Attuning to Spatialities of Affect: Some Implications for Educational Ethnography

Abstract

This paper develops a discussion arising out of the author’s ethnographic work about the capacity of educational ethnography to respond to the affective turn in social theory. It considers how any educational ethnography that attempts to attune to spatialities of affect or "structures of feeling" (Williams 1975, 1977) must configure new, essentially interdisciplinary, spaces. As examples, the affective spaces of Tim Edensor's "industrial ruin" (Edensor, 2005) and Avery Gordon’s (1997) “social haunting” will be noted. The paper concludes with a review of two different possible trajectories that educational ethnography might take after the affective turn: first, that it might seek to describe the lived, psychosocial economies of “affective practice” (Wetherell, 2012), or, secondly that – abandoning description – it might work a “ficto-critical” ethnographic poetics that roams "'from one texted genre to another: romantic, realist, historical, fantastic, sociological, surreal" (Stewart, 1996, 210) in an attempt to register what Kathleen Stewart has articulated as the "atmospheric attunements" of "ordinary affects" (Stewart, 2007 and 2010 respectively)

This short paper summarises a methodological discussion prompted by my ethnographic study of young people's disaffection from school in a de-industrialised UK coal mining community (see Bright 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b 2012c). Basically, it wonders about the limits of educational ethnography's capacity to respond to what has been called the “affective
turn” (Clough, 2007) in social theory. In doing so, it responds to recent work in sociology of education (Reay, 2005; Shildrick et al 2009; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012; Taylor, 2012) cultural geography (Mitchell, 2005; McDowell, 2008; Anderson, 2009); and critical psychology (Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012. Wetherell, 2012) that calls for a method that can adequately apprehend the spatialised circulation and transmission of affect, particularly as any such transmission relates to processes at the intersection of social class and education. To get quickly to the nub of the discussion, let me recap the original problematic that prompted my work in the first place.

**The social puzzle**

For Paul Willis, the ethnographic impulse is prompted by one’s being:

...so moved with curiosity about a social puzzle…that you are seized to go and look for yourself, to see ‘what’s going on’ …Physical and sensuous presence then allows observation and witness (Willis, 2000; xiii)

In the case of my research, the original puzzle was presented starkly in my own professional practice during 2000-2002 when I ran a project in a further education college for young people who had been permanently excluded from school. The ‘Special Programme’ that I led offered provision on behalf of the Derbyshire Behaviour Support Service for 14 to 16 year olds excluded from school between the ages of 14 and 16. From the outset, certain common features were apparent among the young people being referred. First, it was noticeable that, while the reach of the Behaviour Support Service was county-wide, referrals tended to be from the coalfield villages in the north of the county, and from two neighbouring communities, Coalbrook and Cragwell, in particular. Second, most young people tended to be from families that had historically made their livelihoods in the, by then, non-existent coal-mining industry and that had lived through the 1984-85 miners’ strike which had been bitterly contested locally (Coalbrook was a largely striking pit; Cragwell a largely working pit).

Excluded from local schools that themselves were commonly struggling in, or on the edge of, ‘special measures’, most of these young people had formal statements of special educational needs for non-specific ‘emotional and behavioural difficulties’, were often ‘on medication’, and had been in varying degrees of trouble with the police. As was apparent from their notes, they were literally the children of the miners’ strike and its aftermath (being born between 1984 and 1986) They lived in the very streets where the conflict between the striking
coalfields and the largely working Nottinghamshire coalfield had flared and had been, consequently, so heavily policed. In their sullen demeanour and sudden outbursts, these young people, girls and boys alike, seemed to carry some very specific ‘invisible injuries of class’ (Sennet and Cobb, 1972) which they acted out in ways that pointed back directly to the experiences, conflicts and language of the 1984-85 strike. Most significantly, though, in almost all cases they knew nothing (in any conventional sense) about the history that shaped the ‘affective geography’ that they inhabited.

My original social puzzle, then, was this: **Why were so many young people from pit families getting excluded and why did they seem to embody and act out conflicted aspects of their own history that they themselves knew nothing about, but that was otherwise present both everywhere and nowhere in the lives of their families and communities?** The exploration of that question became a seven year long ethnographic inquiry.

*A coalfield ethnography*

In a series of publications, I have drawn attention to the historical and cultural geographies of coal mining communities, highlighting how early sociological work positioned places like Beldover, Coalbrook, Cragwell and Longthorne (the villages making up my study) as exemplary cases of ‘working class community’, shaped by identifiable solidarities arising from a particular form of industrial production. By the time my work commenced in 2006 the realities behind this conventional picture of the ‘coal miner’ and ‘pit village’ had largely disappeared. De-industrialisation was to all intents and purposes complete, as all of Derbyshire’s large pits had closed by 1995. As one might expect, the local economy exemplified key characteristics of post-industrialism at a time of economic crisis. Unemployment, high but masked by industry related disability, increased once again in the early 2000s and what work there was became increasingly casualised, feminised and affective.

At the very same time, however, the ‘traditional’ construction of the coal-mining ‘community’ continued to proliferate as an ‘imaginary’, flourishing beyond its time not only in the rhetoric of policy interventions – the Coalfield Communities Campaign being a case in point – but also in the ‘just talk’ (Stewart, 1996) of people around the learning projects and youth work sites of my study. Indeed, one might say with Stewart that the “barer the life became, the more its worldings proliferated and accrued” (Stewart, 2010: 3) feeding a
cultural poetics of community longing that one could see performed in the embodied narratives of the participants in my study. In my observation, this longing commonly drew together an affective weave of shame, melancholy, dark humour and anger which, while rarely uttered, was articulated in the lived practices of local young people. In response, I started to think of a psychosocial process of affective transmission that might be thought of, following Avery Gordon, as a ‘social haunting’ (Gordon, 2008). Basically, ethnographic materials that I was gathering attested to a transmission of affect (Brennan, 2004) that was having a significant impact on young people but remained unacknowledged in education and youth practice or policy. The nature of that transmission, how it might be theorised, and how it might trouble the methodological capacities of educational ethnography, became a central preoccupation of my inquiry.

**Edensor on ‘ruins’**

Aspects of the thesis developed by Tim Edensor in his *Industrial ruins* (Edensor, 2005) have become crucial to my thinking about the affective phenomena that I am describing here. Edensor’s account of the industrial ruin is one that positions industrial ruination as an actively re-territorialising aspect of the neoliberal project. As such, ruination deliberately enacts:

> ...the erasure or commodification of the past ... and, in so doing, [seeks] a forgetting that things might be otherwise, that elements of the past might have conspired to forge an alternative present. (Edensor, 2005: 141)

What Edensor’s idea allows me to do is acknowledge the presence of the coal industry in its absence; that is, as ‘ruin’. In fact, this is a central ambition of my work: to show how occluded, ruined – even desecrated – “method assemblages” (Law, 2004) of collective knowledge are fully present through their local absence in ways that powerfully influence lived experience, particularly young working class people’s experience of education. The four villages that constitute the site of my study are classic spaces of industrial ruin in Edensor’s sense. “Smoothed over”, the disappeared collieries remain as erased but abundant spaces of ongoing meaning. Hidden in plain sight at the centre of an emptied habitation of signs – colliery housing, derelict colliery baths, grassed waste tips, lifted railway lines, dioxin pollution, leaking methane, subsidence – they are read through a collective, intuitive knowledge of inter-bodily affect.¹

¹ (I am taking bodies in widest ‘new materialist’ sense).
Such a transmission speaks out of an *excess* of the semiotic in the affective geographies of industrial ruins that are always simultaneously both full *and* empty. For Edensor, industrial ruins are “rampantly haunted by a horde of absent presences, a series of signs of the past that cannot be categorised but *intuitively* grasped” (Edensor, 2005: 152, my emphasis). Transmission is therefore, strictly, *ineffable*: “the knowledge that emerges out of the confrontation with these phantoms is not empiricist, didactic or intellectual but empathetic and sensual, understood at an intuitive and affective level”. (Edensor, 2005: 164). The knowledge of the industrial ruin is both “inarticulate” and “suffused with affect” (Edensor, 2005, 163). It speaks, that is, without being spoken, but is no less a powerful a mode of transmission for all that. And educational ethnography certainly needs to able to be register it.

So where does the fact that the “very ineffability and mystery” of industrial ruin “thwarts attempts at representational fixing” (Edensor, 2011:1) leave us? Well, as trainee youth worker Stephanie articulates so eloquently in this conversation about a school rebuilding project, some kind of social ‘mediumship’or ‘channelling’ becomes necessary:

**NGB.** Do you think, then, the [1984-85 miners’] strike affects things today?

**Stephanie.** I *totally* know what you’re saying there. It’s almost, like, ghostly isn’t it? *That* space [the old school] is related to *that* time and you can *paint* it, you can put *wallpaper on it*, you can *fill the cracks in*, but it still *holds* that time... ...So, we’ll build [the new school] *right next to it* and when you look at that new school – which is *amazing* – you look at that [old] school and you do see it’s prefabbed, it’s pebble dashed, it’s awful. It’s got it written: depression, sadness, stamped across it, all over it. *This* [new] school is bright, it’s full of windows! It’s got different *pods* – they’re called ‘*pods*’! ...Erm, so if you’re in this [old] school you’re brow beaten and depressed and shamed and got nothing to look forward to. But at *this* [new] school – which is built right next to it, [it’s] a bit more...*Yeeeah!* But, they’re *not taking the past into the future*! Haunting, yes, that’s a good way of putting it. I think that’s the right way to explain it. I don’t know if you can lay [ghosts]. I don’t know if you can. It’s the past. It happened. It’s part of...it’s part of who we are for those that was involved and those that were affected...*and* for those, I guess, that wasn’t. [...] Yes...I think it needs to be talked about. I think it needs to be talked about in schools...They’ll talk about black slavery, which is interesting, and it’s fantastic and it’s a great subject but what do you actually *do* with that? But why not talk about something that’s
significant to ‘em? I don’t think you can ever exorcise this, because I don’t think...I think it needs addressing [...] You do know what’s a matter with [young people]
That’s the whole point.

In essence, my research addresses how affective circuits flow through classed temporalities, places and identities in ways that impact on the lived experiences of a particular group of working class people in an erased site where they “through ghosts, make space place” in Bell’s terms (Bell, 1997: 820). Addressing our purpose here, my specific question then is this: what would an ethnography of such a social haunting look like?

**Class and affect**

Well, it would need to foreground both class and affect. Now, the recent work of Diane Reay, Beverley Skeggs and Valerie Walkerdine does just that, and is powerfully present in the background of my account. In a “speculative” but nevertheless signal paper published in 2005 – *Beyond Consciousness? The Psychic Landscape of Social Class* – Diane Reay argued that “that there is a powerful dynamic between emotions, the psyche and class inequalities that is as much about the makings of class as it is about its consequences” (Reay, 2005a: 911). In developing this point through a series of education-based studies, she has since outlined “a psychic economy of social class” (911) which is constituted through “affective aspects of class – feelings of ambivalence, inferiority and superiority, visceral aversions, recognition, abjection and the markings of taste” (911). Class is “in the blood, in the very fibre of a man or woman” (911).

The trajectory of Beverley Skeggs’ recent work is also fruitful. In a series of recent articles (Skeggs, 2009, 2010, 2011; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) Skeggs has deepened her critique of the affective production of the ‘classed self’ in a contemporary context where affect and economy are increasingly bound together as capital colonises intimacy as part of its ‘biopolitical’ project (see Marazzi, 2011). Effectively her account is one of enfleshed class consciousness rooted in collectively accessible, historically specific and relatively autonomous circuits of affect. It puts the struggle for personhood and value – a struggle “against unjustifiable judgment and authority and for dignified relationality” – at “the very core of ontology” (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012: 472). It is, therefore, a notion of class as viscerally lived within affective geographies and contingent temporalities that don’t just fall from the sky but unfold unpredictably within historically conjunctural intensifications. Such
intensifications might reasonably be argued to include, we might note, periods of de-industrialisation; a conclusion which speaks powerfully to my own data.

Valerie Walkerdine’s contribution – though interrogating much of the same experiential territory – is, however, positioned from quite a different disciplinary location, having its home in an originating project of critical psychology rather than in sociology (See Pulido-Martinez and Walkerdine, 2007). From that perspective, Walkerdine’s work problematises the psychosocial in relation to issues of gender, femininity, class and subjectivity at the same time as it sustains a critique of the disciplinary institution of Psychology (see Walkerdine, 1997, 2005, 2007; Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989; Walkerdine and Blackman, 2001; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001). Much of Valerie Walkerdine’s recent work has shown a strong emphasis on affect, neo-liberalism, subjectivities, and work identities in de-industrialisation (Walkerdine, 2006, 2010; Jiminez and Walkerdine, 2011; Walkerdine and Jiminez, 2012) and constitutes a crucial reference point for my own inquiry as it develops. Centrally, her account brings to the discussion a distinctive sensitivity to the psycho-social unconscious. This emphasis is particularly important for me as I try to understand the intergenerational empirical phenomena – particularly the collective transmission of what Hardt has called “affects of trauma” (Hardt, 2007: xii) – that I’ve apprehended in the field. The interdisciplinary psychosocial terrain mapped by Walkerdine – a place where the “intersection of class, politics and psychoanalysis [can] thrive” (28), where “embodied anxieties, which may be so hard to feel or to name, belong as much to a history of class as they do to any family relations that can be separated from that history” (25) – is particularly productive.

Suffice it to say that all of this work – Reay’s, Skeggs’ and Walkerdine’s – makes an enormously significant contribution to any developing account of the lived experience of class in de-industrialised communities. In “...paying detailed attention to the emotional cost of coping with the traumatic loss ...of manufacturing work and its intergenerational effects on subjectivity, e.g., disappointment, lack of hope, despair and painful grief. (Jiminez and Walkerdine, 2007: 197) it firmly establishes the idea that an understanding of collectively transmitted affect is crucial. Inevitably it takes us into the terrain of ‘affect theory’

Within the academy, affect theory has moved successfully into the near-mainstream, even become fashionable, over the last ten years or so. This ‘affective turn’ in social theory – in so far at least as it’s been described by Clough (2007) – coalesces broadly around an idea of
affect as a *capacity* to affect and to be affected, as *circulating* in and between bodies and as remaining always *in excess* of rationality and empirical capture. Affect, it is argued, is *autonomous*. Now, theorising affect as autonomous – as ‘virtual’ in Massumi’s term (Massumi, 2002) – is not without its implications. Affect, on this account, always escapes realist representation and always exceeds social ‘structure’.

‘Affective practices’ or ‘ordinary affects’?

Margaret Wetherell, in her recent study *Affect and emotion: A new social science understanding* (Wetherell, 2013) picks up these implications and rejects them. Charging that some applications of “Deleuze and related philosophical traditions...have been radically unhelpful in their assertions about the functioning of affect” (Wetherell, 2013: 4) and have effectively thrown attention on to “becoming, potential and the virtual... in preference to the already formed objects that are the usual fare of social science institutions, identities, economies, social class etc” (3), she argues instead for an understanding that focuses on affective practices as *embodied meaning making*. Interestingly, she takes the term “affective practices” from Walkerdine’s work on affective communities (11) and argues that acknowledging ‘affect as flowing activity’ (12), as Walkerdine does, does not mean that “a flow of affect is entirely indeterminate” (13). This is a substantive point that effectively reclaims *structural patterning* from the idea of affect as autonomous. For Wetherell, affect displays “strong pushes for pattern as well as signalling trouble and disturbance in existing patterns” (13). As such:

> Affect is about sense as well as sensibility. It is practical, communicative and organised. In affective practice, bits of the body...get patterned together with feelings and thoughts, interaction patterns and relationships, narratives and interpretative repertoires, social relations, personal histories, and ways of life (Wetherell, 2012: 13-14).

This emphasis enables Wetherell to draw useful attention to the ways in which interrelated patternings of affective practice can be held inter-subjectively across a few or many participants. Evoking the “complex coalescences” (14) of Williams’ “structures of feeling” (see Williams, 1975, 1977) she indicates that such patternings can even be ‘held’ enduringly in specific places, through social categories and for historical periods. Now, when one considers the kind of empirical materials that my work has generated, Wetherell’s account is persuasive. It certainly allows for affective transmission through historical geographies of
class, and that is a very significant step. It struggles, however, to accommodate the counter-
realist notion of affective knowledge/s as ineffable as proposed by Edensor. This is where I
want to turn to the work of Kathleen Stewart.

Interestingly, Kathleen Stewart also draws attention to William’s structure of feeling but
heads off from there in a very different direction. She provocatively characterises the
trajectory of her work since the classic post-modern ethnography *A Space on the side of the
road* (Stewart, 1996) as a project of "ficto-critical" ethnographic poetics that roams "from one
texted genre to another – romantic, realist, historical, fantastic, sociological, surreal"
(Stewart, 1996, 210). Her ethnographic project, she says, has evolved as a:

...slow, and sometimes sudden, accretion of ways of attending to the charged
atmospheres of everyday life. How they accrue, endure, fade or snap. How they build
as a refrain, literally scoring over the labour of living out whatever’s happening. How
they constitute a compositional present, pushing circulating forces into form, texture
and density so that can be felt, imagined, brought to bear or just born. (Stewart 2010b:
2)

In recently positioning her ficto-critical approach, she draws on a literature that includes
Deleuze and Guattari, Nigel Thrift, Lauren Berlant, Barthes, Benjamin, Micheal Taussig and
Raymond Williams. Her project – “an experiment, not a judgement” – is one that is:

Committed not to the demystification and uncovered truths that support a well-known
picture of the world, but rather to speculation, curiosity and the concrete, it tries to
provoke attention to the forces that come into view as habit of shock, resonance or
impact. (Stewart, 2007:1)

Stewart calls the “charged atmospheres” with which ficto-critical ethnography is concerned,
“ordinary affects” (Stewart 2007: 1). Ordinary affects are “akin to Raymond Williams’s
structures of feeling” (2) which are described as “social experiences in solution [that] do not
have to await definition, classification, or rationalisation before they exert palpable
pressures” (Williams, 1977, cited in Stewart, 2007:2-3). They are at once “abstract and
concrete”. Ordinary affects “work not through ‘meanings’ per se, but rather in the way that
they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social
worldings of all kinds” (3). They are:
More directly compelling than ideologies, as well as more fractious, multiplicitous, and unpredictable than symbolic meanings. They are not a kind of analytic object that can be laid out on single, static plane of analysis, and they don’t lend themselves to a perfect, three-tiered parallelism between analytic subject, concept, and world. They are, instead, a problem or question emergent in disparate scenes and incommensurate forms and registers: a tangle of potential connections. Literally moving things – things that are in motion and that are defined by their capacity to affect and be affected – they have to be mapped through different, coexisting forms of composition. (Stewart, 2007: 3-4)

In such a project, writing is an “effort to approach the intensities of the ordinary through a close ethnographic attention to pressure points and forms of attention and attachment” (Stewart, 2007:5).

**Conclusion: Working a ‘sixth sense’**

Now, in one very real sense that is precisely what my own work is about: “intensities of the ordinary” that leak form “pressure points and forms of attachment” – both real and imagined – and impact on the lived experience of young people undergoing ‘education’ at a time of de-industrialisation. In fact, what I’ve been trying to do in recent published work is to elaborate a poetics of circulating forces “pushed into form by events that ...are at once abstract and concrete, ephemeral and consequential, fully sensory and lodged in prolific imaginaries” (Stewart, 2010: 4). Like Stewart, “I’m interested in the peculiar materialities of things that come to matter” (4). Consequently, in her working through “interruptions, amassed densities of description, evocations of voices and the conditions of their possibility, and lyrical, ruminative aporias that give pause” (Stewart, 1996:7) it is Stewart’s work, rather than Wetherell’s, that offers a register for my own developing inquiry. It speaks to the yearning that drew me initially towards a writing practice that unashamedly deployed what I was afraid of calling – but Stewart, categorically, is not – a “sixth sense”. In Stewart’s hands, that sixth sense – improvisational, processual, intuitive (Stephanie’s mediumship?) – breaks free from the confines of realist ‘science’, seeking instead to turn “a potentiality into a threshold to the Real” through “a sideways step into what normally gets stepped over, a curious pause to wonder what analytic objects might matter in the singularity of a situation and what forms of writing and thinking might approach them” (Stewart, 2010: 4. My emphasis)
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