

Affect and Socialist Community:
Raymond Williams's *Border Country* Revisited

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I

Given the author's renowned theory of 'structures of feeling', the frequent recurrence of the word 'feel' or 'feeling' in *Border Country* (1960) is not unexpected. We need to remember, however, that we often regard the word 'feeling' in the phrase 'structures of feeling' as solely representative of a particular emotional state, whilst ignoring its tactile sense: the experience or sensation of touching or being touched. As I will discuss, the tactile sense of the word 'feeling' is no less important than the emotional or psychological sense; rather, I propose that the semantic interaction between the former and latter is significant. My central argument is that an affective intensity is brought about by the mingling of the emotional and tactual via the usage of the word 'feeling'. I argue that this affective intensity, present within *Border Country*, places the novel in an important and even interventional position in the history of modern literature, psychology, and socialism.

The 'affect' referred to in my title is also an allusion to the recently developed Affect Theory, which tends to foreground 'affect' or affective intensity as something in excess of institutionalised literary and psychological representation.¹ Indeed, I must stress the ideological cooperation or conspiracy of both discourses—that is, modern literature and psychology—in their attempts to visualise the mind, which is, by definition, invisible. This privileging of visibility or ocularcentrism regarding the functions of the human mind manifests itself in a variety of forms. One example of this is artistic impressionism, which was inspired by the contemporary psychological and physiological approaches to the retina or how it receives visual images from the outside.² As regards literary representations, physiognomic assumptions allowed novelists to imagine facial expressions to be materialisations or visualisations of the

mind, something which is, in fact, inner and invisible.³

Considering this discursive preoccupation with visuality in modern psychologised literature, it becomes evident that the 'affective' and tactual dimension of *Border Country* is a noteworthy deviation from the typically ocularcentric realist language of modern literature. It is worth recalling here that tactual sense has often been marginalised, considered primitive and unsophisticated in comparison with the visual in the context of modern ocularcentrism.⁴ Thus, by extension, such tactual affectivity in *Border Country* is also suggestive of the novel's political potential as a socialist text. The affective intensity of this text can be read as a critique of the languages of institutionalised socialism as well as literature. On this basis, I also consider the novel's potential in the context of pre-modern and modern Japanese politics.

II

Border Country presents a clear critique of modern literature's institutionalised use of physiognomic representations of facial expressions, especially those of the eyes, in order to indicate characters' feelings or thoughts. The opacity of Harry's eyes is repeatedly foregrounded in the book. Almost every time his feelings or emotions draw our attention, his eyes are depicted as 'dark', 'closed', or 'withdrawn', thus frustrating our physiognomic expectations:

But the dominant impression was the curious stillness of the features, and the distance and withdrawal in the very deep blue eyes. (28)

Harry hesitated, his deep blue eyes withdrawn. (64)

... with the distantly brooding deep blue eyes. (68)

Harry nodded. His eyes were clouded again, as he looked back down over the valley.... (77)

Harry smiled, but his eyes were clouded and distant, and his whole body was attentive. (114)

Harry's eyes were very dark and withdrawn. (227)

The connection between these obscured eyes and affectivity in *Border Country* is equally crucial. The novel frequently represents feelings as fundamentally unrepresentable in words:

...an extraordinary tension between what was felt and what could be said. Whenever the eyes were dark, like this, the old, losing struggle was being waged. (228)

'I can feel,' Harry insisted. 'It isn't what's said.' (95)

Of particular significance at this juncture is the repeated mention given to Harry's fingers and hands; they are presented in sharp contrast with the opacity or physiognomic reticence of his eyes. His fingers and hands serve as his privileged tactual and affectual sensors. Harry is thus represented as a person who touches or is touched rather than a person who sees or is seen:

The hand was pale, delicate, beautifully formed. (19)

Harry smiled and touched her nose with his slender finger. (48)

Harry sipped at once, his slender fingers curved tightly round the glass. (55)

The sensory and affective landscape of *Border Country* is also characterised by an auditory or acoustic element, most often represented as 'voice'. The auditive impression of a choir in this novel can be considered 'affective' in communicating a bodily sensation of collectiveness or togetherness. This

kind of strong and intimate intersubjectivity is a common affective trope, according to the recent affect theory⁵:

It was time now for the choirs, and Will knew, looking up, that it was no use at all even trying to stay separate. Each choir moved into position, into dark settled rows, and the set faces turned to the conductor, eyes widened and lips poised; men and women surrendered, asking for movement and control. The drop of the raised hand, and then not the explosion of sound that you half expected, but a low, distant sound, a sound like the sea yet insistently human; a long, deep, *caressing whisper*, pointed suddenly and sharply broken off, then repeated at a different level, still both harsh and liquid; broken off again, cleanly; then irresistibly the entry and rising of an extraordinary power, and everyone singing; the faces straining and the voices rising around them, holding, moving, in the hushed silence that held all the potency of these sounds, until you listening were the singing and *the border had been crossed*. When all the choirs had sung, everyone stood and sang the anthem. *It was now no longer simply hearing, but a direct effect on the body: on the skin, on the hair, on the hands.* (258-9; emphases added)

The emphasised phrase 'caressing whisper' is evocative of the affective comingling of the auditory and tactile senses. This is again evoked in the last sentence of this excerpt: 'It was now no longer simply hearing, but a direct effect on the body: on the skin, on the hair, on the hands'. Here, again, the hands play a crucial role in creating the novel's affective strength.

III

This kind of sensory intersubjectivity may be termed an 'affective' community within 'the border country', which—reminiscent of the author's theoretical terminology—leads us to pay attention to the dialectical interaction between 'the residual' and 'the dominant' in this affectivity. The word 'distance' is crucial here, implying a sort of 'absent cause' in this community. This 'distance' is, for

instance, shown in the character of Pugh the vicar, who is willing to help Will/Matthew to prepare for crossing 'the border' and going to Cambridge.⁶ It is also noteworthy that a 'telescope' is the first thing that occurs to Pugh as a tool for introducing Will to modern knowledge and science. The implication of this is clear in a variety of senses: whilst the 'residual' Welsh community is 'felt' affectively, with intimacy or immediacy, the 'dominant' Cambridge is what can only be seen from a distance. Pugh prepares Will for a place representative of modern knowledge's ocularcentric privileging of visualisation by teaching him to use a telescope. Thus, the 'residual', affective, 'touching' community and the 'dominant' and 'seeing' society are in stark contrast in the novel. This may be reminiscent of the '*beside*' that Eve Sedgwick terms 'the most salient preposition' (8) in *Touching Feeling* in resistance to the dominance of '*beyond*' or '*beneath*' in modern narratives. In our context, the latter prepositions—*beyond* and *beneath*—can be thought of as suggestive of a modern epistemological preoccupation with the visibility of the invisible.

However, this text does not function in simplified dichotomy but is rather constructed upon the dynamic dialectics between the residual/touching and dominant/seeing. The novel suggests that it is only through the experience of seeing Cambridge and London as what Williams terms 'the dominant' that Will/Matthew can really appreciate the significance of their affective/residual communality of touching or being touched, thus allowing it to re-emerge as the 'pre-emergent' in a retrospective and retroactive manner. No doubt, this is the implication of his concluding remarks:

Only now it seems like the end of exile. Not going back, but the feeling of exile ending. For the distance is measured, and that is what matters. By measuring the distance, we come home. (436).

For that matter, the last sequence of the novel is 'touchingly' indicative of just how one generation—while negotiating with the last one—regenerates itself as 'the pre-emergent', utilising intriguing references to the words: 'eyes', 'distance', and 'touch':

He went round the house, seeing to the doors and the fire. As he walked upstairs, he was winding his watch, but *his eyes were distant and clouded*, as Harry's had been, standing in the living-room in Glynmawr. At the boys' bedroom he hesitated, then went in, switching on the shaded light. The beds were drawn close together, so that they could play across them. Harry's book lay open on his pillow, but his sleep was easy and relaxed. Jack, as always, lay bunched on the pillow, frowning under his mop of hair. Quickly, Matthew bent and kissed them lightly on the smooth fine skin of their temples, but even at this *touch* they moved a little, in the warmth of their sleep. (436; emphases added)

I argue that this is one important affective dimension of what Raymond Williams calls 'actual structures of feeling' in *The Long Revolution* (1961), the 'meanings and values' of which 'are lived in works and relationships'. Here, it is suggested that there are 'processes of historical development through which these structures form and change' (337). This is also what Williams re-theorises as the possibility of turning 'the residual' into 'the pre-emergent' in *Marxism and Literature* (121-27). Thus, we can find here a crucial example of the roles played by this kind of bodily affectivity in the process of cultural productions or reproductions of communities in this text, where political senses and ideas transmit themselves from generation to generation in such a way as casts new light on the author's notion of 'the structures of feeling'. It is worth mentioning that *Border Country* was published a year before *The Long Revolution*, in which the author's conception of 'structures of feeling' is first manifested.

IV

Border Country's affectivity is indeed 'touching' in a genuinely aesthetic sense, but I would also argue that it strikes me as actual in the political landscape of Japan today. In view of the thematic centrality of the General Strike of 1926 in this novel, it is possible to re-define this 'border country' as a 'demonstrable' community'. In negative contrast, I problematise Japan as a

non-demonstrable society. Despite a series of violations of the Japanese pacifist constitution and the inexcusable corruptions committed by the Japanese government, most Japanese people have remained indifferent to them and those who have joined demonstrations against the government have been in the minority.

I am reminded of Karatani Kojin's lecture entitled 'Why don't the Japanese demonstrate?'. Referring to Maruyama Masao, a Japanese political thinker, Karatani categorises people's attitude towards politics into four types: dissociative, associative, centripetal, and centrifugal. Using this categorisation, he historicises Japanese modernisation as a rapid and forceful process wherein the Japanese people were subjected to imperialist centralisation, which made them ideologically 'centripetal'. Historically, this brought about the destruction of a set of pre-modern communities, the European counterparts of which are churches or trade associations, such as the craft guilds of mediaeval municipalities. As a result, the Japanese people became less centrifugal in their relationship with the dominant powers in Tokyo, which also caused them to be less 'associative' as political subjects. In other words, they were exposed to politics without any of the traditional intermediate communal systems, thereby becoming 'dissociative' as political agencies (116-28). This has been reinforced by neoliberalism, wherein individuals have been exposed to the global market. Thus, the Japanese modernisation and postmodernisation have resulted in what I call '*non*-demonstrable society': a society whose members are more fragile, vulnerable, and atomised as political protesters.

Reconsidered in this historical context, the word 'distance' in *Border Country* takes on another significance. Karatani's argument allows us to say that the distance between Harry's and Matthew's 'country' and Cambridge and London makes them (both Harry and Matthew) 'centrifugal' political subjects and makes their community 'associative' as an intermediate space between the centralised powers and their subjectivities. The frustration of Morgan Rosser after the strike and his resultant conversion to free-market capitalism is suggestive of this. Rosser's psychological affinity with the leaders of their trade union in London is worth recalling; his centripetal political

consciousness accounts for the abstractedness of his socialism. In contrast, Harry's centrifugality in this respect makes his political stance more spontaneous, physicalised, and affective. There is a fundamental continuity between Harry's commitment to the strike and his devotion to the affective community.

This is, no doubt, what Pugh the vicar identifies as the 'formula for being neighbourly' or the 'real local organisation' (278). It is precisely in this sense that the title *Border Country* not only suggests the division between Wales and England but also the division between individual and centralised political powers. This border is also the border between the 'residual' and 'dominant'. Harry perfectly understands the weakening of this 'residual' space when he says to Will: 'You do what you see your way to' (298). In order for Will to form a new 'structure of feeling' as the 'pre-emergent' in the affective milieu after the failed strike, Matthew has to experience Cambridge and London as the centre by crossing the border, thereby living through the dialectical negotiations between the 'residual' and 'dominant'. Matthew is quite right in saying that it is 'by measuring the distance' that we 'come home' in this real affective and political sense. The 'border country' in his memory is thus recalled, reactivated, and re-affectivised as the 'pre-emergent' even if he continues to live in London beyond the 'border'.

*This argument is based on my oral presentations for the Raymond Williams Society 1st Annual Conference 'Cultural Production and the Redundancy of Work: Precarity, Automation, and Critique', which took place at Friends Meeting House in Manchester on 27 April 2019 and 'Selective Tradition in the Pacific: A Conference on Class, Writing, Culture', which was held at Victoria University of Wellington on 1 September 2017. I owe my gratitude to Professor Barnaby Ralph for his invaluable comments on earlier versions of these papers.

Notes

- (1) For recent reevaluations of Williams's conception of 'structures of feeling' in the context of Affect Theory, for instance, see Flatley (especially 24-27) and regarding the political and psychoanalytic potentiality of this

- idea of ‘affect’, see Yates. As for representative studies in this field, see, for example, Massumi, Clough, or Gregg.
- (2) For the political implications of this literary impressionism, see Jameson. Concerning a literary genealogy of criticism of this kind of ocularcentrism, see Endo.
 - (3) For this sort of physiognomic assumption in modern literature, see Pawlikowska.
 - (4) For this discussion, see Takamura.
 - (5) For this aspect of affect, see, for example, Brennan.
 - (6) For the biographical background of this, see Smith.

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