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“Bound by a shared affect”: Insights into reading and teaching emotions in recent poetry

Elina Siltanen

Abstract: In this article, I present a theoretically oriented framework for teaching poetry that accounts for the role of affect. I call this framework *reading for affective uncertainty*, meaning an approach to affect and meaning that recognizes affects associated with the reading event as integral parts of the reading without expecting meaning to be inherent to texts and simply in need of interpretation, which is often a focus in teaching. Central to this framework are the notion of a poem as an object and Sara Ahmed’s argument, in the *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004/2014), of how objects do not cause emotions, but emotions are produced in circulation with objects. As examples, I consider Evelyn Reilly’s *Echolocation* (2018) and Wendy Trevino’s *Cruel Fiction* (2018), two recent poetry books that consider relations between the human and the nonhuman and the notions of race and borders, respectively. These works generate uncertainty as to how to relate to others and thus serve as good examples of the way in which reading for affective uncertainty works in acknowledging that poems can be viewed as ordinary objects that participate in generating emotion.

The sidewalks

were mostly empty at night
as small groups contingently
bound by a shared affect
and theoretical lingo
congregated regularly
before moving off
into the flux of inevitable
accrual of differences
necessary to a continuously
evolving selfhood
(Reilly 2018, 32).ⁱ

Evelyn Reilly writes, in her poem “Self Inc.,” which appeared in the 2018 collection *Echolocation*, about the “shared affect” that binds together people who “congregate[] regularly” and pass each other by (Reilly 2018, 26-35). The poem, which spans nine and half pages, moves through

corporate offices where “Self” sits in an office cubicle that is located too close to others’ cubicles, yet separated from them by the steady flow of office speak like “*We will study that / and get back to you*” (Reilly 2018, 27, original italics) or copyright notices asserting that Self has no right to intellectual property (Reilly 2018, 34). The poem presents affect relating to the points of contact, borders, and boundaries that both bind us together and separate us from others, like people we might meet on sidewalks or at work. The poem, like *Echolocation* as a whole, also considers the borders between humans and the nonhuman. Complex literary texts frequently ask their readers to engage with such affective points of contact, but they can also be difficult to approach, which can manifest especially in teaching situations. In this article, my purpose is to present a framework for teaching poetry that accounts for the role of affect. I call this framework *reading for affective uncertainty*, by which I mean an approach to affect and meaning that recognizes affects associated with the reading event as integral parts of the reading without expecting meaning to be inherent to texts and simply in need of discovery.

The notion of *affect* has been defined in several ways, but here, I take *affective* to refer to a kind of emotional relationality, which Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg characterize as “*in-between-ness*” (2010, Kindle loc. 50; original italics). Affect is “a gradient of bodily capacity” that is shaped by encounters (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, Kindle loc. 59). For her part, Sara Ahmed writes that “emotions are shaped by contact with objects, rather than being caused by objects” (2014, 6). The notion of contact is central to this definition of affect. Ahmed does not, as she notes in her afterword to the second edition of *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, with reference to Seigworth and Gregg’s discussion, make a meaningful distinction between affect and emotion (2014, 207). Nevertheless, for her, [e]motions [...] involve bodily processes of affecting and being affected” (Ahmed 2014, 208), and thus what she calls emotion is relational similarly to how affect is relational for theorists like Seigworth and Gregg. I use the term *affect* to refer to this kind of relationality that is affected and shaped through contact with others and with objects, such as texts.

Thus, reading for affective uncertainty acknowledges the uncertainties encountered in contact with a text such as a poem.

In reading poetry, we frequently engage with partially “shared affect”, in Reilly’s words, that connects us, as readers or selves with poems and their speakers across boundaries between us and the poem, even while there are also “inevitable / accrual[s] of differences” (Reilly 2018, 32). Such “accrual[s] of differences” require working to critically examine, if not necessarily to overcome, such boundaries. When we bring a work of literature into a higher education classroom, it comes to serve a purpose. The literary work, like a poem, might be used to exemplify a literary historical period or illustrate a theoretical angle, to hone students’ analytical and interpretative skills, or perhaps to “cultivate capacities of judgment and sensitivity that can and should be expressed in the choices a citizen makes”, as Martha Nussbaum (1997, 86) has proposed of the arts in general and literature in particular. These purposes for discussing literature in the classroom are, of course, not mutually exclusive. Nussbaum proceeds to advocate for teaching literary works that support compassion and “read[ing] critically; not only to empathize and experience, but also to ask critical questions about that experience” (1997, 99-100). Nussbaum’s (1997, 101) argument about how compassion and “sympathetic reading” need to be accompanied with critical reading in order to overcome the inevitable biases that texts hold as they propose compassion for certain kinds of people while ignoring others prepares the case for the importance of considering emotions.

Furthermore, as Amy L. Eva-Wood (2008, 565-566) proposes, based on an empirical study of the “benefits of think-and-feel-aloud instruction with poetry”, emotions should be emphasized more in teaching poetry because “affectively based comprehension strategies might help readers delve into the experience of the poem, circumventing initial cognitive confusion”. I concur with Eva-Wood in proposing that poems that appear difficult to comprehend initially can be made easier to handle once we acknowledge the role of affects, and more specifically, what I call affective uncertainty.

Although it may seem obvious that uncertainty would be a legitimate response to a text, affective reactions to texts are not necessarily acknowledged in teaching contexts when the focus is on working towards an interpretation. My term reading for affective uncertainty is connected to Ahmed's idea of how emotions are not "caused by objects" but through "contact with objects" (2014, 6). Ultimately, I argue that acknowledging affective uncertainty, which works on the boundaries between the reader and the text, supports poetry reading as it does not presume that the text should be easy to interpret and to handle. Instead, acknowledging difficulties can be a step towards critically productive reading.

Like affect, *critical reading* can be understood in many ways. Critical reading skills in university level literature teaching can be viewed as transferable reading skills that can be applied to other texts (see Showalter 2003, 26). Critical reading can also be taken to mean the kind of reading we do as literary critics when we apply a critical apparatus to a text. Developing critical reading skills in the first sense can involve, for instance, attention to concerns like those Robert Scholes mentions in his discussion of matters student readers often have problems with: "to focus sharply on the language of the text" and "to imagine the otherness of the text's author" (2002, 166). Emotional identification with a poem's speaker is, in this understanding, too simple of an approach for reading to be critical. Scholes's concern is that students are not able to step outside their own experience in reading poetry or to develop a nuanced focus on the formal and linguistic aspects of a text. They are thus perhaps not able to "share affect" in the sense that Reilly's poem cited in the beginning of this article exemplifies while maintaining their own separateness as a critical position. Acknowledging the otherness of the text, or its (implied) author and the selves in the text, then, is part and parcel of this understanding of critical reading.

The focus on critical reading means that the approach of reading for affective uncertainty as discussed here is more focused on content and themes than on formal aspects like rhythm and sound which are generally an integral part of poetry. Traditionally many poems are written to be heard or

read aloud and have rhythmic and oral dimensions, even though in recent poetry textual qualities are frequently emphasized at the expense of sound (see Perloff 2004, 226). Indeed, Joy Alexander (2013, 118) states that “hear[ing] the voice of poetry” is significant in poetry teaching because it means that the reader “participates in the dialogic nature of the text”, a point that she makes with reference to Denis Donoghue’s concept of the “epi-reader” (Donoghue 1981, 99-100 quoted in Alexander 2013, 118). Alexander (2013, 121) suggests that reading poetry aloud can help lessen its perceived difficulty. Scholes, for his part, proposes that a focus on rhythm through reading aloud can work to help concentrate on (the author’s) feelings (Scholes 2002, 167-168 with reference to an 1879 textbook). To pay attention to sound is a part of paying attention to the form of the text, and considering sound and rhythm is integral in considering how poems make meaning, or how “every word, and indeed every sound and rhythmic movement, makes a difference”, an assumption that Marjorie Perloff makes in a discussion of a poem by T.S. Eliot (2004, 24). I maintain that reading aloud and rereading can be useful in reading for affective uncertainty, because these can help focus attention on the subtleties of texts, including their formal aspects as objects.

My argument about affective uncertainty is grounded in specific poetry examples. In addition to Reilly’s work that considers relations between humans and other humans and between humans and the nonhuman, I discuss Wendy Trevino’s 2018 book *Cruel Fiction*, which concerns itself with “more than poetry”, as Trevino writes in the acknowledgements (Trevino 2018, n.p.), a starting point that is evident in the collection’s politically inclined commentary on the notions of race and borders. In its focus on activism, the collection negotiates distinctions between “us” and “them” that are rooted in affect. Reilly’s and Trevino’s works do not emphasize form and sound, but they do use the poetic line to give weight to the ideas presented. Reilly’s and Trevino’s works are prime material for considering affective uncertainty as they address prominent contemporary themes, such as ecological concerns, human-nonhuman relations, and race, in ways that may be difficult to approach. Reading for affect in contexts like these, or “understanding how affect works — within

individuals and between species, as well as in and across various environments, genres, and scales” is emphatically needed today, as Kyle A. Bladow and Jennifer K. Ladino note in their introduction to *Affective Ecocriticism* (2018, 17). Both Reilly’s and Trevino’s works engage with the notion of *border* on multiple levels, whether that is perceived as existing between humans and the nonhuman, humans and other humans or between countries. As something that works *in between*, the notion of border can be connected to Ahmed’s idea of “emotions [as] shaped by contact with objects” (2014, 6), in which my concept affective uncertainty is rooted. While I consider Reilly’s and Trevino’s works as concrete examples of what I take affective uncertainty in reading and teaching poetry to mean, I propose that any works that address affective engagement on points of contact might be considered in this context, even though the particularities of what such an inquiry looks like depend on the text. Other texts might, for example, emphasize formal aspects more.

While this article considers teaching, it does not rely on empirical work.¹ Rather, my aim is, as stated, to work towards a framework for reading for affect in teaching contexts that could then be adapted to practical situations. In the second section, I continue with an overview of how poetry is often addressed in teaching contexts in order to clear space for reading for affective uncertainty. Next, I define affective uncertainty further by connecting the concept to Rita Felski’s (2008, 14) idea of ordinary responses to reading and by discussing the connection between critical reading and affect. Ahmed’s (2014, 8) notion of the circulation of affect is central here. Finally, in the last section, I consider Reilly’s and Trevino’s works as examples of reading in the framework of affective uncertainty.

The uncertainties of poetry teaching

¹ I have, nevertheless, taught a course called *Everyday Emotions: Ordinary Cultural Contexts in Contemporary American Poetry* at the University of Eastern Finland in 2020 where both Reilly’s and Trevino’s works were discussed among others, and I wish to thank the students on that course for participating in discussions on these works.

In teaching contexts, poetry reading is often treated as an interpretative process that has a clear endpoint. For a long time, literary criticism has tended to emphasize uncertainty in a deconstructive or postmodernist fashion, yet interpretation that aims at a conclusion holds sway in many teaching situations. Marjorie Perloff writes, with reference to Cleanth Brooks's reading of Keats's "Ode on the Grecian Urn", that a particular kind of close reading of the message of the poem is often implicated in poetry teaching, a position that, she notes, becomes problematic at the latest when we try to tackle contemporary poetry, which may provide few of those "resolutions" and "balances" that Brooks was in search of (Perloff 2004, xix). In a more recent consideration of similar ideas, Daniel Xerri remarks, in a discussion of poetry teaching in upper secondary education, that a particular "style of close reading" tends to lift the teacher as the "master reader", leaving students unable to engage in any other way than the way they think the teacher expects them to which, according to Xerri, risks reducing poetry to little more than a classroom exercise (2014, 29-30). The reading situation is, thus, unbalanced when one of the readers has more power than others.

The prevalence of interpretation in teaching poetry is further verified by Anna Sigvardsson's (2017) systematic literature review of studies on the pedagogy of poetry reading within secondary education. She reviewed 28 international articles on the topic published between 1990 and 2015, searching for common themes, with the aim of developing poetry teaching in Sweden (2017, 584). While my focus is on university level teaching, experiences from secondary education undoubtedly also inform university students' understandings of how poetry reading is supposed to work. Sigvardsson found in her review that a significant subset of articles focused on "the development of poetry reading" (Sigvardsson 2017, 588) and what is being developed is specifically interpretation (Sigvardsson 2017, 591). Moreover, a large number of the articles Sigvardsson reviewed used Louise Rosenblatt's style of personal reader response as a starting point for teaching, a premise that can account for emotional and affective responses (Sigvardsson 2017, 588-589). Rosenblatt views reading a poem as "an event in time" where the poem is created in the encounter (Rosenblatt [1987]

1994, 12), and thus, approaches to teaching based on Rosenblatt go some way towards veering away from a complete interpretation as a goal. However, Rosenblatt's approach does not preclude a primary focus on interpretation, nor does a personal reader response approach necessarily leave room for feelings of uncertainty that might be experienced towards a text. She treats poems as events, not objects (Rosenblatt [1987] 1994, 12), associating the latter with New Critical understandings of reading (Rosenblatt [1987] 1994, 6-7). However, as I have already posited, recognizing poems as objects that participate in the circulation of emotion (Ahmed 2014, 6) is central to maintaining one's separateness as a critical position.

Sigvardsson proceeds to note that poetry reading is ultimately viewed as "individual performance" (2017, 595) in most of the articles that were included in her review. Poetry teaching gravitates towards interpretation for a variety of reasons, not the smallest of which is examinations (Sigvardsson 2017, 588, 593).² One of the articles discussed in Sigvardsson's review (2017, 592) is a study Hennessy, Hinchion and Mannix McNamara (2010, 179-180) conducted in Ireland in 2010, surveying teachers in 50 schools and pupils in eight schools. They found that 77% of the teachers who answered the questionnaire viewed "teacher clarification' of poetry" and preparing students for exams as central in teaching, while pupils emphasized arriving at a coherent meaning and looked up to the teacher in telling them what that was to avoid "wasting time" (Hennessy, Hinchion & Mannix McNamara 2010, 180-182). Gary Snapper came to similar conclusions in his study in the British context, noting that preparing for tests and a focus on meaning contribute to the reasons why high school and undergraduate students might show what he calls "resistance to poetry" (2013, 31-32, 35). A focus on studying poems for exams implies that reading poetry is a finite, instrumental task

² In addition to the development of reading and teaching for examinations, Sigvardsson (2017, 593-594) found other smaller focuses such as a focus on boys as readers of poetry, but these are not discussed here because they are not relevant for discussing interpretation. Another focus that Sigvardsson mentions is "[s]tudents' heterogeneous socioeconomic backgrounds in terms of class and ethnicity" and reading for identity (2017, 594) but notes that this was underdiscussed in the studies reviewed. This point could be connected to reading for affective uncertainty and developed further in future research.

that has the specific purpose of getting at the meaning in order to meet a learning goal that can then be evaluated in a summative assessment (see also Cushing 2018, 274).

Nevertheless, going beyond interpretation in poetry teaching is not, of course, an unprecedented idea. For example, Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr's edited volume *Poetry and Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary* (2006) presents a variety of ways of going beyond interpretation in teaching contemporary poetry. In one of the articles, Charles Altieri proposes that poetry teaching should, in addition to literary historical and formal concerns, center in on "the role of affect", which means understanding not only how affect manifests in the poem but also how it positions us as readers, or "how being moved situates consciousness in particular ways" (Altieri 2006, 41). Altieri suggests that foregoing interpretation as the sole focus frees us for an "exploration of who texts ask us to become if we participate in their particular ways of fusing sensation and imagination" (Altieri 2006, 46). He seems to imply that we should allow texts to affect us instead of aiming for control over the text through meaning-focused interpretation. Foregoing such control, however, can also have effects of its own, ones that end up positioning readers in their own ways. With this in mind, then, I turn to considering the notion of affective uncertainty further.

Critical reading for affective uncertainty

A possible consequence of relinquishing control over the text can be, as suggested by Douglas Dowland, having to face negative emotions in the face of uncertainty (2019, 543-544). Dowland postulates, in a special issue of *Pedagogy* entitled "Anxious Pedagogies", that university literature courses tend to lift anxiety as the dominating affect that drives the search for meaning, since attempts to dwell in "instability", so frequent in literary interpretations in general, can be anxiety-provoking (2019, 543-544). Remaining in uncertainty, though expressly promoted by late 20th century critical orientations, thus comes to be viewed as a negative outcome of the reading event. According to Dowland, we should take this situation seriously so that we do not resort to grasping

for “illusions of control and certainty” (2019, 545-546). He proposes highlighting anxiety in teaching instead of ignoring it because it “has a great potential to bring us together to better see the connection between emotion and reason, between anxiety and interpretation, between critical inquiry and public realities” (2019, 547). The concept of affective uncertainty that I want to outline here is indebted to this idea of lessening control and accepting anxiety as a part of reading literature in the classroom.

Accepting anxiety as a part of reading can be better understood through considering Rita Felski’s insistence on recognizing the ordinariness of literature instead of merely valorizing its “otherness” (2008, 5). A literary work is, in the view that Felski (2008, 3-5) wants to unpack, an “othered” object that must be viewed negatively in order to prove that we, as critics, are not uncritical. To undo this deep-seated conviction, Felski discusses various modes of textual engagement that are primarily ordinary responses to reading, namely “*recognition*”, “*enchantment*”, “*knowledge*” and “being *shocked*” (Felski 2008, 14, original italics). If we recognize literary texts’ potential for generating ordinary responses, our anxieties may lessen, but this approach can also allow us to recognize anxiety as one ordinary response among many that does not need to be brushed off as irrelevant. A literary text need not be an a-priori strange and unknown object that must be made familiar and conquered through relentless interpretation without admitting our hesitation or uncertainty. If we can, instead, approach literary texts like poems as ordinary objects, allowing ourselves to examine them and to experience affective uncertainty, we can clear space for reading the otherness that texts present.

As Lydia Kokkola and Elina Siltanen argue with reference to reading the work of a Sámi poet, Niillas Holmberg, as non-indigenous readers, “uncomfortable feelings [...] are most powerful when they remain unresolved” (2021, 219). They note that this allows readers to question stereotypes that are taken for granted (ibid., with reference to Nel 2017, 58). This may mean, for example, that readers need to “admit ignorance or a lack of belonging” (Kokkola & Siltanen 2021, 237). I

postulate that allowing uncomfortable feelings to “remain unresolved” also in teaching contexts entails treating literary texts as objects in their own right (see Felski 2008, 2-3) rather than, for example, as instruments for gaining knowledge and skills to be tested in examinations. Thus, the idea of recognizing literary texts as ordinary objects entails that there is a boundary between us and the text.

Central to the notion of affective uncertainty is the idea of readers and texts as distinct entities, or objects, that are separated by a boundary. As mentioned above, Ahmed views affect as moving between objects (2014, 8). For her, “[f]eelings [...] are produced as effects of circulation”; they do not belong to those who experience them or originate solely within “an ‘I’” or a subject (2014, 8, 208). In Ahmed’s understanding, objects “become sticky, or saturated with affect” through the movement of affect (2014, 11). Moreover, affects are not simply *caused* by the objects that we encounter; rather they participate in *generating* boundaries between subjects and objects (Ahmed 2014, 10). Texts can participate in the circulation of emotion by “nam[ing] or perform[ing] different emotions”, but they do not contain emotions (Ahmed 2014, 12-13). If we apply Ahmed’s idea of the circulation of affect to poetry, poems are objects that participate in the circulation and affects are “produced” (2014, 8) in our encounters with poems. Poetic speakers and other presences in poems also need to be understood as objects rather than as poetic subjects. This means that affects are not simply something that poems or their speaking subjects deliver and that we need to interpret or capture. In this understanding, reading can be viewed more widely than as a cognitively motivated exercise in interpretation or as a situation where we, as readers, need to respond to the emotion of the text, for example through identification. Reading encompasses the ways in which poems position their readers, which can include emotions felt towards the text.

I propose, then, that in a poetry teaching context, acknowledging affective uncertainty as an integral part of reading can be a step toward a critically productive reading. This can mean, for example, acknowledging a sense of frustration in the face of a complex literary text. Lynne Pearce

has discussed frustration felt towards a literary text as “an expression of the subject’s feelings of impotence towards the (textual) other” which can culminate in an evident impossibility of choosing a course of action that could reinstate a productive relationship with that textual other (Pearce 1997, 156). For Pearce, who discusses reading as a matter of “falling in love” with texts in *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, the “textual other” can be “a ‘structure of feeling’ [...], an interlocutory subject position (how a character in a text positions *us*), an author-function, an interpretive community, or the (covert/overt) audience/addressee of our own reading” (Pearce 1997, 17; original italics). In response to a poem, the speaker may be a textual other, but poems can, of course, present a variety of “structures of feeling” towards which readers may feel frustration.

Discussing teaching in a digital humanities context, Brandon Walsh (2019, 519-520) emphasizes the necessity of “providing spaces for students to work with ugly feelings” such as frustration, using the term Sianne Ngai introduced in her 2005 book. Poetry teaching should arguably provide similar opportunities. Walsh (2019, 521) translates Ngai’s framework into the context of learning, explaining that when students encounter a “feeling of knowing something is wrong but struggling to address it”, they are faced with the problem itself together with a frustrated sense that the failure is their own, and are therefore held back by what Ngai (2005, 3) calls “obstructed agency”, which teachers can help students navigate. Acknowledging “obstructed agency” is important in getting at the kind of reading that recognizes otherness on multiple levels (see Scholes 2002, 166; Pearce 1997, 17). It involves acknowledging that affects do not belong to us or to the poem; rather, they circulate on the borders between us and the text and in so doing generate such boundaries (see Ahmed 2014, 10). Frustration, then, is not something that simply arises in us in response to the text; rather it can separate us from the text and generate a boundary.

In reading poetry, obstructed agency can initially mean difficulties in choosing how to approach the text: whether it is through a focused interpretation or through a more open-ended personal response. Beyond those initial choices, readers might face the frustration of not knowing

how to interpret or how to feel towards the various objects that we encounter: the poem itself, its author, its speaker, the characters, communities and personas that are present in the text. The positions of these objects may be ambiguous. Acknowledging obstructed agency needs to involve an examination of the objects and the textual others in relation to which the obstruction is created. In the next section, then, I consider Reilly's and Trevino's poems as examples of negotiating affective uncertainty that might be experienced in the face of these texts that deal with complex topics like posthumanism, race and borders.

Borders, race, posthumanism, and reading for affective uncertainty

Both Reilly and Trevino, in their respective poetry collections, work with the distinctions and continuities between "I", "you" and "we" as they examine the connections between "self" and "other". The first section of Reilly's *Echolocation* is entitled "Self" and it begins with a quotation from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari: "*There isn't a subject; there are only collective assemblages of enunciation*" (quoted in Reilly 2018, n.p.; original italics).³ From the beginning, then, we know that there is a "Self", who appears in many of Reilly's poems, complete with a capital initial, but the "Self's" singular subjectivity is called into question throughout the poems and through the theory reference. Based on the reference, we also know that this is poetry that is interested in considering the self on a theoretical level. The first poem of *Echolocation*, "Song Of", which I discuss here, does not use the pronoun "I", though "we" does appear later. Ostensibly, then, there is no subject; instead, the Self is an object (or more conventionally a character) against which we, as readers, must consider our affective orientations and reactions. Already from the beginning, the poem sets out to generate uncertainty about the selves and objects we are dealing with. A discussion of the poem in a teaching situation, then, could begin with examining these objects.

³ Reilly does not specify the source of her quotation from Deleuze and Guattari, but it appears in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986).

Echolocation engages with the notion of selfhood not just with reference to humans but also in connection to animals and nature, which means that the book focuses on affective experiences that connect to posthumanism (see Milne 2018, 121). The collection considers posthumanism on a theoretical level, as evidenced for example by the notes at the back of the book which indicate that it quotes, among other works, from Donna Haraway's *Crystals, Fabrics, and Fields: Metaphors that Shape Embryos* (2004). These are, of course, complex topics that would be likely to generate uncertainty in a teaching situation.

"Song Of" is a three-part poem, the first part of which ends in the word "posthumanity". This sets the tone for what is to come, as the collection largely explores the relations between the "Self" and others, who are not always human. The poem also comments on the human's attempts at becoming posthuman in an ironic tone. The ever-present question is whether we are all "true / post-national animal subjects", as the end of the second part formulates it (Reilly 2018, 17). The sentence reiterates that humans, too, are animals, but despite this, the poem acknowledges more widely that for humans, becoming nonhuman requires crossing a border. For example, the second part of "Song Of" brings up the idea of "animal murder" and refers to meat-eating and ritual sacrifices to gods (Reilly 2018, 18), which reminds us of how much we tend to view nonhuman animals as "others". Thus, in these poems, nonhuman animals are the "textual others", to use Pearce's term (1997, 131), in relation to which we must define ourselves. An excerpt from the beginning of Part 2 of the poem will enable us to consider the various textual others that the poem presents:

And why should our bodies end at our skin?

someone asks as Self

shakes the water

from its heritage predator pelt

and gets down on all fours

for some joint animal prayers

having just crossed over

the species line [...]

(Reilly 2018, 15).

The poem describes the Self's becoming a nonhuman animal who wears a "heritage predator pelt" as it⁴ joins in a ritualistic expression, "having just crossed over / the species line". The "heritage predator pelt" could be a man-made item, perhaps as used by a hunter, but it also marks Self as hovering somewhere between humanness and nonhumanness. Self "gets down on all fours" in an effort to become a nonhuman animal, but this transformation is also partly ironic: are Self's efforts mere masquerade or a sincere effort to transcend "the species line"? The beginning of the poem can, thus, generate uncertainty, as readers attempt to grapple with what or who Self is and how the Self's attempts to become nonhuman should be interpreted.

Self is an unknown textual other, an object that we cannot quite grasp, and it participates in the circulation of affect. The idea that the Self is an other is reflected on a literal level in the poem when there is no explicit speaking "I", which is otherwise, of course, common in poetry. Self is a character in a story, a non-speaking protagonist who cannot speak for herself, unlike the speaker who, like an omniscient narrator, presents objects like the Self for readers' consideration. The question about where bodies end that is posed at the beginning of the poem comes, notably, from "someone", an undefined other. Such uncertainties about who is who can arguably cause frustration or other emotions that are not necessarily easy to define. In a teaching situation, such affective uncertainty needs to be acknowledged so that it does not become an obstacle to engaging with the text.

The second part of "Song Of" proceeds to describe a zoo exhibit. The speaker addresses readers by asking them to "Look / at this parka stitched / from whale intestine" (Reilly 2018, 16).

⁴ In the poems, the pronoun "it" is used to refer to Self in the third person instead of she, he, or they.

As the poem considers human uses of animal parts, it establishes a border between humans and other animals and situates readers as outside observers. Reading the second part of “Song Of” can begin by considering the distinctions that the poem draws between the various textual others that it presents. The poem is, as noted, vague in its definitions of these textual others, presenting as it does “someone” and “Self”, along with the speaker, who inevitably participates through its voice, guiding readers through the zoo and inviting them to participate for example by looking.

The poem proceeds relentlessly, arranged as it is in short lines. No punctuation is used, which creates its own rhythm, meaning that the poem could benefit from being read aloud, which can then emphasize its affective effects, positing the reader on the one hand as a listener and on the other hand as the one who can embody the speaker’s voice (cf. Alexander 2013, 118). Reading the poem aloud could be a productive way in to the text and to examining the form of the poem. The form of a text is emphasized by Nicole M. Merola in a discussion of reading for affect as she discusses “position[ing] the human reader and body as centrally important to the composition, elicitation, production, and circulation of affect”, a point she makes in a discussion of Juliana Spahr’s ecopoetic work *this connection of everyone with lungs* (Merola 2018, 31). Acknowledging the materiality of the poem as involving the body is a further aspect to consider in an affectively uncertain reading of the selves and objects that Reilly’s “Song Of” presents, even though the poem does not explicitly use sound in meaning-making.

An affectively uncertain reading of Reilly’s “Song Of” entails a more ambivalent relation between readers and the text than a simple identification with speakers or characters. Felski discusses literary identification, which is normally used to signal “an experiential *allegiance* with a character, as manifested in a felt sense of affinity or attachment” (2008, 34; original italics). “Song Of” appears to resist such affinity, as it presents its readers with several textual others, vaguely defined presences signaled by words such as “Self” or “someone”. It considers theoretical questions about posthumanity instead of presenting identifiable life experiences. However, Felski proposes

that identification can also mean another kind of affinity with a text, namely “an interplay of self-knowledge and acknowledgment, an affiliation that is accompanied by a powerful cognitive readjustment” or a “heightened self-awareness” (2008, 35). We can see how this could work in response to Reilly’s poem, as the poem attempts to encourage readers to consider the borders between the human and the nonhuman that is made more and more complex as the text proceeds. In a teaching context, the investigation of the poem might begin by asking readers to consider their positions amongst the positions that the poem considers, which arguably allows for many possibilities for encountering affective uncertainty.

Where Reilly’s *Echolocation* is invested in considering borders between the human and the non-human, Trevino’s *Cruel Fiction* examines borders between countries and races, which it views as “cruel fictions” (Trevino 2018, 90). *Cruel Fiction* engages with race and the notion of border in short poems that emphasize the first person while searching for collective expression and strength in collectivity. The collection is more personal than Reilly’s work since it more or less encourages readers to associate the “I” with Trevino herself whose background is similar to the “I”. The “I” discusses her Chicana background growing up in the Rio Grande Valley where she, according to one poem, “learned / I’m not white & what that means & how what / That means changes & doesn’t & to who” (Trevino 2018, 81). Identity and how others define “us” are central in these texts.

Trevino engages with the notion of race through direct statements like the following:

When I said race is relational what
I meant is people are racialized in
Relation to other people who have
Power. ...

(Trevino 2018, 76).

The poem considers racialization as a way of instating borders between selves and others through power relations. Overall, *Cruel Fiction* attempts to overturn this notion through focusing on collectivity in other ways.

Trevino's collection is unabashedly political as it documents activist action while engaging with race and borders. The poems discuss, for example, the position of Black people in Mexico. Mikkel Nørregaard Jørgensen describes Trevino's poetry book aptly as follows: "With this collection she forms a poetic, political resistance to the capitalist foundations of the US's border politics in relation to its Southern border, highlights the stigmatisation of Mexican identity and tries to form a new language for a new, communist horizon" (2019, 50). An integral part of this endeavor is Trevino's centering in on the pronoun "we" which, according to Jørgensen, can be viewed as an attempt to redefine community in ways that diverge from "politically designated" communities (2019, 50). A self-constructed community and communality overrides other efforts to instate borders between people, particularly based on race. "We" is posited against "them". This also means that the collection may be difficult to react to affectively.

Unlike Reilly's "Song Of", Trevino's work presents clear demarcations and divisions between groups of people. The readers of *Cruel Fiction* are not necessarily in a clear position. They may not feel that they belong, or know whether they could belong, to the "we" described. Trevino's clearly established positionalities of selves and others differ from Reilly's theoretically oriented attention to the unstable borders between the "self" and the "other". The affective uncertainty that affects reading Trevino's work exists more markedly between readers and the poem than between selves and others in the poems themselves. Trevino's poems' speaker's leftist allegiances are clear: for example, a poem entitled "Summer 2016" is dedicated to "Antifa Sacramento & those young people in San Jose who beat the bejeezus out of Trump supporters". If a reader, for example, feels ambivalent towards activist action in general or the concerns of these particular activists, this can influence the reading. To begin with, this is poetry that would require some contextualization in a

classroom context where it might be useful to discuss, for example, because of its focus on race and the Chicana experience.

Trevino's poetry's allegiances are already evident in the first poem, "From Santa Rita 128-131", where the context is the 2011 Occupy Oakland protests after which the speaker was imprisoned for a couple of days (Trevino 2018, 13-18). The five-and-half page poem consists almost entirely of statements beginning with the pronoun "I", as the beginning of the poem shows:

I was detained approximately 54 hours, 47 of which I spent in jail.

I spent 47 hours under bright fluorescent lights.

I was cold approximately 43 hours.

I was moved 7 times, to 5 different "tanks."

(Trevino 2018, 13).

The only exceptions to the "I" statements are 10 sentences which mostly refer to topics of discussion that "came up" during her time there ("*Aquaman* came up 1 time", Trevino 2018, 17). Jørgensen remarks that Trevino's experience of being detained "is ongoing and subjective, just like violence in general" (Jørgensen 2019, 57), a notion that he relates to the disclaimer which appears in the beginning of the poem where the list of events presented in the poem is described as subjective and incomplete (Trevino 2018, 13). The extensive use of the "I" underlines the subjectivity of the experience, but at the same time, the speaker is in prison together with numerous others who share this experience. The poem describes the experience of being detained numerically, listing the number of hours a particular experience lasted, the number of times a particular topic was discussed or the number of people with particular characteristics or in specific situations the speaker encountered ("I met 2 women who chose not to report feeling ill for fear of being put in solitary confinement", Trevino 2018, 15). Other people are presented as sharing a collective experience where the quantity of people sharing an experience, like that of not wanting to report feeling ill, is more important than their individuality.

“From Santa Rita 128-131” highlights the emotional connection between “I” and others, which might remind us of Ahmed’s notion about how “surfaces and boundaries” are created through the emotions that are produced in our encounters with objects (2014, 10). The people in the poem are joined together by their experience of being in the prison, which is clearly affective in many ways. This is evident in the encounters with various injustices (like “being denied medication”, Trevino 2018, 14), harrowing events (“I spoke to 1 woman who confessed she was having suicidal thoughts”, Trevino 2018, 14), and feelings of solidarity, as in a description of women supporting each other by staying in the prison longer so as not to leave others alone (Trevino 2018, 14). The first poem of the collection thus presents the premises for forming a collective, while demarcating that collective from others (as when the speaker refers to the police in the prison as “pigs”, Trevino 2018, 16), a theme that persists throughout the book.

In a teaching context, a reading of “From Santa Rita 128-131” might begin by focusing readers’ attention on the preliminarily affective and emotional experiences that are not explicitly named in the text but that are nevertheless a part of the encounters that take place in Trevino’s Santa Rita prison. Rather than beginning from a personal response (“How does this poem make you feel?”), the inquiry might begin by focusing on the affective experiences of the people described in the poem (“How do they feel?”). Such a starting point does not emphasize personal reader response and it leaves aside, at least for a moment, the question of how readers might feel, for example, about the actions of activists. On the whole, the poem and the book might raise the question of not being able to identify with another’s experience, which would then need to be considered in a teaching context.

The distinctions between “us” and “them” are examined further in the rest of the collection. In the poem that gives the book its title, Trevino writes about borders and race as “cruel fictions”:

A border, like race, is a cruel fiction

Maintained by constant policing, violence

Always threatening a new map. It takes
Time, lots of people's time, to organize
The world this way. & violence. It takes more
Violence. Violence no one can confuse for
Anything but violence. So much violence
Changes relationships, births a people
They can reason with. These people are not
Us. [...]

(Trevino 2018, 90).

The poem accentuates distinctions between “us” and “them”, presenting “we” as the ones who understand the fictionality of race/border distinctions, while those in charge of “organiz[ing] / The world this way” through violence and effort (Trevino 2018, 90) are the others. The relationships between different subjects in this poem are clear, and they do not necessarily pose a challenge to readers. A focus on affective uncertainty in a teaching context could concentrate on how distinctions are produced through affective experiences: words like “cruel” and “violence” signal the hostile demeanor of the opposite side.

Reading Trevino's poems, like Reilly's, in a teaching context, then, might begin by considering the affective orientations that their poems present. How does a poem present “I”, “we/us” and “them”? How do these positions feel? Who is the textual other with which or for which we are encouraged to feel, or to not feel for? On a larger level, we can view Reilly's and Trevino's poems as objects of affective uncertainty, where emotional responses are generated in the encounter with the text rather than through the poetic speaker's explicit invocation of emotions and the reader's identification with them. This is a mode of reading that does not focus on working for a complete interpretation of the text.

Conclusion: Affective uncertainties

As I have argued, reading for affective uncertainty means acknowledging potential obstructions to reading and recognizing that affective reactions to the text are generated in a circulation, in Ahmed's terms, between readers, texts and the textual positionings presented by the poems. Reilly's *Echolocation* and Trevino's *Cruel Fiction* are two somewhat different examples of reading for affective uncertainty. Reilly's work asks its readers to begin to recognize the otherness that the texts present and to consider the borders between the human and the nonhuman, creating uncertainty as to who is who and how the relations between selves and others or humans and the nonhuman are to be understood. Trevino's work asks readers to consider how "us" and "them" positions are constructed through affect and to consider the communities to which they might belong. Both writers' works ask their readers to begin to situate themselves in relation to the "I", "we", or the others without proposing that such a positioning should be a simple task. Throughout the article, I have presented suggestions on how such positionings might be addressed in a teaching context. The focus has been on reading for affective uncertainty on the level of content, rather than of form, rhythm, and sound, which would be worthwhile perspectives to examine in future research.

Just like "[a] border [...] is a cruel fiction" (Trevino 2018, 90) and "shared affect" binds people "contingently" together (Reilly 2018, 32), reading for affective uncertainty recognizes the contingency and fictionality of readings that aim for complete interpretations, as if a poem was a wholesome, closed object that can be encapsulated in a simple understanding. Reading for affective uncertainty in a teaching situation means acknowledging that poems can generate various kinds of affect, including uncertainty and frustration and relinquishing the goal of arriving at a complete interpretation. It means returning to the idea that poems can be viewed as ordinary objects (Felski 2008, 3-5) that participate in the circulation of affect (Ahmed 2014, 8) and are thus always contingent on our relations to them.

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