# Can Asians Feel? Affect Theory and the Decolonial Politics of Untranslatability

**Jeremy De Chavez**
Department of English, University of Macau
Email: jeremydechavez@um.edu.mo

**Abstract** This essay interrogates the Eurocentrism inherent in affect theory by proposing a model of affective reading specific to postcolonial Anglophone literary texts. Drawing on Emily Apter's notion of the "untranslatable," this approach pays attention to culturally specific emotions and affects that are sedimented in literary form but are inadequately expressed through the vocabulary of basic emotions. While Apter employs the "untranslatable" to critique the "translatability assumption" prevalent in World Literature, this paper applies it to challenge the same assumption in affect theory. It argues for the necessity of recognizing the untranslatability of culturally specific emotions, as basic emotions are frequently accepted as pre-linguistic and universal, a stance relying on the same "translatability assumption." This paper introduces the concept of "archipelagic feelings" to describe the nuanced layers of affect in postcolonial texts, which resonate with specific reading communities yet resist the universalizing framework of basic emotions. Like archipelagic thinking, archipelagic feeling opposes totalizing and hierarchical epistemologies of emotion.

**Keywords** affect theory; basic emotions theory; decoloniality; Global Anglophone literature

**Author** **Jeremy De Chavez** is Associate Professor of Literatures in English at the University of Macau. While his research and teaching areas are primarily in Postcolonial Studies, Global Anglophone Liter ature, and Affect Theory, he is committed to being a strategic generalist with wide-ranging interests across literary periods, genres, and cultural forms.

## Introduction

The theme of this conference—"Can Asians Critique?"—renders time out of joint for a gnawing belatedness seems to accompany the question. Why ask now at a

time when some have already made the case that we are supposedly in the age of postcritique, a period where the very value and legitimacy of critique is itself under scrutiny? Why ask at a time when we find ourselves in a moment when critique has become the object of critique itself? A time when critique has been labeled a form of rhetorical posturing instead of a means of transformative engagement (particularly when practiced in its routinized and often institutionalized form). Thus, to answer the question in the affirmative—that, yes, Asians *can* critique!—risks suggesting that perhaps Asians too are adept in the art of inflating the transformative utility of an otherwise ineffectual practice. For, indeed, critique has been called out as ineffectual at best or a tool that can potentially reproduce the very structures it sets out to resist at worst.

The question also suggests that, for the most part, criticism in the non-Western world has heavily depended on exported theories and intellectual traditions. Asians are sadly condemned to employ borrowed templates to make sense of their cultural and socio-political worlds, merely affirming Western styles of thought and frames of reference. To ask the question "Can Asians Critique?" in the first place is already indicative of an underlying anxiety that the Asian mode of critique, if any, remains illegitimate or even unintelligible to the global order of knowledge production unless it can somehow align itself with or conform to Western paradigms and frameworks. This reveals a deeply rooted assumption that the Western intellectual tradition is the normative standard against which all other forms of critique must be measured and validated. The question implies that Asian forms of critical thought are inherently suspect or lacking in legitimacy unless they can be reconciled with or assimilated into dominant Western models of analysis and interpretation, which underscores the persistent Eurocentrism and colonial legacies that continue to shape global knowledge production.

However, it must be said that the rise of postcritique has cultivated an environment hospitable to other forms of cultural engagement that are less oriented towards negativity and the hermeneutics of suspicion and more towards positive investments in the objects of study. One such approach would be those informed by affect theory, which positions itself as an alternative to what are seen as the limits of critique by making affect, emotion, and feeling key sites of cultural analysis, taking precedence over more traditional modes of cultural interpretation that have tended to prioritize language or ideology. Rather than privileging textual analysis or ideological critique, the so-called affective turn in the humanities and social sciences has placed greater emphasis on embodied, sensorial, and relational aspects of culture and social life. The rise of affect theory could regarded as a corrective to

modes of analysis that have privileged language and ideology as the primary sites of cultural analysis. Affects are supposedly universal and not subject to the instability of language games or the overdetermination of discursive structures. So, instead of "Can Asians Critique?" I would instead prefer to ask, "Can Asians Feel?"

In response to that question, I turn to a 1970 study by Paul Ekman, an American psychologist, loyal follower of Silvan Tomkins (the father of affect theory), and proponent of basic emotions theory. Drawing from Tomkins's affect program, basic emotions theory posits that there is a limited set of universal primary emotions—such as joy, anger, fear, sadness, disgust, and surprise—each with its own unique physiological signature, which are believed to be shared by all human beings regardless of culture or social context. This theory suggests that these basic emotions have a biological and evolutionary basis, and are not solely the products of cultural conditioning. In his 1970 study, Ekman had participants from two culturally distinct groups—American college students and Japanese college students—watch "stress-inducing films." As the participants watched, however, they too, unbeknownst to them, were being watched. What Ekman and his team were observing were their facial expressions. Ekman was trying to obtain evidence to support his theory of "universal facial expression of emotions." Ekman writes:

> Our analysis...shows the same facial responses to stress by members of the two presumably quite different cultures…The cultural differences in facial behavior were seen later in the experiment [when researchers entered the room]… The Japanese masked negative affect with polite smiles while the Americans replayed and showed the negative affect they had experienced. (Ekman156)

While the study aimed to demonstrate that certain affects or emotions are universal—that is to say, biologically hardwired—and are, therefore, a more authentic form of expression compared to the culturally embedded sign, it also consequently suggested that some cultures are more authentic in their affective expressions than others. The study seems to conflate universality and authenticity with whiteness, as the American participants seemingly had more immediate access to their so-called authentic emotions than their Japanese counterparts, whose cultural "display rules" required them to mask their emotions. The study, therefore, folds itself into the problem it wanted to resolve in the first place, involving subjective processes of interpretation as it offers a normative mode of affective expression as a master signifier by which to read other cultural variations. In addition, the study also conforms to Orientalist structures of thought: does not Ekman's findings rehearse

the trope of the inscrutable oriental—mysterious, unfathomable, untrustworthy—as it affirms the idea that Westerners are more authentic and genuine?

The hierarchy of affects pressumed in Ekman's work and the idea of culturally specific "display rules" for non-Western emotional expression was taken up by Paul Griffiths, a philosopher interested in the philosophy of biology and emotions. In *What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychological Categories,* a work that is "arguably the most influential book on the affects in recent times" (Leys 3), there is a very telling passage regarding the social construction of emotion:

> [The social role explanation] might be given of the syndrome found in a number of Southeast Asian societies and referred to as *amok.* This syndrome consists of indiscriminate attacks on others and usually culminates in the killing of the person who runs *amok*...He is acting out a social role, part of which is that he is not in control of his actions. It might be argued that a similar syndrome now exists in Western cultures. (Griffiths 141)

There are a few things I wish to highlight in Griffiths's telling example of socially constructed emotions. Whereas basic emotions or primary affects are universal, others are culturally specific and often located outside the West and Western epistemologies of emotion. And, whereas basic emotions are closer to being "authentic" as "signature facial expressions" properly synchronize with "autonomic nervous system processes (that is to say, nonvolitional facial and bodily responses), culturally specific emotions, following the "social role explanation," is acted out through a social discursive system of "display rules." Crucially, even the designation emotion or feeling seems to be reserved for only basic emotions and sometimes extends to what Paul Griffiths calls "higher cognitive emotions." Claire Hemmings has suggested that affect theory positions itself as a "privileged way out of the impasse in cultural theory" as it offers a ground for interpretation that is pre-linguistic and pre-cognitive. It appears, however, that only certain types of emotions deserve this recognition. Non-Western affects, legible primarily through culturally specific "display rules," are still subject to the unstable laws of signification.

This paper is in line with those affect scholars who have recently begun to examine the intrinsic whiteness and Eurocentrism that form the foundation of many of the field's central assumptions. Scholars such as Sneja Gunew have interrogated the emphasis on Western philosophical and psychological genealogies in affect theory. Claudia Garcia-Rojas has warned against what she terms "white affect studies" that has been constructed around the work of white male philosophers.

In a similar vein, Colin Patrick Ashley and Michelle Billies have contended that racial issues have been significantly underexplored in affect studies. These critical perspectives on affect theory highlights a growing awareness of the field's inherent biases and limitations. By challenging the assumed universality of Western emotional experiences, these scholars are pushing for a more capacious understanding of affect. The critique of "white affect studies" exposes how the field has often privileged Western philosophical and psychological traditions, potentially overlooking or misinterpreting affective experiences rooted in non-Western cultures and contexts. The call to address racial matters within affect studies represents a crucial step towards decolonizing the field.

It is not the aim of this paper to review and evaluate the long history of disagreement between universalists and culturalists over emotional expression. As a scholar of literary studies, I am concerned about how to address this hierarchy of emotion within the practice of literary interpretation. I would like to suggest that non-Western affects that often appear as “untranslatables,” to use a concept by Emily Apter, function as a mode of interrogation of Western epistemologies of emotion (including its monolingual assumption). I suggest that these “untranslatables,” which often appear in the ill-fitting suit of the vocabulary of basic emotions, but could be, quite aptly, *felt* as literary affects by particular interpretative communities. The feeling I speak of is one that I hope would be intuitively recognizable when reading post-colonial anglophone texts, a sense that certain emotions are not quite in harmony with the language used to designate them. This feeling arises from a discrepancy between the affects sedimented in literary form and the universalist language of emotion used to specify them, a misalignment between non-Western affects and the emotional signifiers provided by the colonizer's language. This dissonance, this untranslatability of certain affects, serves as a reminder of the persistent legacy of colonialism and the ongoing struggle to decolonize not only institutions but also the very ways in which we understand and express our inner lives.

Part of the reading strategy I propose is to seek out and highlight the inevitable failures of translation as a means to insist on the limits of Western epistemologies of emotion. It is an invitation, therefore, to commit what Wimsatt and Beardsley referred to as the “affective fallacy.” Wimsatt and Beardsley were very aware that emotions are rather unruly and an obstacle to “objective criticism,” an approach that solely respects the integrity of the ontological status of “the text itself”—that is to say, a “dispassionate, objective, cognition-based interpretation.” Against the idea that to read affectively is to commit the error of “impressionism and relativism,”

I suggest that in some cases, it opposes the monolingual assumption of Wimsatt and Beardsley and gestures towards a decolonial linguistic pluralism that can only be, first and foremost, felt affectively. This felt sense is not the one that critics W.K Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley refer to as "emotive import" (these critics argue that they do not even want to use the phrase "emotive meaning" since the word "meaning" should only be assigned to the cognitive or descriptive function of language) because this term "depends directly on descriptive meaning or descriptive suggestion." The thinking of Wimsatt and Beardsely about affect in literature is predicated on a monolingual assumption. The feeling I refer to, which in this paper I designate as archipelagic feeling, gestures towards a decolonial linguistic pluralism that is, first and foremost, felt affectively. This proposed approach endorses decolonial linguistic pluralism by recognizing and validating the diverse emotional experiences and expressions that exist beyond dominant Western frameworks.

In the following section, I try to sketch this mode of affective reading by analyzing a well-known Philippine short story in English.

### *A War of (Un) Translatability*

"The classroom thus became the site for a kind of linguistic war or, better yet, a war of translation" (Rafael, Motherless 43).

In his highly anthologized "The Bread of Salt"— a story about a boy who frames his life through his romantic infatuation—Filipino writer and National Artist N.V.M. Gonzalez includes a revealing scene in a classroom. In the scene, the story's nameless fourteen-year-old narrator describes his reaction to a tale of unconventional romance by a canonical British writer, which is set in a time and a place very far removed from his own:

> In class I would not allow a lesson to pass unmastered. Our English teacher could put no question before us that did not already have a ready answer in my head. One day he read Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Sire de Maletroit's Door*, and we were so enthralled that our breath trembled. (Gonzalez 176)

Better than any answer he can give to a question his English teacher could pose, the best evidence the narrator could offer as proof of his mastery of the lesson is the supposed straightforward honesty of affect. To be affected by the story to the extent that his "breath trembled" confirms his thorough comprehension of an English text, for the intensity of affect that is sedimented in literary form registers

itself on his body, suggesting a more thorough and genuine form of understanding. The idea here is one that has become a cornerstone argument for some proponents of the affective turn: that affect, as a pre-conscious, pre-linguistic intensity, evinces a truth that transcends the uncertainty of language games. The scene could be read as one that dramatizes the visceral logic of colonization (to pervert a phrase from Neetu Khanna). Not only has the narrator's mind been captured by colonial structures of thought, but his body, too, responds in tandem. Any suspicion of subversive slippages (or any Homi Bhabha-esque variant of linguistic subterfuge) is extinguished, for affect, written, as it were, on the body, is a supposedly more stable ground for interpretation.

There is, however, more than meets the eye in this scene--or, to use a more appropriately affect-oriented metaphor, more than it seems at first blush. When the narrator codifies affect, he goes only so far as to describe his physiological reaction and stops short of naming its corresponding emotion. He uses a seismic metaphor, "tremble," but leaves it to his readers to decipher that bodily response. This is what Wimsatt and Beardsley refer to as "emotive import"—a term which they prefer over "emotive meaning". What the use of the term "emotive import" also does is to construct a hierarchy of value that places the affective as secondary to the referential, for "emotive import depends directly on descriptive meaning" and sometimes even in "descriptive suggestion" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 35).

It is reasonable to say that if he was "enthralled" to the point that his "breath trembled" that it is suggestive of the affect of interest-excitement (following Silvan Tomkins's affect program). However, rather than a simple case of showing and not telling, I suggest that his omission exposes a tension between what we might refer to as universal primary affects/ basic emotions and culturally specific emotions, that is to say, what is also going on here is "a war of translation" (Rafael, *Motherless* 43), or perhaps more specifically, one of untranslatability. In the context of colonial education, where the narrator is asked to perform his mastery of English by describing his affective state, his performative inability to name the appropriate emotion is revelatory.

In suggesting that this ordinary scene in a Philippine classroom is a site of a translation war, I take my cue from Vicente Rafael, who pointed out that, in the backdrop of the "legacy of American colonial education," learning English necessarily meant the suppression of vernacular languages (Rafael, *Motherless* 43), which reflected how education served as an "adjunct to military operations" to speed up the pacification of Philippine colonial subjects (Rafael, Motherless 44). Thus, in flaunting his mastery of the English language, the nameless narrator also

calls attention to the "aporia of translation" (to use another phrase from Rafael), an *aporia* that is, first and foremost, "felt"—that is to say, it registers itself affectively—that reveals that this monolingual narrative brimming with multilingualism.

Since I first read "The Bread of Salt" as a young boy, I have always associated that scene with a culturally specific emotion called *kilig*. Kilig is a culturally specific emotion that is difficult to translate into English. It describes the giddy, butterflies-in-your-stomach feeling one experiences when something romantic or whimsical occurs. I suggest that kilig, though not identified in the story, is present in the text as affect, despite its linguistic omission. It is, to use the words of the narrator himself, "a silence full of voices" that is not named but is present as affect sedimented in literary form.

Allow me to supply a bit more context. The young narrator wishes to excel in his studies and indeed cultivates the whole of his being (intellectually, physically, and even morally) to honor his beloved, a girl from an affluent family who, throughout, remains utterly oblivious to him and his desire. The above scene, therefore, must be considered in the context of his infatuation. Indeed, the narrator imagines substituting himself and his beloved for the characters of Stevensons's story: "…a benign old man…would also detain me in a secret room, and there daybreak would find me *thrilled* by the sudden certainty that I had won Aida's hand" (Gonzalez 176). In his reimagined version of the story, trembling breath has been translated to "thrilled" (an insufficient translation of *kilig*).

I am not simply reiterating the banal point that some words do not have direct English translations; rather, I underscore how culturally specific emotions register a "felt" presence as affect sedimented in literary form. I invoke Emily Apter's concept of "untranslatable" to designate those "culturally specific emotions" that are "felt" in postcolonial Anglophone texts but sadly appear in the ill-fitting dress that is the vocabulary of basic emotions and primary affects. While Apter deploys the "untranslatable" as a "deflationary gesture" against the "translatability assumption" of World Literature endeavors, in a similar fashion, I use it here to interrogate the same assumption in affect theory. I argue that it is important to emphasize the untranslatability of culturally specific emotions, considering that basic emotions and primary affects are often uncritically designated as pre-linguistic and universal, a universality that also depends on a "translatability assumption."

I designate this felt sense of layered affects in postcolonial texts as "archipelagic feelings," which are available to certain reading communities but resistant to the universalizing idiom of basic emotions and primary affects. The concept of the archipelago has been deployed in recent critical discourse to name a style of thought

that privileges fluidity, multiplicity, and relationality, archipelagic thinking also represents a strong demand for what Édouard Glissant calls the "right to opacity," an ethical appeal to respect the integrity of the ineffable, irreducible, and untranslatable (189). In this paper, I resituate the concept of the archipelago from the exclusive domain of thought to the domain of feelings—that is to say, from archipelagic thinking to archipelagic feeling. Like archipelagic thinking, archipelagic feeling, I suggest, opposes epistemologies of emotion that are totalizing and hierarchical. The apparent hierarchy in affect research involves basic and culturally specific emotions.

**Conclusion**

As I conclude, it might be *apropos* to end with a discussion of the ending of "The Bread of Salt." Interestingly, the story ends with an event that involves a failure of translation, a failure that is "felt" by readers of the story, too. The narrator, a promising amateur violinist, and his musician friends were invited to play at a party held for Aida's visiting cousins. In a rare moment when the narrator is not acting out of his infatuation for Aida, he comments on the food at the party.

> The sight of so much silver and china confused me. There was more food before us than I had ever imagined. I searched in my mind for the names of the dishes but my ignorance appalled me. (Gonzalez 180)

This is when the narrator encounters what he refers to simply as "egg yolk things" (Gonzalez 181). In a moment of weakness, he stuffs his face with "this and that confection" and also "wrapped up a quantity of those egg-yolk things in several sheets of napkin paper" which he slips into his pocket. He did all this, unaware that Aida was observing him.

> "Have you eaten?"
>
> I turned around. It was Aida. My bow tie seemed to tighten around my collar. I mumbled something. I did not know what.
>
> "If you wait a little while till they've gone, I'll wrap up a big package for you, she added. (Gonzalez 180)

The narrator, who was particularly proud of his language and translation skills, is at a loss for words. He runs outside and dramatically flings into the darkness the "egg yolk things" contained in the "napkin balled up in [his] hand" (Gonzalez

181). Various commentators have noted that this story is really about a young man's realization of the immutable hierarchies of social class in the Philippines. But the story, I suggest, could also be read as a commentary on the hierarchies of emotional taxonomies. As he retreats, the narrator names the specific emotion he is experiencing: "I walked away to the nearest door, praying that the damask curtains might hide me in my shame" (Gonzalez 181). Shame, however, will not fully account for his incommensurate reaction to his perceived gluttonous crime. Again, readers attuned to archipelagic feelings would have sensed that another culturally specific emotion is at work here: *hiya*, which might overlap with but is not consubstantial to shame.

Commentators have pointed out that "The Bread of Salt" shares many similarities with James Joyce's "Araby." One of those similarities would be an ending that expresses emotions that are an incommensurate reaction to the event that triggered those feelings. Recall, the line from "Araby": Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger." For a certain reading community, that scene of "shame" also registers *hiya*, which has more explanatory force for the narrator's strong emotional response. In *Contracting Colonalism,* Vicente Rafael writes, "The worst thing one can say about a [Filipino] is that he or she is *walang hiya…*" (127). *Walang hiya:* to have no *hiya.* According to Lasquety-Reyes, to be *walang hiya* is when one violates socially approved norms of conduct yet is known or presumed to have an awareness of those norms, which could be extended to the exploitation of the generosity or kindness of others.

So, can Asians feel? Yes, and indeed much more than what Eurocentric epistemologies of emotion can recognize. This essay has thus proposed a model of affective reading guided by "archipelagic feelings" as a way to interrogate the universal and monolingual assumptions of affect theory. It is also a way to recognize those layered affects and emotions as "untranslatables," which is also a demand for the "right to opacity" that resists Eurocentric epistemologies of emotion. This model of affective reading aims to shift the tides of cultural understanding to resist the urge to map every emotional island onto a single, dominating continent of feeling.

**Works Cited**

Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. New York: Verso, 2013.

Ashley, Colin Patrick and Michelle Billies. "The Affective Capacity of Blackness." *Subjectivity*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2017, pp. 63-88.

Cooppan, Vilashini. "Memory's Future: Affect, History, and New Narrative in South Africa." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies,* vol. 35, no. 1, 2009, pp. 51-75.

Ekman, Paul. "Universal Facial Expressions of Emotion." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1971. pp. 171-182.

Garcia-Rojas, Claudia. "(Un) Disciplined Futures: Women of Color Feminism as a Disruption to White Affect Studies." *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2017, pp. 254-271.

Glissant, Edoard. *Poetics of Relation.* Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997.

Griffiths, Paul. *What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychological Categories*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997.

Hemmings, Clare. "Invoking Affect." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 19, no. 5, 2005, pp. 548-567.

Khana, Neetu. *Visceral Logics of Decolonization*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

Lasquety-Reyes, J. "In Defense of Hiya as a Filipino Virtue." *Asian Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2016, pp. 66-78.

Leys, Ruth. *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2017.

Rafael, Vicente. Mother Tongues: Histories of Translation in the Spanish Philippines. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

—. Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society Under Spanish Rule. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

Wimsatt, W.K., and Monroe C. Beardsley. "The Affective Fallacy." *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, 21-39. Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1954.