Rose-Lynn Fisher’s album *The Topography of Tears* (2017) where, using an optical microscope, she seeks to answer whether or not we can distinguish tears of hope and catharsis, laughter and loss. Her scientific equipment does not give her any definitive answers. “Instead of conclusions,” she concedes, “my exploration of tears has led me deeper into the intangible poetry of life” (Fisher 2017, 8). It is this opaque poetry of life that is also explored in contemporary fiction, as will be shown below.

Tears remain just as elusive in academic literary and cultural criticism. As Jennifer Doyle (2013, 84) observes: “Tears are suspect, whether they are represented within a work of art or produced in the spectator. Tears seem to embody both the height of unquestioned emotionality and the depths of emotional manipulation.” That tension animates this article as well. Doyle writes about performance art, where the visceral presence of the artist and the experiencing audience intensifies the affective effect. Audience members who encountered Marina Abramović during “The Artist Is Present” performance at MoMA in 2010 had authentic affective experiences, often ending in tears despite the obviously staged nature of the encounter. Doyle describes other instances of endurance art that, by using the “effect of intimacy,” seek and do physically move the audience (Doyle 2005, 46, 47–48).

<sup>9</sup> Unlike Brinkema, I am using the full quotation from Barthes to show the extent to which manipulation but also self-awareness is built into Barthes’ fragment.

<sup>10</sup> There is fascinating research on male politicians crying as a performance of masculinity (Gesualdi 2013).

However, even in this context, Doyle (2013, 85) warns that “once emotion is absorbed into the sphere of representation, once a feeling becomes an image of feeling, its claim to authenticity (to being a real feeling) is thrown into question.” We can debate the boundary of the performed and the real in Marina Abramović’s performances, such as “The Onion” (1996), one of the works that Doyle analyses in which Abramović complains about her life while eating a large raw onion, increasingly flooded by tears. However, this ambivalence vanishes when we take up a work of fiction. The emotional intensities conveyed in fiction are always representations of experiences that, nevertheless, have the potential to create the perception of authentic affect and perhaps even an authentic affective response. While Doyle believes that we do not cry in art galleries, we do in the intimate spaces of our home while we read books. Hoogland (2014, 2) calls us to look into “the actual ‘work’ that a work of art, intentionally or not, voluntarily or not, does in the world in which I encounter it.” In analysing fictional affects, we also need to be attentive to the work fictionally induced affects do.

Brinkema (2014, 4) argues for finding a way to read affects and their “exteriority in textual form as something that commands a reading.” Without attention to this exteriority, any analysis of literature or any other art form becomes merely a sharing of subjective experiences that can be neither argued with nor critically challenged. Instead, all we get is the story of “the successful consumption of affect and theoretical accounts of each private feeling experience complicit with the explicit marketing of feeling” (Brinkema 2014, 32). Brinkema (2014, 37) is also the main methodological guide here in “reading affects as having form,” as this “enables the specificity, complexity, and sensitivity to textuality that has gone missing in affect studies and is sorely needed.” While I will not be performing as close a reading as Brinkema does, I follow her guidance in looking closely at a set of textual representations of tears to show the contradictory effect of fictional surfaces on the affective experience.

### **Autofiction as a genre of authentic affects?**

The search for intensity, “the lure and blur of the real,” has led to the proliferation of new genres of self-writing: “criticism as autobiography; self-reflexivity, self-ethnography, anthropological autobiography: a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction” (Shields 2010, 5). These cross-genre texts create the expectation that the textual self is that of the author. As Jessica Winter (2021) accounts in a *New York Times Book Review* essay, the necessary building of any work of fiction on the author’s subjectivity leads to many rushed misidentifications and raises complex challenges for the author:

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If she is forced to confirm that her material is autobiographical, then she risks forfeiting both the privacy and the power of transfiguration that fiction promises. If she denies it, then she surrenders a badge of authenticity that she may never have wished to claim in the first place, and lays herself open to accusations that she is appropriating the pain of others. (Winter 2021)

The blending of the fictional and the autobiographical is more heightened in texts explicitly labelled as autofiction.

French-born autofiction and its younger sibling autotheory seem to be excellent examples of texts that seek to satiate our reality hunger. The term “autofiction” was coined by Serge Doubrovsky (1977, 10) for whom “fiction, of events and facts strictly real” surrenders to “the adventure of language.” The self is not merely fictionalised, but the very act of fictionalisation opens the possibility of a multi-dimensional exploration of the self.

Autofiction offers itself as an alternative to autobiography. Autobiography prefers clarity, closure, redemption, subjecting life to the normative frames of intelligibility and significance (Smith and Watson 2010, 16). As Lauren Berlant has warned:

The sad part is that if we see ourselves as the inflated subjects of suffering who are only really living in relation to the transformative event of gesture, and if our genres of the transformative event are the only media through which we think that other people will be interested in us, we construct our lives and our encounters with destructive disregard for the ordinary forms of care, inattention, passivity, and aggression that don't organize the world at the heroic scale. (Berlant and Prosser 2011, 186)

We should attend to these ordinary affects and forms of care if we want to capture the world around us today, but they are not touched upon in conventionalised trauma and regeneration narratives. Berlant argues that “the genre of ‘life’ is a most destructive conventionalized form of normativity” that limits “people’s capacity to invent ways to attach to the world” (Berlant and Prosser 2011, 182). This raises the question as to what kind of intelligibility we yearn for, or what kind of unintelligibility we are willing to bear. Opacity generates speculation but also potentially indifference.

While autofiction uses one’s life for fictional experimentation, autotheory also seeks to weave theoretical reflection into the narrative.<sup>11</sup> Most of the relatively lim-

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11 The best-known examples of autotheory are perhaps Paul Preciado’s *Testo Junkie* (2008, in English in 2013) and Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015). Preciado’s experiences of taking testosterone without medical supervision are interspersed with a reflection on how the pharmaceutical industry has changed gender identity. Nelson’s

ited work on autotheory done thus far in English explores its relationship to post-modernism, post-postmodernism, and critical theory. Theory in the autotheoretical practice becomes a tool for literary creation and self-reflection. In fact, as Émile Lévesque-Jalbert (2020, 82) aptly puts it, “it is through the interval between fiction and non-fiction that the critical combines with the biographical, and the personal with the political.” In such texts, the author becomes a sort of text that writes the world. This type of textual creation also opens itself to writing that accepts the self as “a porous and disorganized thing that is constantly impelled (compelled and desiring) to take up positions of clarity in relation of objects, world, situations” (Berlant and Prosser 2011, 187).

Ralph Clare (2020, 86) argues that “autotheory’s sincerity lies in the exposure of a vulnerable self that recognizes its contingency and social/linguistic constructedness while nevertheless insisting upon the ‘reality’ and value of lived experience.” I find this tension between confession and critique particularly attractive for diagnosing the present, with its pervasive sense of invisible but inevitable crises filling us with unease and other amorphous minor affects that are intimately ours but also impersonal, part of the affective atmospheres of the present moment that, to use Sianne Ngai’s (2005, 14) words, is characterised by “a feeling of confusion about what one is feeling.” This unease, however, is not easily representable. This is precisely the sort of non-dramatic opaque affect that Konstantinou, cited earlier, was seeking in contemporary texts that almost violently resist affective connection (like the blank works of Chris Kraus and Tao Lin, to cite two extensively researched examples). This confusion, I believe, also creates the most intriguing autotheoretical writing, particularly from an affective perspective.

### **(Auto)theoretical and fictional tears**

In the following section, I want to illustrate the abovementioned theoretical discussion by comparing the representation of tears, a conventional affective marker, in two books: Heather Christle’s autotheoretical *The Crying Book* (2019) (henceforth marked as C in in-text references) and Christine Smallwood’s novel *The Life of the Mind* (2021) (henceforth S in in-text references). Christle sets out on a nonfictional project of exploring the biological and social nature of tears, but this investigation is heavily interlaced with the tears of the narrating “I”. Smallwood’s acerbic novel indeed is about the mind of a contemporary young academic stuck in precarious

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book, seemingly a memoir of pregnancy and childbirth, explicitly refers to a number of theorists in the margins of her text, making the implicit theoretical dialogues explicit on the textual level as well.

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adjunct jobs with no prospects or even desire for anything better. As the protagonist ponders, “want itself was a thing of the past” (S, 13). Her life is surrounded by the sense of an inevitable but slow and invisible ending. She reflects on climate change, refugees, the end of steady academic jobs. Although the stance of the protagonist is detached and cynical, Smallwood’s text evokes sharply recorded flat affects.

In a way, both texts appear grounded in the stereotypical narrative of feminine sentiment, as both protagonists obsess about reproduction: in Christle’s case, the struggle to conceive and to nurture a baby; in Smallwood’s case, the novel begins with the protagonist having a medically induced miscarriage and ends with her supporting one of her friends having an abortion. Yet, neither text easily fits the sentimental model and can instead be seen as an abrasive example of the mode of “female complaint,” a genre that foregrounds “witnessing and explaining women’s disappointment in the tenuous relation of romantic fantasy to lived intimacy” (Berlant 2008, 1–2). This ambivalent mode combines a critical and sentimental stance and produces “a space of disappointment, but not disenchantment” (Berlant 2008, 2). This ambivalence is evoked in the two texts’ use of affect and specifically tears. While Christle claims that tears are unknowable, she still resorts to their authority throughout the text. Smallwood resists the temptation of this legible formal marker but employs it in a stealthy manner. In her text, tears are accompanied by other bodily fluids, from blood to drool, from shedding hair and snot to the remains of a fetus. The abject, it seems, is at times used to stand in for more conventional tears as a signifier of loss.

The scenes of crying in Christle’s book are occasionally predictable (in response to pregnancy, childbirth, grief) in the tradition of feminine sentimentality. This can be seen in the following quote: “Motherhood gets me. I cry whenever I watch a representation – whether fictional or not – of birth. I have also cried at the gym, on the elliptical, watching a trailer for some dumb and heartbreaking movie” (C, 4). Contrary to what Doyle claims, the narrator even cries in museums or planes (C, 5, 28). In weaving together her research and her experience, she seems to be giving more weight to experience than science. By her own admission, “it is exhausting sometimes to conduct these imaginary arguments with scientists who seem determined to misunderstand the bodies of others” (C, 118). The body is more relevant than the objective critical gaze. The text ends with an affectively evocative poem by Aram Saroyan, consisting of one word, “lightht,” and the observation of how the audience realises “we all flicker” (C, 171). After a blank page, we get a somewhat jarring reminder that if readers should be having “thoughts of self-harm or suicide”, they should call a helpline, the phone number of which is given for both the USA and Canada (C, 173). This would suggest an affective, confessional reading, making use

of today's fashionable fragmentary style to do grief work and to arrive at a realisation that "I know I need to stop crying for long enough that I regain my capacity to imagine possibilities again" (C, 170). The books seem to say that art, like the text you are holding, having remembered your own tears and perhaps having shed some on the pages, allows us to imagine different possibilities of living.

Yet, this is not a fully satisfying reading of the tears that well up throughout the pages of the text. It is not just confession or meditation but also a critical reflection informed by science (even if at times it is taken down a notch for its arrogance and privilege blindness, especially when it comes to race), theory, and different art works. The theory does not crowd out the teary author but stays in the background, offering at times oblique commentary. For example, we get an excerpt from Roland Barthes' *Mourning Diary* from the day his beloved mother died, in which the philosopher remarks on frivolously buying tea cake and coming to the conclusion that this was "the most painful point at the most abstract moment" (C, 124–125). Even the confessional sections are interspersed with scenes in which the narrator maintains a certain unsentimental detachment:

The length of the cry matters. I especially value an extended session, which gives me time to become curious, to look in the mirror, to observe my physical sadness. A truly powerful cry can withstand even this scientific activity. (C, 2)

This method, as a matter of fact, is used from the very beginning of the text. Christle smuggles in a detached discussion of crying in church crying rooms, often now the scenes of the sacrament of reconciliation (C, 66), in which a person's anguish can be met with the rote ministrations of a priest. She often returns to the medieval mystic Margery Kempe, the first woman autobiographer in English, famous for her effusive crying. This creates droll scenes, such as the one of Kempe crying so intensely when approaching Jerusalem on her pilgrimage that she almost fell off her donkey. Christle comments that "I wish she could laugh at herself, but she refuses" (C, 49).

Similar distance is displayed throughout the text, often through the evocation of our bodily presence in crying: "It is fortunate to have a nose. Hard to feel you are too tragic a figure when the tears mix with snot. There is no glamour in honking" (C, 3). Yet, Christle intersperses the scenes of distance with confessional ones. For example, the above quotation is followed by the first-person scene describing the effects of a break-up: "I put all my crying into my mouth, felt it shake while I stalked to the car, inside which I let the crying move north to my eyes and south to my heaving gut" (C, 3).

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Smallwood, by contrast, presents us with a snarkier fictional voice whose affect is more ambiguous. The difference is partly due to the first versus third-person narrative. The latter gives the author more latitude to evoke disagreeable or controversial emotions than the first-person narrative, as many authors have found out in the panoptic social media scrutiny of today. We see this already from the opening page in which Dorothy, the protagonist, does not take a call from her therapist:

It wasn't that the miscarriage was such a big deal or that she was broken up in grief about it; it was that she hadn't told her therapist she was pregnant, and didn't want to have a whole session about her tendency to withhold. In the asymmetrical warfare of therapy, secrets were a guerilla tactic. (S, 3)

Readerly sympathy is displaced here: in a more conventional text, the focus of the scene would be on the miscarriage, and the parsing of the emotions of the event would be more central. We know that the miscarriage is important, as Dorothy dwells in detail on its physical effects, especially the bleeding, yet her mind wanders to the many minor affects that surround the traumatic event in an example of emotional realism that sacrifices the legibility of sentiment to authenticity in representing experience.

Tears do make a striking appearance when Dorothy meets her PhD supervisor, Judith, at a conference in Las Vegas. Judith's long-time editor has died in a freak accident, and Judith is seeking a confidante but perhaps also an audience for her grief:

The physiological collapse, the lachrymal overflow, that, in a weaker person, would appear as weakness, in Judith only enhanced her strength. The watery sheen cascading down her face did not make her seem quavering and helpless but strong and passionate. She had the strength to cry; she had the force to withstand it. Tears were no match for her spirit. (S, 142)

The scene is written with the same ironic detachment as the previous scenes of private feeling. Judith's tears are described as being "punctuated by little hiccups and wheezing breaths" (S, 142), and, instead of a mediation on grief, we read about the awkwardness of the protagonist in deciding what part of Judith would be appropriate to touch in an attempt at consolation. Dorothy is aware of the performativity that both women are involved in but also of the presence of authentic feeling behind the façade. Even the scene of grief becomes a scene of power as Judith commands Dorothy to cry with her, and Dorothy, indeed compliantly,

[...] took a breath and exhaled and buried her face in her hands and did her best to channel the whimpering mewls of an infant. [...] Privately, Dorothy felt proud of her effort. She had done a few school plays in her youth. She did not believe she entirely lacked talent for performance. (S, 145–46)

This scene, even more than the preceding one, invites attention to the performativity of tears and the attendant conventional affect. Dorothy's crying is inauthentic, but at the same time, it conveys authentic, even if ambivalent, interpersonal connection, one that leads Judith to recover her poise and leave. Dorothy, however, then finds herself experiencing a toothache with "an absence behind the pain" (S, 147) and succumbs to tears once more. But these tears, too, are followed by a critical comment: "There was something fortifying about crying in public, about letting the snot flow; what felt degrading in private, in public announced one's sensitivity and the great passions that ruled a life" (S, 148). So, this realisation does not rule out authentic affect. At the end of this scene, Dorothy "cried again, animally, whimpering" (S, 148). This juxtaposition of knowing irony and a physical description of crying creates a sense of authentic affect.

Since Dorothy holds a doctorate from a prestigious university, it is not surprising that theoretical musings end up on the page, about gender, feminism, academic precarity, and climate change, to name but a few topics. Intriguingly, among other thinkers, Lauren Berlant, who is extensively quoted in this article, also appears:

"Cruel optimism" was Berlant's way of theorizing why and how people remained attached to fantasies and aspirations of "the good life," how those aspirations injured them, and the resulting affect – something she called "stuckness." (S, 119)

The novel seems to be a demonstration of Berlant's theorisation of stuckness. In fact, one of Dorothy's friends fails to invite her to submit to a special issue on the topic because "'Cruel optimism' was Dorothy's entire life. [...] In other words, Dorothy knew too much about cruel optimism to write about it" (S, 119). The stuckness appears at work and in intimate relations, yet the theorisation comes to life in Dorothy's mind because, despite all its intellectual detachment, her mind is attached to a physical, leaky body. While Konstantinou has analysed texts in which detachment and flatness of tone create a gap between the reader and the writer, Smallwood's text invites a more ambivalent reading: not exactly sympathy, but at least recognition. The protagonist's detachment from the world seems to create a gap between her and the reader, but the recognisability of her situation sutures it.

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Indeed, the novel positions itself as a form of social commentary more than Christle's meditation on crying. Christle also situates her text in today's social realities, in her sustained critique of systematic racism for example, but the first-person narrative meditates more on interpersonal connections. Smallwood writes explicitly about the academic precariat:

No one of Dorothy's generation would ever accrue the kind of power Judith had, and this was a good thing even as it was an unjust and shitty thing. Judith was old and Dorothy was young, Judith had benefits and Dorothy had debts. The idols had been false but they had served a function, and now they were all smashed and no one knew what they were working for. The problem wasn't the fall of the old system, it was that the new system had not arisen. Dorothy was like a janitor in the temple who continued to sweep because she had nowhere else to be but who had lost her belief in the essential sanctity of the enterprise. (S, 143–44)

This is an apt comment on the pervasive sense of ending that permeates the pages of the novel, the slow violence of not just climate change, but also of the death of academia as we know it. These broader processes are too invisible to be experienced directly, and hence we can get access to them only through the oblique affects like the ones that Smallwood represents. The drama of being confused about what one is feeling is at the core of today's crisis ordinariness, and detached resignation might be a more appropriate response than upper-case affect.

Both authors use tears to suggest affective intelligibility but at the same time to undermine this reading. Tears are explicitly shown to be performative, but, paired with other, more abject bodily fluids that resist aestheticisation, they signal the misperception and unintelligibility of affects to others and to ourselves. The texts testify to the opacity of tears as well as other affective markers. The boundary of the authentic and the performative is probed and shown to be porous. The autotheoretical text, because of the presence of the narrating "I", is perhaps more constrained in its affective representations. With its low-key dramas, the novel form allows the author to create a less sympathetic and therefore more credible representation of contemporary affective atmosphere.

### Conclusion

When we look at today's deluge of memoirs, trauma narratives, and confessions, texts in which memory is "rewritten in the direction of feeling" (Shields 2010, 56), we can see that the authority of experience can also become restrictive, especially if the feeling is subjected to very limited surface readings. The texts analysed above dare to resist the temptation of the easy legibility of "depthy" feelings and

their reality effect. They invite us into the seemingly safe world of sentimental feelings, but then lead us to a more ambivalent perception of affects and their performativity. This seems to create a gap between the reader and the text, but to make the effort of bridging it leads to a nuanced and authentic understanding of contemporary, gendered, affective atmospheres.

Adrienne Rich (1986, 213–14) has reflected on a useful theory: “Theory – the seeing of patterns, showing the forest as well as the trees – theory can be a dew that rises from the earth and collects in the rain cloud and returns to earth over and over. But if it doesn’t smell of the earth, it isn’t good for the earth.” We should treat experience the same way. If experience does not smell of earth – or in this case perhaps of snot – it ceases to be a testimony of a complex life lived and becomes a commodified artefact that satiates reality hunger with cheap junk emotions. Most nourishing contemporary writing invites us to meditate on the affective “I” in the contemporary world, released from the demand of affective legibility and likeability.

Our actual bodies and affects are wild and resist simple and unambiguous representation. This messy affect is not what we see in the emotional public sphere where affects are predictable, stereotypical, and performative. Instead, we need to turn to fiction where the distance from the first-person experience gives writers the freedom to be unlikable and illegible. Thus, although the affects we see in fiction are always mediated, they have the potential for greater authenticity than the performative affective displays on “American Idol” or a momfluencer site. Fiction and other art forms have the capacity to surprise, to rub us the wrong way, and to create the sorts of messy affects that our lived experience generates. Today, it might be time to seek not confession and testimony but opacity and the uncertainties of writing. This tactic is by no means new, as de Villiers (2012) has shown, but it has become more vital than ever in our present political moment, in which confessions replete with the authority of experience have drowned out critical reflection. Lévesque-Jalbert (2020, 82) writes about a friend who wants to live in theory, “because in theory everything is perfect.” Examples from today’s experimental writing should tempt us to live in fiction, because it is imperfect like the world around us. This messiness of fiction might give us more authentic guidance for navigating the present than the performative affects of the emotional public sphere.

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## **Autentsus ja sügavuse illusioon afektide kujutamises: taju ja performatiivsus nüüdisaegses ilukirjanduses ja autofiktsioonis**

Raili Marling

**Võtmesõnad:** afekt, performatiivsus, autofiktsioon, nüüdiskirjandus

Üks afektiuringute keskseid teoreetikuid Brian Massumi (2002b, 233) väidab, et tänapäeval on afekt olulisem mõiste kui ideoloogia, sest võim toimib üha enam afektide abil. Kuna üldiselt vaadeldakse afekte kehaliste intensiivsustena, mida ei saa teadlikult kontrollida, siis peetakse neid autentseiks, seda ka tänapäeval, mil autentse ja völtsi piir on üha ähmasem. Kuigi üksikisiku tasandil on afektid tõesti raskesti kontrollitavad, on eri valdkondade teadlased näidanud, et afekte on võimalik kunstlikult esile kutsuda, nt poliitiliste või turunduskampaaniate või ka kogemusturismi abil. Seega väärrib afektide autentsus lähemat analüüsni.

Käesolev artikkel väidab, et afektid, mida me avalikus sfääris kohtame, on performatiivsed: nad lähuvad sotsiaalsetest normidest ja tsitteerivad varasemaid afektiivseid esitusi, mis on korduste töttu omanadanud autentsuse aura. Afektide performatiivsus ei tähenda, et nad on völtsid; lihtsalt me ei tohiks nende siirust üle hinnata. Ka performatiivsed afektid kõnetavad teisi inimesi ning tekitavad autentseid afektiivseid reaktsioone. Afektid liguvad kehalt kehale, nagu väidab Anna Gibbs (2001, 1), aga ka teatrilaval, kinolinalt või raamatulehekülgedelt publikuni. Seega väärrib afektide kujutamine ja selle performatiivsus lähemat tähelepanu kirjanduse ja teiste kunstivormide analüüsile. Jennifer Doyle (2013, 85) väidab, et kui emotsioonist saab emotsiioni representatsioon, siis kerkivad kohe küsimused selle emotsiioni autentsuse kohta. Kuigi tekstidesse kätketud emotsioon või afekt on alati mugandus ja ehk isegi manipulatsioon, ei kaota see oma väge publikut kõnetada ja selles afekte luua. Palju on uuritud etenduskunsti, mis ründab vaatajate meeli ja ootusi, ning ka lugejas tugevaid emotsioine tekitavaid traumanarratiive. Vähem on tähelepanu saanud raskesti loetavad ja näilised tundetud kirjandustekstid, mille afektiivne laeng on ambivalentsem. Aga ka sellistel tekstidel on potentsiaal pakkuda inimestele uudseid viise maailmaga suhestumiseks (Berglant ja Prosser 2011, 182).

Artikkel keskendub konkreetselt ühele autentseks peetavale afektiivsele fenomenile, pisaratele. Pisarad on üks ilmsemaid afektide ilminguid, mida me ei kontrolli ning mis seega näivad autentseina. Kuid juba Roland Barthes (2002) juhib tähelepanu pisarate dialoogilisusele ja suisa manipulatiivsusele. Pisarad on seega huvitav näide afektide autentsuse ja performatiivsuse analüüsimeks, seda enam, et pisaraid kasutatakse mitmesugustes kunstilistes ja kirjanduslikes tekstides afektide tähistajana.

Artikkel lähtub Eugenie Brinkema (2014, 4) soovitusest otsida tekstidest afektide tekstilisi kujutusi, et hoiduda afektiuringutele tihti omast subjektiivsusest ning liikuda pelgalt afektide tarbimiselt sügavama teoreetilise analüüsini. Brinkema (2014, 37) soovitab otsida afektide vormi, mis võimaldab analüüsides olla tähelepanelikum kirjandusteksti stiililise keerukuse ja nüansirikkuse suhtes. Seega vaatab artikkel kirjandusteksti keelelisi väljendusvahendeid kui afektide esitamise ja loomise vahendeid.

Artiklis analüüsatakse kaht nüüdiskirjanduse näidet, mis eksperimenteerivad pisarate kujutamisega. Esimeseks tekstiks on Heather Christle'i autobiograafia sugemetega essee „The Crying Book“ („Nuturamat“, 2019) ja teine Christine Smallwoodi romaan „The Life of the Mind“ („Vaimuelu“, 2021). Neid tekste võiks vaadelda uussiiruse näitena, kuid artikkel väidab pigem, et mõlemad autorid küsimärgistavad naise-

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likkuse ja naiskogemusega seondatavat sentimentaalset siirust. Pisaraid kasutatakse ühtaegu lugeja könetamiseks ja samaaegselt lihtsa pinnalugemise õõnestamiseks. Pisarad on performatiivsed, kuid samas ka autentsed, signaliseerides lugejale, et teiste afektide tähendus jäääb meile alati kättesamatuks. Pisarad ei allu ühesele tõlgendusele, näidates autentse ja performatiivse vahelise piiri poorsust.

Tänapäeva menukite hulgas on palju mälestusi, traumanarratiive ja pihtimisi, milles mälu on suunatud tunnete voolusängi (Shields 2010, 56). Sellised tihti kommertslikult pakendatud kogemused on muutunud piiravaiks, sest nad pakuvad liiga kergesti loetavaid ja tarbitavaid stereotüüpseid emotsioone. Artiklis analüüsitud tekstdid julgevad sellele kergesti loetavuse ja tarbitavuse kiusatusele vastu hakata. Nad toovad meid näiliselt turvalisse sentimentaalse pihtimuse maailma, kuid siis eemaldavad selged teetähised ja jätavad meid omapäi autentsuse ja performatiivsuse piire kompama. Selline strateegia tekitab lõhe lugeja ja teksti vahel, kuid just selle lõhe ületamiseks tehtud jöupingutus aitab meil mõista näiliselt selgete afektide tegelikku mitmetähenduslikkust. Kuigi kirjanduslikud afektid on alati vahendatud, on eksperimentaalses kirjanduses vähemalt potentsiaal murda välja stereotüüpidele üles ehitatud emotioonala avaliku sfääri turvalisest tarbijasõbralikkusest ning meenutada meile elatud kogemuse vasturäävikust ja metsikust.

**Raili Marling** – Tartu Ülikooli anglistika professor. Tema peamised uurimisvaldkonnad on afektide poliittiline dimensioon ning soolisuse kujutamine nüüdiskirjanduses. Ta juhib Eesti Teadusagentuuri rühmagrantti, mis analüüsib kriiside kujutamist ja kujutatavust. Selle projekti raames jätkab ta uurimistööd nüüdiskirjanduse, afektide ja neoliberalismi teemal, võrreldes ameerika, prantsuse ja eesti kirjandust ja kulttuuri. Ta on kirjutanud ka modernistlikest naiskirjanikest, mehelikkusest, feministliku teoria tõlgendamisest ning soolise võrdöiguslikkuse diskursustest.

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