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## Affect Theory in Reading Research: Imagining the Radical Difference

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### ABSTRACT

Working through four key tenets of Deleuze–Guattarian theory, the authors describe how contemporary affect theory offers a radically different perspective on reading. Asking how we can conceptualize reading differently if we conceptualize affect differently, we argue that possible meanings of reading or experiences of reading must be considered not as inherent to internal experiences of reading but as composed and recomposed in sets of affective relations. Using an example of two children reading, we consider how reading, as a material doing, takes up and is taken up by bodies, materials, spaces, histories, feelings, and ideas. To consider affect as the property of sets of present relations rather than of the individual prompts us to consider how the various elements assemble and break apart to produce intensities in which reading participates. Deprivileging human intentionality or motivations, we ask, “In a given instance, what conditions of possibility are being produced and for whom, and how are participants taking up or being moved by those conditions?” We conclude with suggestions for how contemporary affect theory can reorient our understanding of reading research.

We begin with a scene of two children reading together. One child, a boy, is older –perhaps seven or eight years old. Snuggled up next to the boy, her head leaning against his shoulder, is his sister of four years. Both children are laying on their bellies, and the boy is holding out an open book in front of them in both hands, such that they can see the pages.

The book's cover features a puppy and a kitten tumbling in a field of flowers. Both the boy and girl look intently at a page in the book.

Where is affect in this scene of reading? What role does it play? Referring to various ways it is often used in psychology, affect has many potential meanings, including, for example, as interchangeable with emotion, as an internal state, as an added dimension to thought, or as a particular state we attempt to achieve. In this depicted scene, any of these understandings of affect would focus our attention on the internal states of the boy and the girl. We might raise questions such as: What is the boy's arousal state as he is reading this story and how is it connected with his skill as a reader? What meanings is he making from the story and how are these meanings tied to the feelings the story gives rise to? How is the boy's affective state related to his past history of experiences like those depicted in the story and of reading with his sister and of the act of reading? What is the little girl feeling about the story? What is she feeling about being close to her brother reading, and how does this reading time meet the hopes she had earlier, when she asked him to read with her? Questions such as these take as their starting point a view on affect as an internal state, individually held although clearly in interaction with other people and things. Further, these questions also suggest an understanding of reading as a particular set of decontextualized skills that a particular reader has or does not have, which might include the capacity to decode or predict text with a given level of fluency as well as abilities to make connections, draw inferences, and make use of pictures.

We don't intend for these kinds of questions in any way to provide a comprehensive overview of a psychological understanding of affect or of reading. We pose these questions as a productive starting point for exploring a radically different perspective on affect, one that has developed in the humanities and social science over the past three decades. The point here is not to propose that psychological views of affect are wrong, but rather that they are partial and only tell certain stories while leaving out others. Taking to heart Donna Haraway's (2016) observation that "[I]t matters what its what stories we tell to tell other stories with" (p. 12), we offer a radically different story of affect. In this article, we explore the question of how we might think about reading differently if we think about affect differently. In particular, as literacy researchers committed to describing how traditional stories of literacy construct privileged classes of "readers" versus those conceptualized as "nonreaders" or "struggling readers," we look to affect theory as a means of differently conceptualizing who counts as literate and what counts as literacy.

As literacy researchers working with contemporary affect theory, we take our understanding of affect from the work of the French social theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Drawing from the

seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza (and many others), Deleuze and Guattari understood affect, most simply, as affecting and being affected (Robinson & Kutner, 2019). Spinoza understood affect as the impact or the modification or variation created as one body acts upon another. As Massumi (1987) described, it is “a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (n.p.). In contemporary affect theory, “body” is not limited to humans or even living things, but includes material objects, spaces, ideas, senses, fantasies, histories, and culture. Deleuze and Guattari imagine these relations of affecting and being affected as spread out on the same flat surface, which they conceptualize as a plane or plateau. On this plateau of different elements – all jumbled together from what we commonly consider to be different categories of life and matter (different ontologies) – assumed causal hierarchies are flattened and instead, we can begin to sense the coming together of energy, of intensities.

To introduce this perspective, consider again the opening scene, yet this time, break away from the tendency to separate what is the outside of the child’s bodies from whatever may be going on inside their thoughts, feelings, or other responses. Also, disrupt the hierarchical relationship of the (inner) mind and its processed thoughts and feelings over the (outer) sensing body. Break from the “obvious” separation of the boy and the girl as entirely separate entities – as holding, inside their bodies, individual thoughts and feelings. Next, imagine the book itself, not just its story world and images, but also the physical properties of the pages and cover – the feel of the book, its weight and texture, the smell of the paper, and evidence of its history in the tears, wrinkles, and marks it has accumulated. Now put them all in a space – a small, obviously lived-in living room with worn carpeting, toys scattered here and there on the floor, a coffee table with half empty mugs of cold tea and a television remote, and blankets strewn across an old but comfortable sofa and armchair. The children are in this space on a long afternoon on a Sunday in spring, in which rainy weather has kept the children inside, in which tempers have sometimes been short, where there is the smell of cooking food in the air and the sound of music coming faintly from another part of the house, and now where the sun is starting to break through the clouds, making a bright, warm spot on the carpet where the children have settled to read. Think of all of these as participants in this affective encounter. And now imagine reading itself, not as being confined to or contained by the reading proficiency of the boy, the emergent literacy of the girl, the words on the page, and the memories or emotions the story may give rise to – although those may certainly be part of it. Instead, imagine how the act of reading and the story read enter into and interact

with an entire field in which all these participants come together and break apart in predictable and unpredictable ways, playing (or at least having the potential to play) a part in the production of intensities and momentum, of the possibilities and actualizations of what happens next.

In the article, we propose four key tenets of Deleuze–Guattarian theory, as it relates to our project of redefining affect and to thereby shift common perspectives on what reading is and what it does.<sup>1</sup> We will explore each of these ideas in more detail in what follows.

1. Material of all kinds – people, objects, ideas, words, feelings, senses, spaces, histories, and cultures – come together in nonhierarchical relations on plateaus. Relations on the plateau are rhizomatic.
2. Relations on the plateau are nonrepresentational. This tenet has important implications for thinking about how language comes into relation with other materials, and consequently for the movement of affective intensities in the process of reading.
3. Affect is the property of these relations and not of the individual person. Affect is understood as relations of affecting and being affected, in which the human is no more privileged than any other participant. Affect is prepersonal; it is the flow of intensities that catches things up, brings things together, breaks things apart, and can be expressed as possibility, momentum, and emerging directions of force.
4. Because affective relations extend beyond the individual, movements arising from them can be more open or closed to possibilities, more deterritorializing or territorializing. Systems, practices, and discourses beyond the individual can serve to territorialize, translating open possibility into already known patterns and expectations.

As suggested, our goal in posing and exploring these tenets is to bring ourselves and our readers into an experiment in which the guiding question is, “How might we think about reading differently if we think about affect differently?” We do this by exploring more specific questions:

- What might it mean for thinking about reading if, in noticing multiple entities on a plateau, we don’t separate these entities or bodies a priori, but rather attend to how they vibrate or become intensive together?
- What if we pay attention to how things of all sorts (of many different ontologies) make intensive connections, in an ever-evolving process of constantly emergent change?

- Further, what if, among all the bodies we spread out on the plateau, we place our own bodies – our researcher bodies – on the plateau as well? And what if our noticing of movements in a plateau, where things were connecting and changing constantly, is affected not just with our eyes, but with our entire bodies?
- Also, what if we think about any plateau as connected, in unknown and ever-changing relations, to myriad other plateaus?

These are questions being taken up in the rising interest in affect in relation to literacy practices (c.f., Burnett & Merchant, 2020; Rowsell & Shillitoe, 2019; Truman, Hackett, Pahl, Davies, & Escott, 2020). For reading and literacy researchers, such relations dramatically shift our conception of what language is and does. This work has begun to open up new imaginations of literacy research, theory, and practice, an expansion which is of course reflected in the development of this special issue.

In what follows, we describe each of the four tenets of affect theory in turn, returning to our opening scene each time as a device for describing each tenet more carefully. We do this in order to highlight the radical potential for reconsidering reading through an affect theory lens. In the final section of the paper, we will take up the challenge offered by Brian Massumi, Deleuze and Guattari's English translator, when he asks, "But does it work? What new thoughts does it make it possible to think? What new emotions does it make it possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body?" (Massumi, 1987, p. xv). We do this work in order to offer researchers a more nuanced and inclusive way of considering of how reading and literacy move in people's lives.

## Four Tenets of Affect Theory

### *Materials Come into Nonhierarchical, Rhizomatic Relations on a "Plateau"*

From thinking of affect as being present "within," or as a kind of deep state of affairs that is separate and "inside" a body, the radical turn in affect studies spreads affective connections and energies over a plateau. We may think of the ways in which psychology *organizes* psychological life and functions, with the hierarchy of the mind inside the body, psychological functions organized in different parts of the brain, etc. The concept of the organism captures an apriori systematization of parts, functions, locations, hierarchies, depths, and relations. The organism leaves behind the plateau of possibilities to search for a defined self and system.

In contrast, Deleuze and Guattari describe the “plateau” as “a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end” (1987, p. 2). It is less about organization and more about the continuous coming together and breaking apart of heterogeneous elements and conditions on a given plateau – a late Sunday afternoon, a worn rug, the sun breaking through and the smell of cooking in the air, the field still dense with previous tensions, scattered toys testifying to previous games, a book that has been read many times before, and a brother who mostly loves his little sister.

This plateau, like all plateaus, is a kind of “region” or area of intensity, experienced from within, that comes to be not through the consistency (visual or otherwise) of its elements but through their multiplicity and heterogeneity – book, sun, smell, tension, mess of toys, etc. The multiplicity and heterogeneity of diverse elements that come together on any plateau is productive of constantly new possibilities and of emergent intensities. The scene is different – has different potentials, because it is this book and not another, this smell and not another, this room with this furniture and these memories and not others. Each new thing that enters and exits the field brings new possibilities for what else might happen. They are intensities, in the sense of new combinations that catalyze new possibilities.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) tell us that the intensity and multiplicity are also connected to other such “regions” – other plateaus – by “superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome” (p. 2). The rhizome is a useful image for understanding how Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize relations on the plateau and between different plateaus; what, for example, may be going on between lawn mowers and blowers and grass and smoke and workers just next door to our reading children, or in the child’s memory? Drawn from botany, the rhizomal plant is one that sends its shoots out vertically, growing opportunistically in every direction, joining with other shoots, creating new nodes as it grows from which to send out new shoots and roots. They contrast this to the vertical structure of arborescent (tree-like) systems. For Deleuze and Guattari, the arborescent suggests linearity – unidirectional, hierarchical, homogeneous, dualistic, and binary. On the plateau, we are not given a chronology (“roots”) or originary source of “things,” with pre-set beginnings and conclusions. What we are given instead are unstable becomings – identities not yet made – the coming together of different things and movements in relation.

The Deleuze–Guattarian inspired theory of affect opens the closed system of human/nonhuman separations in the reading scene. It calls upon us to become curious about that which is human and that which is other than human all acting upon or affecting one another. It goes further: it

proposes that we take the jumbled up pieces – what we assume to be “inner” thoughts and feelings, along with that which is typically considered less important or ignored altogether – the arms, shoulders, hands, breath, words, and material pieces of the book, along with sound, smell, temperature, atmosphere, and so much more – and spreads them out on a plateau. What, when brought into relation with what else on this plateau, vibrates? What is put into motion? What emerges or “becomes” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) in the course of a moving, evolving world in which two children are lying on their stomachs on a warm rug on a late Sunday afternoon reading together? The rhizome “has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25).

In other words, we can never think about reading as a thing in itself with a discreet beginning and ending and discreet boundaries but rather, we always must think about a series of ever-emergent relations. To place the opening scene on a plane (a plateau) and map it as a series of rhizomatic relations – things, time, space, smells, feelings, textures, moods, memories, words, and histories coming together and breaking apart – allows us to decenter both reading and psychological processes as the central frame for interpreting what happens now and what might happen next. We can begin to consider how reading *lives* among the multitudinous, heterogeneous elements in this scene, on this plateau.

From this perspective, reading – the act of reading as well as what is viewed and read – is understood as contributing material to a much more complex, materially packed scene. Possible meanings of reading or experiences of reading must be considered not as inherent to the children’s internal experiences of reading but as composed and recomposed in sets of affective relations – what reading is affecting and being affected by in a given instance, what it is making possible, closing down, what direction reading is moving things in and being moved into, how reading comes to matter or not matter in relation to the many participants on that plateau. This is Deleuze and Guattari’s conjunctive and ... and ... and ... (1987), which they would signify through dashes: brother-sister-Sunday afternoon-warm rug-food smells-postfight-reading-book-words-pictures-becoming. Through such dashed-connections, they show that the meaning or nature of a thing is not in itself, but is a result of how it combines with other elements on a given plateau. *There is, in other words, no such thing as “reading” as a thing in itself, but only reading as it is created through specific sets of relations with other elements.* They also show, as we will discuss later, that everything is in a state of emergence, becoming something different and something different again – what they call “becoming” – as it is recreated in relation to new material.

### ***Relations on the Plateau, Including Relations to Language, Are Nonrepresentational***

Because everything has the capacity to come into relationship with other things and therefore to affect, everything is understood as matter or as material. This concept gives rise to a nonrepresentational philosophy of affect. By nonrepresentational, we mean that language, including here, the words and images on a story page being shared by a brother and sister, are not pointing to some life “out there.” Rather, language and other signs are material entering into multiple and often unpredictable connections of intensity with life in the present moment (Leander & Boldt, 2013). To call words and images – and by extension, research – nonrepresentational, the theory highlights that although words and images may take as their material something that is out there, e.g., a puppy and kitten playfully tumbling together across a field, the effect of the words and images is in the relations they enter into in the present, in what they produce on the plateau.

What gets formed in the constant assembly and reassembling relations of the emergent present are nonhierarchical (plateau-like) relations of energy rather than signification (re-presenting). Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 7) described how “semiotic chains of every nature” are formed by connections among things of different ontological status. This is what we worked to suggest in the opening scene, in which children-book as material object-book as words and concepts-reading as act-light-rug-smell-sound-temperature-mood-touch as well as history and culture and-and-and – all these elements assemble on the plateau in that time and space. They are nonhierarchical relations of energy, in that any element has the potential to matter as much or more than the next. The connections that form create intensities and thereby movement into the next thing that happens and the next and the next. Something happens and then the next thing and the next, but Deleuze and Guattari do not conceptualize this as a causal chain but rather as a productive movement toward the formation of new multiplicities (Massumi, 1992). Think of the image of the rhizome, in which the coming together into a node gives rise to many new shoots. In interpreting reading, literacy practices, and literacy performances, connection and heterogeneity challenge us to reconsider how talk, discourses, material texts, human bodies, and material objects are related within interactions in which the internal state of the human participant is no more privileged than any other element. Rather than conceiving of these relationships as having centers of meaning that we might discover and trace, these principles prompt us to think of uncontained semiosis as an active, intensive, and dynamic process that produces effects, often moving in unpredictable directions.

Unlike representational views, where significance “binds” us with foundational configurations (e.g., identities, meanings, categories), Deleuze and Guattari move us to consider how social, affective life is an outcome of open, dynamic connections. Let us return to the opening scene. Let us imagine for a moment that a sentence in the storyline reads “Where is the kitten now?” On the facing page of this part of the text, there is a picture of a backyard, with a small garden, a few trees, and what appears to be a basket of yard tools. Let’s imagine that the boy pauses in his reading, and repeats one word, “kitten,” but slowly for his sister, and it sounds to her like “keeetaaan.” The little girl feels the sounds and smiles. Her brother says again “keeetaaan” and the girl stretches out the beginning sound, “caaaaah! caaaaah!” The boy shakes his head and laughs to which the girl repeats louder, “caaaah! caaaaah!” The boy wonders if his sister is imagining a bird in the tree picture. He points to the tree picture: “caw?” His little sister doesn’t look at the book again but instead grabs his mouth and laughs again, and he responds by rolling up to his side and beginning to tickle her stomach. The girl shrieks “caaaaah! caaaaah!” still more loudly and the boy keeps tickling her with one hand while teasingly covering her mouth with the other. The girl picks up the book with her free hand and throws it, hard, against the door, with a loud clunk. The mother yells from the kitchen. And on...

In this imagined set of emergent relations, words don’t merely “stand in” for some reality beyond them, taking up representational relations. Rather, affective intensities ripple across words and non-words: the word kitten-the sound “keeetaaan”-a smile-“caaaaah”-head shake-laugh-“caaaah”-a tree picture-grab mouth-laugh-tickle-etc. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) posit, the gap between the discursive and the non-discursive is bridged by force or direction or momentum. Where does reading begin and end? With the decoding or phonology of the word “kitten”? With decoding the word in relation to images in the text, or assists by the brother?

For affect theorists, reading is not separate from all of these emergent relations, where words and images can represent, of course, but also become swept up into myriad nonrepresentational relations. Words and images and stories become stirred up, in their everyday, living and breathing relations, with other bodies and their affective, immediate responses to them. Words, things, and readers push and pull on one another. The event of reading, in this case, does not begin and end with the text and its representations, but rather lives on the plateau and across its relations.

### ***Affect Is the Property of Relations and Not of the Individual Person***

Affect, for Deleuze and Guattari, is understood through terms that indicate what is produced in interactions, words such as movement, speed,

intensity, direction, and smooth and striated space. Affect is, in other words, a verb, a doing; it is emergent production as a result of constantly changing entanglements of human and more than human worlds. Karen Barad (2007) uses the word “intra-action” to capture the sense of open-endedness, of the “inexhaustible dynamism” (p. 234) of the comings-together and breakings-apart of the actants, in which nothing can ever be understood as completed or as separate, since what something can do or become is dependent upon the other elements on the plateau.

Affect theory calls attention to what it is possible to consider if we imagine affect as “nonconscious, noncognitive, and transindividual bodily forces and capacities, ... deprivilege[ing] the human as the sole agent in an interaction” (Truman et al., 2020, p. xx). Turning to a perspective on affect as “prepersonal” (Massumi, 1987, n.p.), we can consider how reading, as a material doing, takes up and is taken up by bodies, materials, histories, feelings, and ideas. To consider affect as the property of the relations on the plateau rather than of the individual draws us to consider how the various elements, assembled as a plateau, come together and break apart in rhizomatic connections, to produce intensities in which reading participates, but neither reading nor the human intentionalities or motivations of the children are privileged in this scene.

Let us again return to the opening scene. Let us imagine that the boy, a second grader, is considered “a struggling reader” at school. He is not able to produce the independent proficiency – word recognition, fluency, speed – expected within his school’s reading program. He increasingly feels overwhelmed, embarrassed, and angry at school, as he is placed in a low performing reading group or pulled from the classroom for reading support. Reading is understood as an individual and self-contained skill and the boy is failing. At home, on that Sunday afternoon, the boy feels bored by the toys he has already played with. Earlier in the afternoon, he had shoved his sister after she stepped on one of his Lego creations, breaking it apart, and she fled the room crying. Now she has returned and proffered the book to him, looking at him hopefully. It is a book he has read to her many times. He takes the book, sweeps aside random toy pieces, and lays on his stomach on a warm spot on the floor. He doesn’t say anything to his sister, but she understands the invitation and lays down next to him. As he begins to enter into the familiar rhythms of the story, she snuggles up to him and lays her head on his shoulder. He continues to read the familiar words.

Here, we see the boy reading successfully. On the plateau of that time and space, reading assembles for the boy very differently than it does at school. It joins different sets of relations and intensities and does different things than it does at school. What “success” looks like and feels like

points to different sets of intensities and relations. This brings us to the final tenet.

### ***Affective Relations can be More Open or Closed to Possibilities, More Deterritorializing or Territorializing***

Affect – affecting and being affected – in Deleuze–Guattarian theory is understood in relation to the production of movements and intensities, as things happen in intra-actions. Reading at school exists in a field that includes sets of actions that enact beliefs about what reading and a reader is. It would be a mistake to imagine that the open, dynamic nature of the theory suggests that all happenings are simply random assemblages of existing elements. Rather, Deleuze and Guattari attend to how what they call “the virtuality” or the openness of the moment toward what could happen next can be closed down or “territorialized.” Given that systems are open – something can enter at any moment and move the scene in a completely unexpected direction<sup>2</sup> – they draw attention to the fact that the production of the same old thing over and over is the result of the hard, if usually invisible, work of subjectifying systems, practices, and discourses that territorialize – translating open possibility into already known patterns and expectations. In other words, the territorialized version of reading at school narrows what counts as reading and as a reader into knowable, quantifiable terms and measures the boy accordingly. That the boy is many different readers at different times and places and that reading itself is many different things, transforming and becoming different as it enters into many kinds of relations, is not thought in the territorialized version of reading, nor is the idea that neither reader nor reading are self-contained or predetermined.

Importantly, Truman et al. (2020) draw from the scholarship of Sara Ahmed (2004) to argue that a danger of affect theory is that any propensity to move from a prepersonal understanding of affect can threaten to suggest that affect can be thought of as depoliticized or what they describe as “a neutral circulation” (p. 4., citing Truman & Shannon, 2018). They note that for humans being affected, there is a dense history of “racialized, gendered, poor, queer, and dis/abled bodies” through and with whom affect travels. Therefore, they argue, affect must be understood as both personal and more than personal, as “intensity and force” that passes through persons with different histories and different circumstances, therefore coming into being with bodies that have different capacities to act (p. 5).

Returning to the boy and his sister, it matters – it makes a material difference – how we picture the boy and girl and the scene. It matters if imagine the children to be young black or brown or white children.

It matters if the well lived-in living room suddenly suggests a certain shabbiness and the bad tempers that have dominated the day came from a mother who worked third shift the night before at a low-wage job. It matters if the sunshine coming into the room was squeezing between highrise buildings in an impoverished part of a major city or if it is filtering through cut glass windows in an old but beautiful country home. And what is the music coming into the room; is it classical, jazz, bachata, or rap? What if recent struggles in school have resulted in the boy being scheduled for special education testing or what if he is chronically absent from school due to an undiagnosed medical issue? The social, cultural, and historical elements on the plateau shift. The “same old things” being produced for this young boy – how he is positioned as a reader and what counts as “appropriate” reading are repeatedly territorialized in ways that are raced, classed, and gendered. And while a white, middle class, non-diagnosed boy might be given more space for what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) called “deterritorializations” – which is when what happens next is unexpected, when the event sets off in a new direction, when newness is suddenly produced – the raced and classed and dis/abled reader finds himself more constrained, more judged, and punished when his enactments of reading take off in unexpected ways.

### **What Do Researchers Do with Affect?**

We have mapped some of the radical transformations concerning affect as developed in affect theory. These transformations posit an entirely different way of thinking about and with affect than that born out of traditional concepts that keep and contain affect as akin to an internal emotional state. In this final section, we extend our inquiry into what work such transformation does for reading research.<sup>3</sup> The tenets of affect theory that we have considered create major disruptions concerning entire categories of thought about the individual, inside/outside divisions, representations, and human–nonhuman binaries. Such disruptions of our ways of being and thinking are easier to dismiss than to consider or dream with. Yet, we share a commitment to produce work that creates difference – research and writing that is nonrepresentational (Leander & Boldt, 2013), that seeks to move or affect the reader. While we take as our material in this article a scene of reading and some complicated French theory, what we seek to produce is not merely a representation of something that is out there so much as to affect the reader; that our words, ideas, and histories would join with readers’ own ideas and histories to produce something unique and specific in the moment, something that creates particular intensities, that contributes to direction, force, and

intensity carried forward into a new idea, a new conversation, or a new project.

In this direction of possible “next thing that happens,” we extend our discussion in what follows with re-orientations for research processes. By “re-orientation,” what we intend is to relate how embodied and relational ways of conceiving of reading, developed through affect theory, could transform more traditional ways of knowing and researching. In other words, we discuss further how a shifted ontology (way of being with/in the world) re-orient our epistemology (way of knowing). We are not laying out or claiming a new set of research methods, but rather sketching some re-orientations for research on reading.

### ***The Reader’s Text as an Opening***

A first re-orientation is toward considering the text itself as a kind of invocation or invitation, drawing the reader into sets of relations that extend well beyond it. The text in this orientation is a door or window to a world of relations rather than the room for or container of that world itself. Entanglements with the text are vital because every reading is a new reading orientated by the movements that come before, situate the moment, and will come later. Through interactions of others, with sensations, and with objects, meanings and affects are infinitely multiplied. Characters emerge from stories and create relations with readers; readers are changed by characters. The text offerings are rich and heterogeneous, spread out as movements on a plane with other potential worldings.

For literacy scholars and teachers, a position of inviting rather than “owning” the text might make us anxious, with our commitments to decoding, comprehension, and interpretation. For even though we may celebrate multiple or divergent readings of texts, literacy researchers are given to having a text “ground” to return to. Alongside this convergence game of constant return to the text, here we re-orient with a different game – a divergence game. Here, the text is treated as non-sovereign (Breger, 2017) and engaged in unstable, emergent relations. The question put about the text is not what it means, but what it does as it enters into relations on the plateau. In this game, the ground of activity is only the plateau and its ongoing play of energies.

### ***Following Rhizome-Like Wanderings in Reading***

The second re-orientation follows from the first: if the text is an invocation or opening, then following lines of deterritorialization away from the text are every bit as important as following lines toward it. The researcher may notice and follow lines of deterritorialization in the course of a

reading event; the sister begins to caaaah and the brother rolls over and tickles. Yet, when preconceived research questions or predetermined stances toward what reading is, how it works, what readers must do to attain fluency, or to “open” different meanings and interpretations of texts by creating, for instance, “personal meaning” connections, such deterritorializations can be seen as distractions or diversions and researchers often struggle to stay open to the importance of the unexpected. Through deterritorializations, unplanned modes of “being a reader” along with unexpected meanings and affective relations with texts lean forward in time and are shared by those involved in the reading relation – including the researcher herself – cascading forth with unfolding energy. The child strays off “topic” or makes an unexpected move and the researcher sits up. The author stumbles. The becoming researcher-child-reader-text explores, making productive links and wanderings, sensing the relations. The researcher waits for the child to build a world of relations and meanings, and waits for them to drop away. Readers dial up their own attention, light up all of their capacities to feel the heterogeneity on the plateau before them – this day, these pages, these objects, these relations, the singularity of now. What comes together? Yes, and, what else? Every coming together is the right one for the next one. Life is considered in its growing complexity. In a single child, we find that multiple potential readers are on the scene always in the middle, along the lines: they don’t stay not “in” the lines but “on” the lines, feeling the lines – where things might go – and their reverberations, feeling the text-becoming of the lines.

### ***Reading Research as Embodied Attunement***

The reader is moved – a hint of thought, the shift of a posture, the rise of intensity felt from the act of reading, or from the others in the emerging story world offer a hint of the next move – only the next. Readers, intensively oriented, attune to one another, they attune to authors, they attune to the “objects” (including ideas, fantasies, memories, cultures, and histories) they are bringing to life in the world of a story, and they attune to the collectively built story world (Boldt, 2020). An analysis of reading that is only about fluency or reading skills or about being right, about argument, or about textual interpretation will miss these attunements. In this re-orientation, research is also about being present – about presencing the reader’s world – and about feeling that presencing as it is coming to be. In research as attuning, we pay attention to the rising and falling of energies and imaginations as much as anything else.<sup>4</sup> The reader is at work, the author is at work, the characters are at work, the setting is at work, the specific moment is at work – all of them making offerings.

This particular occasion offers up its sensations – the classroom smells funny, the bell is going to ring, somebody’s stomach is growling, a poster names word decoding strategies, there is a warm breeze blowing through the open window, laughter floats in from the playground. And still, there are orientations: the expectation for reading does not disappear; the author and text don’t disappear, they are here, present, among others, along with the reader, as these rhizome-like relations of energy rise up and drop off. All of it is potentially full of a nearly infinite number of possible meanings and possible directions. Research as attunement is about not being on the outside looking in, but being in the middle, and in the middle, sensing the idiosyncratic energies in motion – attending to the singular entanglements between the emergent relations of readers, texts, and material worlds, and moving with them.

### ***Reading Intervention as Creating Affective Intensities***

Since affect is always present and not a special case of relations or a “bonus” to reading events, and since affect (as intensity, direction, momentum) is inevitably the essential outcome of intervention and reading pedagogy, then an additional re-orientation concerns the activity of research and intervention themselves. Viewing reading as entering into and participating, for good or for ill, in complex material relations in which affective intensities are always present, in our research (Boldt, 2020; Tanner, Leander, & Carter-Stone, 2020), we consider how literacy comes to be experienced as vital and how vital participation in literacy far exceeds any traditional notions of an individual who reads. We ask how readers, reading, and texts participate as material in the creation of the momentum and direction of unfolding events. The vitality, the life that takes place that includes reading is something we might name as literacy broadly understood. This matters because it demands that we consider what reading *does* in the lives of children. Liane Mozère, a close colleague of Deleuze and Guattari, wrote that learning does not have to do with what happens when children master the official curriculum but rather what happens in those moments when the children are able to snatch something that empowers their own “forces of life” (2014, p. 102). Learning, for Mozère, involved the ignition of possibility that set a child on a line that increased the power and intensity of that child’s movement with desire (Boldt, Lewis, & Leander, 2015).

What then does “intervention” look like from such a perspective? Rather than this work being only representational – something happened there, in that space, that the researcher witnessed but was not part of – the relations of research and intervention become also affectively oriented. Thinking with Mozère, the researcher who is committed to reading

intervention is called to be a mover of readers, an activator. The researcher feels forward and back along the lines of intensity – where is this energy moving? Where could it? What could provoke movement? What attunements are being made? How can differences be provoked, along the lines we are collectively exploring, to break repetitions? They coach from the side, from within the moment: What if you heightened connections here? Experiment. The researcher guided by affect might pay attention to bodies – noticing and interpreting but also animating the energies being exchanged during a discussion of the text. Where are the children's bodies at this moment? What possibilities of the ensemble are activated by their physical relations to one another, and how could new possibilities be afforded or provoked? How might the researcher design interventions and pedagogy that would allow children to practice an affirmational exchange of energies?

## Final Thoughts

In our research together and separately, we are concerned with narrow, rigid understandings of what literacy can be and do. We are concerned with the ways literacy is and is not allowed to become full of life, to become vital in the life of a given child. And we are concerned with the ways those reductions, constraints, and territorializations play out differently and in even more punitive and less life-affirming ways for students who are minoritized by categories of race, social class, gender, and disability, thereby making it less likely that all the things that reading can contribute to their lives will become a vital part of their lives.

Thinking affect differently – imagining the radical difference that a practiced theory of affect holds – offer us a sense of hope and of possibility and a different focus as researchers. We have tried to follow these differences by writing through theory and scenes of children reading, illustrating affective intensities in the way that things assemble and disassemble on a plateau, thinking of it as direction and momentum, sensing affect as not internal to humans but as something in which humans get caught up, or that that passes through and around them, connecting them to everything else that is part of the scene, remaking them over and over in constantly emerging relations of possibility. All of these ideas compel us to ask what conditions of possibility are being produced and how participants are or are not taking up or being moved by those conditions. They cause us to cast an always critical eye on what it is that is enlivening or deadening in a given scene and for whom. They force us to reckon with our own responsibilities for what is being produced. If we imagine that the act of reading or the interpretation of the text are not an endpoint but are rather materials that are taken up for good or for ill

in a given moment, then language, learning, and text are removed from their position as the predetermined and privileged endpoint. Instead, we have to ask what these materials are doing and what is being produced. Where is the energy? Where is the vitality? What role is reading playing or failing to play for whom in this emergent scene, these reading scenes we study with great intent, and those we create here and now?

## Notes

1. By describing four tenets of affect theory, we by no means are implying that there are only these four concepts. Deleuze–Guattarian inspired affect theory is hugely complicated. We are simply highlighting these four ideas in an attempt to bring into focus some of the ideas that are useful for rethinking reading.
2. At the moment we are writing this, we are in the midst of the novel coronavirus pandemic. It is as dramatic an example as anything might be of the fact that we live in open, dynamic, unpredictable systems.
3. Contemporary affect theory also has many implications for classroom teaching. For some examples of this, see Boldt (2020), Sherbine and Boldt (2013), Ehret and Hollett (2014), and Zapata, Van Horn, Moss, and Fugit (2019).
4. Recent examples of highly attuned literacy research include Boldt (2020), Ehret (2018), Hollett and Ehret (2015), Hackett and Somerville (2017), Tanner, Leander, & Carter-Stone (2020), Niccolini (2019), Sherbine (2019), and Wargo (2015).

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