Alyson Harvey

Professor Bernstein

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Affective Immortality: A Novel Form of Symbolic Immortality

The framework of "symbolic immortality", put forth by Lifton and Olson in 1974, sought to unify Freud's theory of death-as-instinct with their observation that beliefs surrounding death take on highly-abstracted forms (Lifton and Olson in Robben 2004: 32). Rather than raw instinct, they argued, death's role in human behavior is primarily mediated by its integration into complex symbolic structures (Lifton and Olson in Robben 2004: 32). These symbolic structures can be relational, creative, theological, spiritual, and/or experiential. Observing the types of emergent beliefs in immortality arising from such structures, Lifton and Olson classified five forms of "symbolic immortality": biological, creative, theological, natural, and experiential (Lifton and Olson in Robben 2004: 34).

Interestingly, the structures giving rise to these distinct forms of immortality indicate (directly or indirectly) diverse degrees of direct continuity-of-"oneself" after death. Within Lifton and Olson's framework of symbolic immortality as a means to "master" death anxiety in order to "live with death", this raises the question of why indirect continuities-of-oneself are viable sources of comfort, given the existence of more direct continuities (Lifton and Olson in Robben 2004: 39). Lifton and Olson's symbolic immortality implies that, for instance, the existential ease offered by having children (no direct continuity of "oneself") is equal to that conferred by belief in Christian doctrine, which offers literal immortality in utopia (direct continuity of "oneself").

It is significant to investigate this phenomenon, as it poses an apparent challenge to the foundations of Lifton and Olson's (and myriad others') work towards characterizing beliefs in immortality: that such beliefs broadly serve to overcome death anxiety. This is especially challenging given that humans tend to not only *fail to decouple* emotional significance from the dead, but actually often *augment it* and expand its boundaries. Helping to unify the forms of symbolic immortality put forth by Lifton and Olson, I identified a yet-undescribed manifestation of belief in immortality. Critically, this manifestation is uniquely coexistent with seemingly-contradictory symbolic immortalities; heightening of the emotional significance of dead bodies; and perceptible in relationally-distant entities.

AFFECTIVE IMMORTALITY

This new form, which I have termed "affective immortality", is able to coexist with each of the forms described by Lifton and Olson. "Affective" immortality describes an "intuitive" attribution of life to the dead and their remains (bodily remains, material possessions, their tangible or intangible works, etc.). In her essay *The Phase of Negated Death*, Hikaru Suzuki recounts a situation which powerfully demonstrates this phenomenon:

> [W]hile this funeral professional was transporting the deceased and his family from a hospital to the Moon Rise funeral hall, the back door of the company van had opened and the coffin had slid onto the street and fallen open; the deceased had landed face down on the pavement with an upturned coffin beside him … The family members were furious; enraged, they shouted at the professional that he had injured the deceased, who was almost hit by a car behind the van. The funeral professional knelt on the pavement, touching his forehead to the ground, and apologized to the family in a continuous

> kowtow. The family's ire did not dissipate, however, until the managers had apologized and offered to pay for the entire funeral. (Suzuki in Robben 2004: 224)

Suzuki goes on to explain that this particular response resulted from a formal cultural belief regarding the definition of "death":

> What was manifested in this episode was the perception of the continued life of the deceased in the eyes of the family. Although dead in the medical or physical sense, the deceased was not yet acknowledged to be dead. Japanese believe that a person experiences death twice, once at the hospital and again at cremation. (Suzuki in Robben 2004: 225)

Yet, drawing from my own experience: while I have no formal cultural belief in "second death", I noticed that my own instinctive reaction to this account was similarly emotionally-charged. Why is it that such injury to the body of the deceased– even in the absence of any formal cultural belief in "second death"– provokes horror greater than would be provoked while they still lived? Even across only two cultures, and with a small sample size for my perspective; and even given this feeling's formalization in Japan, versus its instinctive expression in myself– it is significant that this situation evokes the same intense reaction cross-culturally. The culturally and spiritually-transcendent nature of this phenomenon prompted my exploration of the existence of "affective immortality" through a utilitarian lens (in the functional– not philosophical– sense).

Observing "affective immortality" through a utilitarian lens– the "affective" component of "affective immortality" is rooted in the "affect theory" framework put forth by Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Ahmed argues that subjective, internal, and arguably involuntary emotions and bodily sensations delineate object boundaries (Ahmed 10). This

process of affective definition allows for objects' circulation as socially, culturally, and/or politically significant (Ahmed 11). Adding to this, Ahmed notes that:

> [W]hile the experience of pain may be solitary, it is never private. A truly private pain would be one ended by a suicide without a note. But even then one seeks a witness, though a witness who arrives after the anticipated event of one's own death. (Ahmed 29)

Here, the example of pain is analogous to the imbuement of the dead with affective immortality. Through the lens of affect theory, affective immortality serves– perhaps completely subconsciously– to structure societies and cultures through the performance of emotion. This proposed socio-political utility of intuitive, unspoken perceptions of immortality provides a useful foundation as we observe its presentation in strikingly diverse cultures.

When compared to other forms of symbolic immortality, affective immortality appears less intentional. While other forms often have a formal doctrinal basis, or at the very least, a structured community of adherents– affective immortality seems to be implicitly understood among unstructured and diverse practitioners. But, perhaps most interestingly, affective immortality tends to persist, while many formalized forms of continued life after death are relatively brief (though many are not). In Suzuki's example, the loved one is dead; but in a formalized symbolic sense, they are not yet dead (Suzuki in Robben 2004: 225). In contrast, isolated affective immortality can truly constitute perceived immortality, even when there is coexistent formalized acknowledgment of the deceased's status as such.

AFFECTIVE IMMORTALITY COEXISTS WITH CONTRADICTORY IMMORTALITIES

This contrast is particularly evident and significant in the context of Christianity. Given its doctrine of "direct continuity" immortality, Christianity imbues dead bodies and their remains

with an extreme degree of affective immortality. In fact, a key feature of Christianity is its focus on, and veneration for, martyrdom– specifically due to its perception as a tragic display of faith (Smith 102). Historically, Christianity has constituted a "cult of martyr-heroes" whose spiritual practices were known to emphasize the veneration of bodily remains, "as if life were still present in a desiccated bone" (Smith 102). While this particular presentation of affective immortality could be considered anomalous, its descendent practices demonstrate the continued primacy within Christianity of venerating martyrs' remains. Today, interaction with literal bodily remains may generally be replaced by the symbolism of the cross or with consecrated bread and wine– but as Smith notes: "there is a difference between bodily relics and other material remains, but it is better understood as one of degree, not one of kind" (Smith 103). Despite their abstract nature, key practices in Christianity center upon interactions with remains, given their symbolization of the dead body (or, the body facing imminent death) and objects which contacted it.

Christ himself is undoubtedly Christianity's most significant martyr, and beliefs and practices surrounding his martyrdom best illuminate the primacy of affective immortality in Christianity. Specifically, the veneration of Christ's symbolic remains demonstrates the affective immortality of *Christ the mortal*. The perception of life in Christ's mortal, embodied self is demonstrated through Communion– a symbolic "reanimation". The cross is "a model for imagination" of the death of Christ the mortal, and in being so, immortalizes him through continued inspection of his physical suffering (Smith 26). If affective immortality was *not* placed upon Christ's mortal body, then one might expect– in line with his resurrection and freedom from the human body's constraint– a lack of emphasis placed on continued interactions with his mortal body (and its symbolic forms). Christ's appearances after resurrection do suggest continuity of his mortal body's physical appearance:

> Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (*New International Version*, John 20:27-29)

It could be argued that Christ's mortal body is therefore linked to his doctrinally-immortal self, and that the perceived immortality of his mortal body is theological, not affective. However, it is the imminent *death* of Christ that imbues him with immortality, indicating the attribution of immortality to Christ the mortal, and not Christ the resurrected-but-outwardly-mortal. Christ is imbued with affective immortality through the cross's perpetual transfer of his embodied suffering during death to empathetic practitioners. Furthermore, the symbolic body and blood in Communion stand in for the symbolic body and blood shared by Christ at the Last Supper, during which he foretells his mortal death (Matthew 26:17-30). Christ resurrected is no longer mortal, although there may be continuity of his outward physical appearance, which is that of Christ the mortal.

It appears important to examine whether the continuity of Christ's outward physical appearance after resurrection indicates reanimation of the same material which composed his mortal body. Perhaps the immortality prescribed to Christ the mortal is transferred to Christ the resurrected-but-outwardly-mortal if his body is materially identical to Christ the mortal.

This question of material continuity of the resurrected body has a long, tortuous, and blatantly-contradictory history (Bynum 296). Importantly for this discussion of Christ's affective immortality– the struggle here is not just "lack of bodily restoration versus restoration", but also "materially-exact vs. replacement-based bodily restoration".

For instance, early Christians emphasized the power of God to "remake what He once made", irrespective of the body's condition, suggesting that "flesh shall remain even after the resurrection," (Bynum 268). Yet simultaneously, there was an intense concern for proper burial, and early Christians "often went to extraordinary lengths to collect and reassemble the dismembered pieces of the martyrs for burial", grieving if they failed (Bynum 268). In light of this and abundant analogous histories, Bynum theorizes that the significance– or even existence– of bodily fragmentation "depends not on what happens to the body physically but on the moral standing of the person to whom the bodily events pertain." (Bynum 294).

Within this framework– in the case of Christ, Christianity's moral pillar, the equivocation of Christ the mortal's body with that of Christ the resurrected-but-outwardly-mortal could be the result of his perceived infinite capacity for miraculous self-renewal. If *any* body could overcome fragmentation, miraculously resurrecting with *exact material continuity* rather than through replacement-based restoration), it would arguably be Christ's. At first, this appears to prove that Christ's embodied immortality could be strictly attributable to theological immortality.

However, I argue that it is not only Christ's degree of material continuity, but also his mortal nature or lack thereof, that constitutes his holistic continuity of "self". Even if Christ's body has exact material continuity pre- and post-resurrection, a discontinuity-of-body exists in his mortal-to-immortal transformation. Once again, the primacy of Christ's *death* in constituting his perceived embodied immortality proves that this perception is affective, not theological. Beliefs and practices involving Christ's dying and imminently-dying body are affective, based on *feelings* of empathy and grief for the mortal martyr. The Christ immortalized through perpetual empathetic experience of his dying and imminent death must be the Christ who *is mortal*. Definitionally, this cannot be the resurrected Christ, given his immortality– even if his exact

mortal body's material forms his now-immortal body. Fascinatingly, this demonstrates the presence of affective immortality in Christ the mortal, coexisting with the extant theological immortality of Christ the resurrected.

AFFECTIVE IMMORTALITY AMPLIFIES EMOTIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

I argue that the widespread placement of affective immortality by Christians upon less theologically important figures represents an amplification of emotional significance. Through the lens of affect theory, affective immortality applied to culturally, politically, and/or theologically-significant individuals is a form of societal structuring (Ahmed 11). But its widespread application to family members, who are primarily *personally* significant to the immortalizer rather than societally, interrogates the boundaries of affect theory. I argue that affective immortality is not strictly bound by affect theory. Affect amplifies the emotional significance of the dead and their remains, particularly when they are personally-significant individuals. Affective immortality then manifests despite its irrelevance in broader societal dynamics, demonstrating a suspension of underlying affect *theory*. The emotional significance amplified by affective immortality can even render the affectively-immortalized deceased *more emotionally-significant* than when they were alive. This is an especially powerful observation in the context of Christianity, where the earthly form of the deceased is especially irrelevant after death.

Consider the story of the fate of BBC reporter Alistair Cooke's remains. Cooke's remains became the subject of public outcry when, instead of being cremated, they were stolen by a fraudulent funeral parlour and sold to an illegal tissue bank– subsequently revealing a bonafide organ trade arising from this method (Scheper-Hughes 10-11). The reaction of Cooke's daughter

Susan Kittredge, an Episcopal priest, to this scandal demonstrates the presence and significance of affective immortality as applied to personally significant individuals.

Kittredge was open about her struggles to reconcile her faith with the feeling of horror evoked by the treatment of her father's remains, which she found were "not as easily detached from the 'person' as she had believed" (Scheper-Hughes 11). Such unexpected difficulty is prevalent. Health seems to allow the body to "disappear from awareness and action" (Sharp 290), leading to heightened discomfort when its failure reminds one of the physical body's inextricable linkage to personhood (Sharp 290). Perhaps responding to the realization of this linkage, Scheper-Hughes points out Kittredge's affective belief that "the dead body seemed to have a life of its own" (Scheper-Hughes 11). Kittredge's affective perception of immortality in her father's remains, and resultant horror at their abuse, builds an understanding of affective immortality's amplification of emotional significance in immortalized versus alive individuals. Despite Kittredge's deep understanding of Christian doctrine, the horror of the mistreatment of her father's affectively-immortalized remains overshadowed the peace found in their doctrinal irrelevance and vacancy-of-soul.

AFFECTIVE IMMORTALITY TRANSCENDS RELATIONAL THRESHOLDS

It is not just primacy in Christian *belief and practice* that illuminates affective immortality's existence, significance, and capacity for co-existence with theological immortality. Further insight can be derived from Christians' ability to prescribe affective immortality in their extrareligious beliefs and practices. Note that, in using the term "extrareligious", I don't intend to suggest an active or willful suspension of religion in certain moments (In fact, I don't believe this is possible.). I refer instead to beliefs and practices which are broadly lacking a particular

Christian evaluation. For the sake of my argument, extrareligious beliefs and practices are the result of an evaluation's direct *and indirect* absence in Christian doctrine– these being the most defensibly extrareligious. In this context, affective immortality's diminishment of the relational closeness needed to prescribe and perceive immortality is most convincingly revealed.

Perceptions of animal afterlives among Christians demonstrate affective immortality's toleration of intriguingly distant relationships between immortalizer and immortalized. Christian orthodoxy holds that animals lack eternal souls, and therefore they do not have an afterlife, nor a resurrection (Magliocco 44). The Bible, however, does not explicitly indicate that animals do not have souls, and this orthodoxy is deductive. The openness-to-challenge of Christian doctrine regarding animal afterlives reinforces the ability of affective immortality to coexist with theological immortality. Interestingly, though, it also highlights affective immortality's unique frequency of application in nonhuman species.

Lifton and Olson's symbolic immortalities are generally applied to oneself and upon one's loved ones. These loved ones generally hold some close relation to the immortalizer, most commonly that of kinship. Such relational thresholds could be explained within the framework of Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, in which he argues that the "obligatory character" of death rites is to reaffirm group identity in the face of group destabilization brought about by death (Durkheim 107). This also applies to affective rites: in this framework, intense emotions surrounding death are inauthentic on an individual level, instead serving as a stabilizing performance of shared emotion among group members (Durkheim 107).

Group destabilization is presumably greater when the deceased is relationally closer (or more powerful) to the affected group. Accordingly, emotional responses to the death of a pet-companion which mirror those towards a human companion appear bizarre within such a

framework. The widespread prescription of affective immortality onto animal companions indicates a role of affective immortality beyond group stabilization. Simultaneously, it critiques Durkheim's theory of performative emotion, demonstrating frequent and intense affective responses to death disproportionate to their associated degree of group destabilization.

These responses are often mediated by a particular construction of animal afterlives, influenced by the Christian afterlife. The "Rainbow Bridge" constitutes an animal-specific utopian afterlife, and defines a connection between itself and Christian Paradise (Magliocco 48). Specific details of pet-owner reconnection in the afterlife vary, but reconnection is the Rainbow Bridge's general promise (Magliocco 48). Indeed, the prototypical animal afterlife among Christians is *rooted* in the reconnection of pet to owner, and in the eternal maintenance of that relationship. It does not liberate immortalized pets from ownership, nor does it typically immortalize animals who aren't owned.

The fact that this extrareligious construction of animal immortality primarily serves to comfort owners facing their pets' death indicates that it constitutes a form of affective immortality. This fact also qualifies the "transcendence" of affective immortality beyond typical relational thresholds. By identifying the owner-focused nature of the Rainbow Bridge, it appears that this phenomenon may actually reflect the existence of a new "group" consisting only of oneself. Perhaps it is not that affective immortality's expanded relational threshold reveals some humans' intuitive, affective valuation of the lives of pets, elevating them at times to the value of humans'. Instead, it may reflect an increasing isolation of people over time from the typical subjects of their coexistent forms of symbolic immortality (if coexistent forms exist, as in Christianity). Affective value, and therefore affective immortality, expands to include more abstract subjects when humans' lives become more isolated from typical subjects. Atypical

subjects such as pets would understandably hold increasing affective value in the face of decreasing group size and/or significance.

CONCLUSION

These arguments provide powerful examples of affective immortality's coexistence with beliefs in "direct continuity" forms of theological immortality; its amplification of the emotional significance of the dead; and its ability to immortalize atypically relationally-distant entities.

If we assume theological immortality poses the ultimate challenge to affective immortality's coexistence, then its foundational role in Christianity suggests affect's particular persuasiveness in the human psyche. This persuasiveness is bolstered by affect's particular ability to augment the emotional significance of its immortalized, especially when this augmentation overrides the comfort provided by Christian theology's diminishment of the mortal body's emotional significance. Finally– though affective immortality's lowering of relational thresholds for immortality perception may be somewhat attributable to practical difficulties in seeking comfort from other symbolic immortalities– its ability to accommodate this need is significant.

Ultimately, the existence of affective immortality is clear, and an understanding of its contributions to diverse symbolic immortality "cocktails" is valuable. Adding affective immortality to Lifton and Olson's symbolic immortality framework could help to resolve the tension inherent in symbolic immortality-as-existential-fear-mitigation, given that their current forms of symbolic immortality display a huge diversity of directness in their continuities-of-life. Affective immortality could be a "compensatory" form which allows more abstract symbolic immortalities to provide similar existential comforts as the more direct forms.

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