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# Expression, Animation, and Intelligibility: Concepts for a Decolonial Feminist Affect Theory

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**ABSTRACT:** This article considers Lisa Feldman Barrett’s challenge to Darwin’s claim—popularized by Paul Ekman’s cross-cultural studies—that facial expressions are intelligible across the species. Barrett considers how Ekman’s research expectations normalize Eurocentric gestures; she proposes that emotions are not hardwired but constructed in a dynamic interplay of interpretation and prediction. Drawing connections between this argument and decolonial feminist challenges to prominent Western accounts of what it means to be human—including Sylvia Wynter on the “ethnaclass of Man” and Sianne Ngai on racialized and feminized “animatedness”—this article explores what assumptions might underpin claims of affective intelligibility across cultures, and develops concepts toward a decolonial feminist affect theory.

**KEYWORDS:** affect theory, decolonial feminism, expression, animation, intelligibility

In this article, I link Lisa Feldman Barrett’s theory of constructed emotion<sup>1</sup> to decolonial perspectives that also challenge this universality of affect in cross-cultural facial expressions. After first outlining some of the present-day political stakes of these questions, I turn to Sylvia Wynter on the “ethnaclass of Man” in Western modernity, where she asks: how were

concepts of not only being, truth, power, and freedom but also affect—the intelligibility of one’s feelings toward others—framed by histories of colonial violence and refusals of imaginative identification?<sup>2</sup> Wynter argues that the overrepresentation of the Western ethnoclass results in the naturalization of a limited and contingent mode of being as definitively human. Extending Wynter’s account to the limits of affective intelligibility, particularly the capacity to sense the pain of others, I turn to Sianne Ngai’s analysis of “animatedness” in racialized and feminized representations of emotional expression<sup>3</sup> and more recent elaborations of Ngai by Kyla Schuller, in her work on “sentimental biopower,”<sup>4</sup> and by Cathy Park Hong on “minor feelings.”<sup>5</sup> These decolonial feminists offer pivotal concepts for an affect theory attentive to plural histories and perspectives. These insights extend Wynter’s argument to what I have elsewhere described as a “coloniality of the affects.”<sup>6</sup> I propose that we require a theory of constructed emotions, rather than six or eight hardwired affects, to get at the relation between “affect” and “power” from an intersectional feminist lens, through which power and positive affect cannot be so quickly affirmed as in tandem with one another. Presumed transparency is not necessarily a sign of mutual respect.

### Reading Other People’s Faces

Are the expressions of emotion the same for humans cross-culturally, based on a shared species inheritance? Charles Darwin thought so in 1872, studying the continuities of human expressions with nonhuman species, tracing their emergence as more-or-less useful inherited reflex actions.<sup>7</sup> Darwin was drawn to the photographs of French physiologist Duchenne de Boulogne, who used electrical probes to study the facial muscles at work in various expressions. Taking these photos out at dinner parties, he would ask his guests what emotion they saw expressed in the contorted faces of test subjects, observing in the recurring themes they chose to discern patterns of universal expression across the human species, in forms such as joy, anger, fear, and disgust. More recently, neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett has challenged the contemporary formulation of this Darwinian claim<sup>8</sup>—strengthened by Silvan Tomkins in the early 1960s and popularized by Paul Ekman’s cross-cultural studies beginning in 1969—that affective expressions of the human face function as universals, intelligible across the

species—what is known as the “basic emotions” thesis.<sup>9</sup> Barrett contests a theory of universal affects by detailing how her lab repeated Ekman’s experiments with the intelligibility of facial expression in non-Western cultures *unsuccessfully*. This leads her to believe that the emotions studied by Darwin are not universal but constructed. As constructed rather than biologically hardwired, these affective expressions are no less real, but they emerge in a dynamic interplay of instances through which we interpret and, importantly, predict.<sup>10</sup>

Both Ekman and Barrett hold that there are significant implications of their own theories for contesting histories of racism and colonialism. Ekman and Keltner write, in response to Barrett’s *New York Times* article of that year,<sup>11</sup> that Darwin established “the unity of mankind, challenging the racist assertions of his time that Europeans had descended from a more advanced progenitor than Africans.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, in *How Emotions Are Made*, Barrett (2017) considers how these expectations tend to normalize a Eurocentric set of gestures, with implicit biases persisting in the criminal justice system (e.g., jury perceptions of remorse in a death penalty hearing) and in studies of facial recognition software, among other places. Does it honor our shared humanity to claim that we share deeply hardwired affective responses, surfacing in facial responses that can be grasped cross-culturally, as Darwin and Ekman argue? Or, with Barrett, does this universality of expression sneak in a subtle coloniality of the affects, such that the Western ethnoclass of Man again becomes the purportedly neutral standard of humanity?

The present-day stakes of these questions—shared human intelligibility and colonial and/or racist expectations for expression—might well be epitomized by the example of facial recognition software, which has grown popular in the last decade in consumer products and in law enforcement, as a means of identification. As Safiya Umoja Noble writes in *Algorithms of Oppression*, the “digital decisions” of algorithms in the age of neoliberalism, because they are inevitably made *by human beings*, serve to both “reinforce oppressive social relationships and enact new modes of racial profiling.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, we lack a national regulation or standard for the use of these algorithmic tools, and local as well as federal and state agencies “rely on a wide range of contractors and systems with different capabilities and levels of accuracy.”<sup>14</sup> One of the first incidents with facial-recognition arose in 2009, when HP’s new webcams proved unable to recognize black faces. HP responded: “The technology we use is built on standard algorithms

that measure the difference in intensity of contrast between the eyes and the upper cheek and nose. We believe that the camera might have difficulty ‘seeing’ contrast in conditions where there is insufficient foreground lighting.”<sup>15</sup> A December 2017 article on the use of this software in law enforcement referenced a 2016 Georgetown study, which found that black people are most likely to be scrutinized by this software—given the racialization of the justice system—but that the technology is also less adept with non-white faces.<sup>16</sup> A February 2018 article observed failures of IBM and Microsoft in the testing of their commercial facial-analysis services, which proved significantly less accurate with black subjects, particularly in identifying the gender of women with dark skin.<sup>17</sup> When asked to analyze the lightest male faces in the set of images, the service worked correctly with an error rate of .03 percent, but this rose to a rate of 21 percent with darker female faces.

Facial-recognition software again made headlines recently after the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) released a study in December 2019, evaluating 189 algorithms from 99 developers, which it described as “a majority of the industry.”<sup>18</sup> The NIST study observed that the majority of facial recognition algorithms “exhibit demographic differentials,” which means that the algorithm’s ability (1) to match two images of the same person, or “one-to-one” matching, and (2) to differentiate an image of one person from images of others, known as “one-to-many” matching, was significantly less successful with non-white demographics. According to the study, people of Asian and African descent were up to one hundred times more likely to be misidentified than white men, as were Native Americans and Pacific Islanders, women, children, and the elderly.<sup>19</sup> This inaccuracy is significant not only because facial recognition increasingly regulates one’s ability to access necessary services, e.g., to sign into phones and other technologies and to board planes, but also because it increases one’s risk of misidentification by law enforcement with databases of driver’s licenses, updated with REAL IDs.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, some have connected the use of this software to the history of phrenology and physiognomy as discredited pseudo-sciences of facial structure and shape.<sup>21</sup>

Far from transcending the implicit biases of human brains, then, facial-recognition technologies have tended to fail at recognition the more that those faces differ from the Western European white middle-age one. The ambition of discerning a cross-cultural set of facial responses, while cosmopolitan in its aims, thus risks projecting a normalized Western ideal as the measure of “civilization” and “responsiveness.” Here, Sylvia

Wynter's critique of the "coloniality of being/truth/power/freedom" lays the groundwork for a critique of the coloniality of the affects.

### The Coloniality of the Affects

Given the overrepresentation of not only Western European forms of knowledge and power but also styles of expressing emotion, Wynter's intervention—to disarticulate the hegemonic mode of the Western ethnoclass from the descriptive possibilities of humanity—is necessary for an affect theory that pays attention to intersectional feminist and decolonial perspectives. Wynter admits the paradox of this disarticulation in the strategies of our present biocentric model, which Max Hantel helpfully describes as one that *overrepresents the human* through naturalistic terms of biological and later genetic determination, as well as the determination of market forces.<sup>22</sup> This biocentric model demands that we repress the status of this model as "truth-for," the idea that the truth has been established and is continually reinforced to serve a particular ethnoclass. Yet, this complication reveals something about the capacities of the human, beyond the ethnoclass of Man: that we are a self-representing species, capable in turn of studying "these symbolic, representational, behavior-motivating and demotivating processes," which could enable a greater "autonomy of feelings, thoughts, behaviors."<sup>23</sup>

While recent theorists have affirmed Wynter's *critical* project, they have been less willing to, as Alexander G. Weheliye writes, "trail Wynter's pioneering inroads into the territory of the neurobiological" in studying sociogeny.<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere, I have written in Wynter's defense by bringing her into dialogue with the late feminist philosopher Teresa Brennan (1952–2003),<sup>25</sup> who also sought to upend sociobiological claims that naturalize or otherwise justify existing relations of power. Brennan and Wynter write in the same time period, though they are not in direct dialogue. I previously drew them together to engage their respective critical accounts of Western Man's "self-containment," and of the universalizing accounts of human expression set according to this standard. Brennan's posthumous book on affect contributes the useful critique of prominent sociobiological accounts, i.e., against the biological determination of social life, she argues that the social also shapes the biological.<sup>26</sup> Like Wynter, Brennan recognizes that a decolonial feminist theory of affect must engage with the constructed

and contextual— sociohistorical—nature of the affects. With Brennan, Wynter rejects the notion of universally intelligible human affects because the rubric for measuring these is not neutral but, rather, operative within histories of racism, ableism, misogyny, and other fears of bodily difference.

I find this admittedly-invented dialogue enriched in conversation with Barrett's critique of Ekman's still-prominent "basic emotions" thesis, first researched in 1969 and popularized in psychological research in the ensuing decades. As noted earlier, Ekman pursued Darwin's thesis to study whether the facial expressions of six basic emotions could be comprehended cross-culturally.<sup>27</sup> If emotions express innate, inherited needs of the human, might their expression provide a common ground on which we all could understand each other? Against the basic emotions thesis, Barrett defends a "constructed emotions" thesis, which proposes that emotions do not exist as stable distinctive neural fingerprints but occur through a complex interplay of mental processes that do not come from specific parts of the brain.<sup>28</sup> Emotions are constructed by the brain's representation of sensations (interoception) and predictions of what will happen next: "Everything you feel is based on prediction from your knowledge and past experience."<sup>29</sup> Thus, our emotional expressions may overlap with shared concepts and practices to interpret our experiences: "What's universal is the ability to form concepts that make our physical sensations meaningful."<sup>30</sup> Humans are meaning-making beings, and emotions are no less real for being constructed from social reality; we are taught to notice some things and not others in a given cultural setting, admitting some details as information and dismissing others, toward the reinforcement of a coherent worldview that can be shared.<sup>31</sup> This does not make cross-cultural emotional understanding impossible, nor does it make intracultural comprehension wholly transparent; rather, it means that our differences in expression do not need to be reduced to a basic set of gestures or a unified explanation.

What other possibilities for being human might arise through a decolonial feminist critique of affect theory? And how has a dominant descriptive statement of what it means to be human been both reflected and reinforced in theorizing affect according to Ekman's basic emotions thesis? Following Barrett's intervention, the capacity for intersubjective understanding between Ekman's researchers and the Indigenous peoples of New Guinea perhaps need not demand a universal facial language, biologically inherited across the whole of humanity. Rather, this capacity for

intersubjective understanding follows from our efforts as meaning-making beings, because we use gestures and/or sounds to convey meanings—and presume that others also intend to convey them this way, as well. It is with this shared context that the work of mutual interpretation can commence.

Thus, to presume the transparency of other people's expressions across cultural difference is not necessarily a sign of respect but may reflect the hubris of taking one's own habits to be natural and normal. Wynter extends Anibal Quijano's concept of the "coloniality of power" to consider how knowledge and power weave together, for instance, in our Western constructions of being, truth, and freedom, the very means of resisting oppression. In what follows, the third section of this essay turns to the work of Ngai and Schuller,<sup>32</sup> extending Wynter's thesis in turn to incorporate the coloniality operative in affect theory, by which the positive affect—joy—and empowerment of the individual are often taken to be a naturalistic value and a site of affirmative value. When we develop Wynter's critique of the Western ethnoclass of Man in dialogue with recent intersectional feminist work on the complex relation of "affect" and "power," it appears that increased power and joy cannot be so quickly affirmed without a larger context; such a context must also take account of who or what has been drained in order to energize that individual.<sup>33</sup> While some pleasures do not require the draining of others—such as watching the ocean waves, for instance—the pleasures of a privileged few have been historically bound up with the pain of numerous other groups.

### **Racialized Caricatures of Expression**

Drawing on recent intersectional feminist insights, we may find the interpretation of facial expressions further obfuscated by a history of racialized caricatures. The emotional expressions of those perceived as different from the hegemonic ethnoclass of Man have been figured as reactive and exaggerated, often in feminized and/or racialized ways. Ngai's concept of "animatedness" explores the dynamics of vitality and automatic mechanization in racialized representations of emotional expression.<sup>34</sup> She draws on examples from sentimental abolitionist literature in the mid-nineteenth century, namely in William Lloyd Garrison's 1845 preface to Frederick Douglass's autobiography, in which he testifies to Douglass's "animated" physical and emotional qualities as a sign of the authenticity of his



narrative.<sup>35</sup> Ngai observes that these characterizations make the featured speaker into a ventriloquist puppet of Euro-American values.<sup>36</sup> Drawing on Ngai, Schuller finds that a similar fantasy of the simultaneously “mechanical” and “malleable” worker supported an “industrial economy in which bodies of color are set into motion like the commodities they produce, and their individual feeling serves only as unmarketizable excess.”<sup>37</sup> As meaning-making beings able to consciously respond to and adjust the racialized affective code that has been laid upon them, feminized, racialized, and otherwise marginalized subjects who achieve mainstream “success” have tended to learn how to express the culturally desired emotion at the desired time, whether or not it matches their affective-energetic state. This could be described as a form of more or less self-conscious “animation” in response to the empathy-desiring norms of the hegemonic ethnoclass, such as the present norms of white privilege. At the same time, expressions that exceed or defy the expectations of this hegemonic ethnoclass continue to be regarded as “animated.”

Also drawing on Ngai, as well as recent work by Claudia Rankine,<sup>38</sup> Cathy Park Hong offers an account of what she calls “minor feelings,” which she follows Ngai in identifying as “non-cathartic states of emotion” with “a remarkable capacity for duration.”<sup>39</sup> Hong Park describes these minor feelings as arising in response to cognitive dissonance, as one negotiates narratives of American optimism in contradiction with one’s own racialized experience; she summarizes: “Minor feelings are also the emotions we are accused of having when we decide to *be* difficult—in other words, when we decide to be honest. . . . Our feelings are overreactions because our lived experiences of structural inequality are not commensurate with their deluded reality.”<sup>40</sup> What happens when historically marginalized subjects do not *affectively* express themselves according to the expectations and desires of the dominant ethnoclass? First of all, it means defying the presumption of a universal set of gestures that we could cross-culturally comprehend. For example, Sara Ahmed’s “feminist killjoy” spoils the fun of others by refusing to laugh along;<sup>41</sup> Audre Lorde’s “angry” presence disrupts a predominantly white feminist conference;<sup>42</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s “misfit” does not align with ableist presumptions of public spaces.<sup>43</sup>

Second, it exposes bodies who defy these expectations not only to a lack of care and concern, but sometimes also to violence on the part of the hegemonic ethnoclass. Schuller extends Ngai’s thinking about animatedness to

her own work on sentimental biopower in the nineteenth century, charting impressibility as a “key measure for racially and sexually differentiating the refined, sensitive, and civilized subject who was embedded in time and capable of progress, and in need of protection, from the coarse, rigid, and savage elements of the population suspended as flesh.”<sup>44</sup> Here, Schuller follows Hortense Spillers’s distinction of the flesh (*viscus*) from the rights-holding body (*habeas corpus*) as “that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.”<sup>45</sup> These cruelties were possible only through the separating of “expression” from a racialized concept of “animation,” by which some expressions came to be perceived as either insincere or unintelligible. Far from a neutral measure, then, Schuller and Ngai underscore the framing of what registers as “expressive”—and thereby authentic rather than “animated”—for an imperialist gaze.

## Conclusion

Developing this critique of the coloniality of the affects with Wynter, with attention to current controversies in facial recognition software and their material effects—whether in the ease of technology use and travel, or the dangers of (mis-)recognition in criminal justice applications—we can support Barrett’s challenge to Ekman’s Darwinian thesis that faces express universally hardwired emotions across cultural differences. With Ngai’s concept of *animatedness* and the dynamics of power shaping perceptions and performances of animation, we must call into question the universal intelligibility of facial expressions. Even if we likely do, as Darwin hypothesized, share some expressive responses and traits as a human species, our interpersonal access to these expressions is not transparent but mediated by cultural conditions and power relations, including histories of caricature, phobic projection, and other more-or-less violent misrecognitions. Indeed, this decolonial critical lens on the universality of facial expressions would be only deepened—as I am currently researching and drafting—by critical disability studies perspectives with attention to neurodiversity and especially the autism spectrum, given that a hegemonic ableism all too often interprets neurodivergent facial expressions as lacking or in excess of this purportedly universal intelligibility. Disability as well as decolonial feminist perspectives have been

underemphasized in affect theory, but they can show us that that which energizes or drains us is already bound up in networks of power, not as pure measures of our metaphysical capacity, but as processes constrained and made possible through institutional practices. Resisting Ekman's claim to the universal intelligibility of cross-cultural affective expressions, Barrett's constructed emotion thesis takes seriously the influence of symbolic practices of meaning-making and sociohistorical forces on the affects in their coloniality, so habituated that one may struggle to imagine them otherwise—though their purported transparency and obviousness follows from hegemonic power.

#### NOTES

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2. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Toward the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *The New Centennial Review*, 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.
3. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).
4. Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
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7. Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
8. Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*.
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10. See Silvan S. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). Tomkins himself moved toward this claim in his later work on “scripts”—how one tends to respond, given a set of defining scenes and characters and the predictive habits these generate (179–95).

11. Lisa Feldman Barrett, “What Faces Can’t Tell Us,” *The New York Times*, February 28, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/opinion/sunday/what-faces-cant-tell-us.html>.

12. Paul Ekman and Dacher Keltner, “Darwin’s Claim of Universal Facial Expressions Not Challenged,” *Huffington Post*, April 10, 2014, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/darwins-claim-of-universals-in-facial-expression-not-challenged\\_b\\_5121383](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/darwins-claim-of-universals-in-facial-expression-not-challenged_b_5121383).

13. Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 1. Noble coins the term “technological redlining” to name patterns of othering and exclusion that presently operate much like redlining in real estate and banking, in which “discrimination is... embedded in computer code and, increasingly, in artificial intelligence technologies that we are reliant on, by choice or not” (ibid). This is all the more true as libraries, universities, and governmental agencies are “increasingly reliant on or being displaced by a variety of web-based ‘tools’ as if there are no political, social, or economic consequences of doing so” (9).

14. Drew Harwell, “Federal Study Confirms Racial Bias of Many Facial-recognition Systems, Casts Doubt on Their Expanding Use,” *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/12/19/federal-study-confirms-racial-bias-many-facial-recognition-systems-casts-doubt-their-expanding-use/>

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23. Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 326 and 331.
24. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 29.
25. Guilmette, "Unsettling the Coloniality of the Affects."
26. Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).
27. Ekman, "Universal Facial Expressions of Emotions"; Ekman and Friesen, "Constants Across Cultures."
28. Barrett, *How Emotions are Made*, 40.
29. *Ibid.*, 78.
30. *Ibid.*, 38.
31. *Ibid.*, 133, 83.
32. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*; Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*.
33. This borrows from Brennan's energetic terms of transmission, in which affects do not merely circulate or move contagiously but, instead, enrich some at the expense of others. See *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). For more on Brennan's theory of energetics, see Guilmette, forthcoming in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 33, no. 4 (2020).
34. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 32, 91.
35. *Ibid.*, 95.
36. *Ibid.*, 98.
37. Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, 14.
38. Claudia Rankine. *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014).
39. Park Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 56.
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41. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
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44. Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, 8.
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