“Emotionscapes of Geopolitics”: Interpreting in the United Nations Security Council

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The agency of interpreters has been kept out of view in human geography. This paper corrects this by focusing on embodied interpretation: bodies, freighted with their own relations, expectations, and experiences in the context of “emotionscapes,” settings for emotional communication. Conceptually, “emotionscapes” enable the exploration of the potentiality of an emotion in its spatial setting. Emotionally expressive behaviour is a process of the emotion; a potentiality to be realised. Emotions are distinctively connected to specific sites and spaces. This potentiality shifts the analytical focus away from what emotion is to what emotion can do to the alteration or reproduction of relations. I argue that this is vitally important to understanding geopolitical exchange, that is, how global politics is made and remade. However, the potentiality of emotions is made more complicated when interpretive bodies are involved in geopolitical exchange. They are intrinsic to the relational fluxes, currents, and flows of emotion – its potentialities – they identify and relay emotionally laden language of others for others in geopolitical communication. They observe, relay, and mutate emotional potentiality in “emotionscapes.” In doing so, they wrestle with more than just words. They seek to capture emotions and geopolitics between real-life people in real places. Understanding their endeavour should challenge us therefore to [re]consider geopolitical exchange in “emotionscapes” and the mediatory and performative roles played by interpretive bodies in these spaces of geopolitical knowledge production. This is my key purpose in this paper. Underpinning the paper’s conceptual ideas are qualitative data on the role of interpretive bodies in realising emotional potentialities in the “emotionscape” of the UN Security Council in New York, arguably the most high-profile geopolitical institution.

KEYWORDS
emotionscape, interpretive body, language, practice, United Nations
1 | INTRODUCTION

I looked up from my notes at Vitaly, and extemporaneously posed a set of questions that I urgently needed him to answer. Are you truly incapable of shame? Is there no act of barbarism against civilians, no execution of a child that gets under your skin, that just creeps you out a little bit? Is there nothing you will not lie about or justify? As always, he delivered his statement in Russian, and I listened to the interpretation through my earpiece. (Power, 2019, p. 540)

This vituperative exchange between US Ambassador Samantha Power1 and her Russian counterpart Vitaly Churkin2 over atrocities in Syria in December 2016 is the staple of geopolitics; inter-state accusation in front of the watchful gaze of the world’s press and media, and the folding of the diplomatic body with the geopolitical behaviour of states.3 As a diplomatic exchange, it is by no means unusual and possesses many of the hallmarks of performance and theatricality associated with diplomacy in the United Nations, that is, saturated gendered meaning (Fall, 2020) and the concerted effort to ground power not only in the choice of words but equally in their delivery as an emotional calculation designed to build international credibility or disparage that of others (Jones, 2020a). That Ambassador Power should recount this exchange in her autobiographical narrative authenticates perhaps its unscripted nature, its symbolism in her view of diplomatic flourish and linguistic acuity in the “emotionscape” of the Security Council, and the ways in which through her diplomatic performance (Jones, 2020b) she was able to “bring meaning into existence and ‘story’ the world” (Fall, 2020, p. 5).

Yet, I argue, it is all too easy to foreground diplomatic bodies in these geopolitical spectacles while simultaneously overlooking the significant role of interpretive bodies4 in the conveyance of emotional geopolitical messaging in “emotionscapes” (Jones, 2020c). The interpretive body5 is itself a subject and object which, to summarise Mountz (2018), requires understanding of its disparate abilities, subjectivities, emotions, and affects. In keeping with this feminist scholarship, the interpretive body becomes “analytical tool, scale, site, space of representation, commodity, and physical organism with its own dimensions and that is subjected to other processes” (Mountz, 2018, p. 761). In fact, transmitting the above diplomatic exchange in the UN involved six interpretive bodies – Power’s remarks decoded and encoded by the Russian interpreter and Churkin’s response linguistically processed by the English booth interpreter. For others around the table, four interpreters extended the global reach of this diplomatic spat by conveying it into Chinese, Spanish, French, and Arabic. I contend that by shifting the gaze from the diplomatic to the interpretive body, an alternative and interesting set of questions is provoked by this geopolitical moment: How is this exchange interpreted? How is the emotion of Power’s comments reflected by each interpreter? What aspects of Power’s comments present difficulties in their interpretation between languages? Does Power’s message resonate in the same way across the language terrains? What impact does the poignancy of emotional comments have on the interpreter her/himself? The pertinence of these questions is routinely ignored in geopolitical scholarship. My call, then, is for the study of interpretive bodies and the transmission of emotion in political geography, which I address through a focus on “emotionscapes” – spaces in which the “conditionalities, potentialities and materialities” of emotions (Anderson & Harrison, 2006, p. 334) are played out.6

In the following sections I set out first a conceptual discussion of “emotionscapes” and the role of interpretive bodies within these, showing how the coming together of the expression of emotion and its reading is key to geopolitical communication. The UN Security Council provides the empirical socio-spatial focus for the study of “emotionscapes.” Here, I specifically draw on interviews with interpreters to explore how emotionally expressive behaviour is a process of the emotion; a potentiality to be realised. The final section emphasises in explicitly relational ways the inter-language, inter-cultural, and inter-individual contexts of emotionally expressive behaviours in “emotionscapes” – in effect, the contingencies of place, bodies, and context that must be taken into account in investigating diplomatic exchange such as that between Power and Churkin.

2 | EMOTIONSCAPES AND INTERPRETIVE BODIES

Much geographical work has exposed the difficulties of viewing emotion as a universally recognisable phenomenon. This has prompted calls for emotion to be analysed only “within the context in which it takes place” (Giacomoni, 2017, p. 16). This spatialising of emotions moves firmly in the direction of “emotionscape,” spaces where emotion can stick to bodies, and surface and resurface in ways that blur the boundaries between self and other, private and public, and the personal and the geopolitical. “Emotionscapes” thus emphasise in relational ways the inter-language, inter-cultural, and inter-individual contexts of emotion use – in effect, the contingencies of place, people, and context. Here, I argue, lies a “sharper
geographical sensibility” (Thien, 2005, p. 451) by connecting emotions, space, and geopolitical process (Jones, 2020a; Jupp et al., 2017; Pain, 2009; Pain & Staeheli, 2014). This spatial grounding of emotions shifts the focus onto the body/ies as loci at which “geopolitical power is made and contested” (Williams & Massaro, 2013, p. 752) and, crucially, is co-constituted with the international (Dowler & Sharp, 2001). This complements important work by feminist scholars – champions in foregrounding those bodies frequently overlooked in analyses of global politics, including women, young people, and migrants (Benwell & Hopkins, 2016; Tazzioli, 2020). Their work has re-inserted these bodies into accounts of geopolitics and in doing so lessened the hegemony of “big picture” political explanations (Dowler & Sharp, 2014) as well as widened the realm of the geopolitical (Koopman, 2011). This embodied geopolitics, then, does not argue for bodies as merely “surfaces for discursive inscription” but rather as “sites of performance in their own right” (Dowler & Sharp, 2001, p. 169). This firmly grounds geopolitics in practice and in place.

However, interpretive bodies have been ignored in these accounts (see, e.g., Kuus, 2019), as well as in other equally comprehensive discussions of embodied political geographies (see, e.g., Mountz, 2018). As bodies, they have been kept “out of view”; a denizen of the geopolitical in-between at a range of scales, spaces, and situations despite their centrality to both the “institution of war” (Baker, 2006; Packer, 2007) and the “institution of diplomacy” (Bos & Soeters, 2006; Cremona & Mallia, 2001). Interpretive bodies do far more than spectate on geopolitics. Rather, they are intrinsic to how geopolitical knowledge is transmitted and perceived. They perform its linguistic and cultural intermediation. This intermediation, I argue, takes place in “emotionscapes” where ethical codes and practices, and adrenaline-fuelled performances by interpretive bodies co-produce and communicate geopolitical messages linking emotion with language.

The coming together of the expression of emotion and its reading is pivotal to geopolitical communication. This entanglement between “emoter” and “reader” has been described in conceptual terms as an “emotionscape” (Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013; Gartner & Riessmann, 1984). “Emotionscapes” are spaces through which emotions flow and are communicated. They comprise, in addition to language, a multiplicity of signs and sign systems – facial, postural, gestural, and kinesthetic expressions; in sum, bodies spatially and temporally interacting and coalescing around and within certain signifying environments. “Emotionscapes” bring together particular emotional, relational, and material qualities that are mediated by bodies and their senses, so that different spaces can become linked to various emotions. This relation between emotion and space can change over time, and the same space can trigger vastly divergent emotions in various bodies. “Emotionscapes” are therefore characterised by:

> Perceptible elements which express, and … stage an emotional experience, and [consist of] … the meaning of these elements for all concerned actors, both for the actor who is the subject of the emotional experience (who ‘lives it’) and for the direct or indirect participants of this experience (who observe it, ‘read it,’ interpret it, interact with the actor-subject of the experience). (Stockinger, 2018, p. 12)

This direct and indirect experience within an “emotionscape” is described in philosophical terms as subjective and objective perspectives on emotionally expressive behaviours (Stout, 2010; Strawson, 1960). Subjective perspectives involve a willingness to engage reactively with such emotional behaviours, while objective perspectives are characterised by emotional detachment from them.

However, interpretive bodies occupy an ambiguous position between these two perspectives within “emotionscapes.” They are more than detached invisible spectators of geopolitical exchange but act as its linguistic and cultural intermediary, oriented to capture, represent, and reproduce the politics of these exchanges and their emotionally expressive behaviours, in all their uncertain complexities. This orientation involves interpretive bodies in acts that are cumulatively perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive and are “correlated with the situational and sociocultural context” (Duarte et al., 2006, p. 2). The “emotionscape” is therefore a space “deeply inscribed with the politics, the considerations, the positions and the strategies of power” (Alvarez & Vidal, 1996, p. 2).

Language is a fundamental element in “emotionscapes.” It plays an integral role in emotion perceptions and experiences. Consequently, interpretive bodies are accorded a key responsibility in “emotionscapes,” shaping the nature of the emotion that is perceived or felt in the first place (Lindquist et al., 2015). Language does the work of geopolitics and interpretive bodies are thus critical to this labour. Focusing on “emotionscapes” therefore enables a situated account of emotions and language in geopolitical exchange, revealing how interpretive bodies and their differentiated agency try to capture the emotion of others for others, supposedly carefully and accurately tying language with emotional intent by decoding and processing language’s emotional dimensions, and matching these appropriately to socio-cultural context, including the mood and atmosphere of the “emotionscape” (Griffiths & Scarantino, 2009; Trigg, 2020). “Emotionscapes” have “socio-spatial capacities” (Gandy, 2017, p. 369); affective geographies that spur feelings of trust or suspicion, acceptance or dismissal,
certainty or diffidence. Bodies generate different affective responses in one particular context and another; “emotionscapes” are therefore “tuned spaces” within which interpretive bodies are conscious of their own evaluation: in effect, the body is subjected to emotions done by the self on itself, by the self on others, and by others on the self in advance of, during, and post “emotionscape” performances. “Emotionscapes” are thus “grasped pre-reflectively, manifest spatially, [and] felt corporeally” (Trigg, 2020, n.p.).

The study of “emotionscapes” connects emotionally expressive behaviours in geopolitical exchange to their various spatial and immediate temporal contexts; a project that is of “considerable importance and urgency for critical social scientists” (Davidson et al., 2005, p. 11) since it attests to “the importance of recognizing and analysing emotions in relation to everyday, embodied moments and [geopolitical] encounters” (Mitchell & Kallio, 2017, p. 4) as well as foregrounding those bodies and practices from which individual subjectivities bring “affective potential” (Dittmer, 2017, p. 3). It is interpretive bodies that are charged with the appraisal of geopolitical exchange and its emotionally expressive behaviours, decoding the language of others and encoding it (un)wittingly into words of potential political meaning for other bodies. Thus, within “emotionscapes” interpretive bodies not only communicate geopolitical exchange, but also crucially assist the (mis)perception of it. This I argue warrants academic attention.

“Emotionscapes” are spaces in which the traversing of knowledge, actions, and emotions occur, that is “relational flows, fluxes or currents, in-between people and places rather than ‘things’ or ‘objects’ to be studied or measured” (Davidson et al., 2005, p. 3). Emotionally expressive behaviour takes place and is perceived in these spaces. This is a process of the emotion, that is, the realisation of its potentiality in its spatial setting. The “emotionscape” is an interactive space for the awareness of others’ emotions – a joint engagement with emotional expression (Stout, 2010). “Emotionscapes” are where emotions are communicated – unstructured authentic outpourings or skilful inauthentic calculations with desired intent. They are spaces in which emotions are recognised in differentiated ways, be it anger, happiness, fear, surprise, or sadness. Within the “emotionscape” the body is a tool of unparalleled power for expressing emotion beyond the use of verbal utterances, and as such a key source of information for emotion recognition (Glowinski et al., 2017).

However, the degree to which interpretive bodies are able to infer the emotional states of others when not directly emotionally engaged with them is a critical and unexplored aspect of “emotionscapes.” Crucially, for example, how do interpretive bodies read and understand diplomatic anger or frustration when it is directed at someone else and not oneself, and across cultures and languages? This is the dilemma facing the interpretive body as it looks through glass and listens through earphones in the “emotionscape.” Using Strawson’s (1960) approach to emotionally expressive behaviours would suggest that the “emotionscape” contains both subjective and objective readings of emotions, with interpretive bodies adopting objective perspectives that involve different perceptual mechanisms. The connection between interpretive bodies and how they read emotions in these spaces is summed up by McNeill: “It may focus more on the environment to which I am or have been exposed, or it may focus more on how I have been exposed – on the experiences I have come to have or the beliefs I have come to hold that allow me to know what I do” (2012, p. 577). Interpretive bodies are therefore freighted with their own relations, expectations, and experiences in the context of “emotionscapes.” They have differentiated agency in geopolitics.

The “emotionscape” has intensity; a time-pressureous environment that tests the cognitive ability of interpretive bodies to capture and transmit emotionally expressive behaviours immediately, and under the critical scrutiny of other interpretive bodies and audiences. Interpretive bodies are dynamically coupled to this spatial geopolitical context, and are constantly being moulded by the practices they execute on behalf of geopolitics. They replicate, imitate, or differentiate geopolitical knowledges with the express goal of minimising linguistic misunderstanding and, thereby, geopolitical uncertainty. Their task is primarily to render geopolitical ideas coherent while paying particular attention to “idiom, innuendoes, and nuances of meaning” (Cremona & Mallia, 2001, p. 304). They must strike the right tone, capturing mood and the simulacrum of atmosphere by accurately surveying visual, tactile, and kinesic characteristics since these are also drawn on to furnish additional contextual and communicative certainty about emotionally expressive behaviour in the transmission of geopolitics (Mikkelson & Jourdenais, 2018). Within “emotionscapes,” words and terms do not necessarily display their meanings in the ways individuals wish to be understood. As such:

The same (emotion) term (or the same account of ‘the same’ event) might mean something quite different in different contexts; and similarly, in particular contexts, other language forms might have the same ‘meaning’ as the (emotion) term (or the whole account) under consideration. (Bamberg, 1997, p. 315)

Consequently, interpretive bodies serve as “gatekeepers” for the range of possible interpretations of emotionally expressive behaviours and what they may be deployed to do in “emotion talk” in geopolitics.
“Emotionscapes” require interpretive bodies to behave and perform according to specific normative expectations. This is not restricted to deliberately learning rules of appropriate behaviour but the largely unconscious sense of what correct behaviour in a given political context would be, that is, to summarise Hochschild (1983), a “feel for the [geopolitical] game.” Their engagement with geopolitics leads to the production and sharing of communal resources; an inventory of practices that serves to build and bind interpretive bodies in their common enterprise of capturing and transmitting emotionally expressive behaviours (Wenger, 1998). Across the “emotionscape” are “schemes of perception, thought, and action … that produce individual and collective practices … ” (Scheer, 2012, p. 201). Indeed, each interpretive body has its own style of interpreting – its use of tone, its capture of language and emotionally expressive behaviours, and ways of delivering geopolitical knowledge(s) to target audiences. Each decision it takes thus “contributes to the elaboration or modification of this larger [geopolitical] narrative” (Baker, 2006, p. 122).

The “emotionscape” has spatiality – arrangements of heterogeneous elements oriented for communication: bodies (political bodies, interpretive bodies), materials (e.g., meeting agendas and briefing notes [though of little help when speakers move off-script], sound-proofed booths, microphones, wireless headsets), technologies (e.g., simultaneous relay systems, online terminological registers), techniques (e.g., command of terms, expressions, and specialised vocabulary), practices (e.g., short intense bursts of interpreting, respecting booth etiquette), and norms (e.g., sufficient interpretation output and its level of linguistic faithfulness, and avoiding interpretation “straying” into political advocacy, defence, or endorsement). These connect, combine, and align relations within and across the “emotionscape.” Within this “scape,” the interpreting booths separate physically interpretive and political bodies, a spatial staging that may induce performative anxiety in some interpretive bodies, but equally offer a physical safe-haven for self-confidence to flourish in others. The view from the glass-fronted booth suggests a range of potentials exist at any one moment in the “emotionscape”; a number of contingent futures based on shifting combinations of geopolitical ideas, materials, and emotionally expressive bodies.

While in the booth, interpretive bodies are expected to remain calm under pressure and respect a booth etiquette regarding noise and behaviours to avoid impairing the performance of other interpretive bodies as they listen, watch, prioritise, and distinguish between primary and secondary information, activate short-term memory, and communicate. The interpreting booth is therefore much more than an uncannnyy material construction but a space of social encounter with the fluxes, currents, and flows of emotion in geopolitics: “the glances, gestures, positionings and verbal statements that people continuously feed into the situation, whether intended or not” (DeLanda, 2006, p. 8). These orientate and direct interpretive bodies as they jockey in and out of multiple language combinations while minded of their cognitive capacities to interpret for long periods without diminishing interpretation quality, speed, or faithfulness. Within the “emotionscape,” interpretive bodies are conscious of the possibility of “people frowning, grimacing, taking off their earphones, looking back at the interpreters’ booths, and at times, realising that the interpreters are not automatons” (Cremona & Mallia, 2001, p. 302). These are emotionally expressive animations that bring their own intensities on interpretive bodies.

The UN Security Council is arguably the world’s most prominent international committee, and is the context for my study of “emotionscapes” and interpretive bodies. There, the use of emotions in “discursive and performative tropes” (Fall, 2020, p. 4) serves the claim-making of diplomats on behalf of states (Jones, 2020a, 2020b; Schia, 2016). Since 2016, there have been hundreds of Security Council meetings at the UN in New York. Each of these has been covered by interpretive bodies working in the dimly-lit language booths perched above the iconic horseshoe-shaped table that is the centrepiece of the Council chamber. For example, in 2019 alone, the Security Council convened a total of 243 public meetings, adopted 52 resolutions and issued 15 presidential statements (UN, 2020). Yet, interpretive bodies continue to lie outside the “range of practices, actors and objects [that] come into view when we consider diplomacy” (McConnell, 2019, p. 46, see also Müller, 2007). Moreover, the translation of diplomatic practices in spaces and places, what Dittmer and McConnell rightly describe as the “transmission, sharing and transformation of values, beliefs and narratives” (2016, p. 8), overlooks the specific performative roles of interpretive bodies. Indeed, Fall’s equally fascinating account of diplomatic exchanges in the UN relies on agreed UN transcripts of meetings as “examples of discursive geopolitical performances” (2020, p. 5) – that is post-event, politically endorsed accounts rather than the immediate diplomatic interchanges interpreted in different ways by interpretive bodies, and the instantaneous perceptions of these. Similarly, McConnell also omits interpretive bodies in her comprehensive account of the “messiness and liveliness” and “the unscripted and the spontaneous” (2020, p. 1021) of the UN as a “site of geopolitics” (p. 1019). Thus, by focusing on interpretive bodies in “emotionscapes” we can explore how diplomatic statements and interventions, with all their emotional intensities, are interpreted in the moment across the six languages operating in the UN. This offers a sharper focus on the potentialities of emotions in the spaces and places of diplomacy and, I argue, important insights into addressing “how modes of politics are articulated and how geopolitical agency is produced and contested” (McConnell, 2020, p. 1032).
3 | “BODIES, TABLES, AND INTERPRETATION BOOTHS”: METHODOLOGY

With the creation of the UN in 1945, standards for recruiting interpreters were set exceptionally high. Competition for UN interpreting jobs is, and always has been, remarkably stiff. According to UN records, the Head of Division interviewed 200 candidates and hired only two applicants (and then only on probationary contracts) in the first year of the UN’s existence (Baigorri-Jalón, 2004). Over 60 years later, out of 1,800 applicants seeking work as Chinese interpreters in the UN, only 10 applicants passed the entry examination. Similarly for Arabic, only two out of 400 applicants made the cut. Working at the UN in this role is regarded as reaching unquestionably the professional pinnacle. UN interpreters must have excellent passive comprehension of their two source languages; accuracy in interpreting into the target language in a grammatically correct manner; an understanding of the appropriate style and register; intelligent editing of logically redundant words and phrases; ability to cope with difficult or dense passages; and good diction and delivery.

We know little about these mediators of geopolitics.

On 14 January 2020 I chaired a 2.5-hour roundtable meeting with six senior interpreters (four women, two men) drawn from each of the six language booths (Russian, Chinese, Arabic, French, Spanish, and English) at the United Nations in New York. Planning for this began in October 2019 after permission was secured from the Head of the UN Interpretation Service. Ahead of the roundtable meeting, I was asked to submit precise details of the research themes for UN clearance and security access. In early January 2020, with UN interpreters having been allocated their timetable of interpretation slots for the month, a date for the meeting was set. Each participant had between 5 and 18 years of interpreting experience in the UN, including in the General Assembly and Security Council. Each of them was working as a staff interpreter in the UN at the time of the Power-Churkin exchange. Several of my interviewees had interpreted in over 150 Security Council sessions over their career. In line with best practice for determining group size for successful roundtable meetings, bringing together bodies from different language booths in this way created an opportunity for them to participate fully in the discussion and in doing so reveal their differentiated agency as well as individual and shared experience in “emotionscapes.”

The roundtable meeting was organised around several key themes, including practices and performance, emotional labour (self on self, others on self, self on others), and the role of interpretive bodies as they interface geopolitics. Following the roundtable meeting, a further discussion took place with one of the senior interpreters from the meeting, and this was held in one of the booths overlooking the Security Council table. This privileged access to interpreting space also enabled an exploration of how the heterogeneous arrangement of interpretive bodies, materials, and technologies facilitates the capture of emotionally expressive behaviours in “emotionscapes.” The roundtable meeting and “in-booth” discussion were conducted in English, recorded, and fully transcribed.

In sum, the roundtable discussion provided personal and emotional testimonies of “before,” “during,” and “after” lived interpreting experience in the “emotionscape” of the UN Security Council that revealed how this is “intrinsically embedded within and productive of … geopolitical processes” (Barabantsveva et al., 2019, n.p.). Second, it revealed specific details of the sets of individual and communal practices and performances carried out by interpretive bodies in the “emotionscape” for the capture and conveyance of geopolitics. Third, it furnished fine-grained evidence of the panoply of emotions in the “emotionscape,” including the challenges of capturing and communicating emotionally expressive behaviours, handling emotional meetings and speakers, and the affects of these on interpretive bodies. This attested to “the importance of recognizing and analysing emotions in relation to everyday, embodied moments and encounters rather than simply through grand metanarratives that lack grounding” (Mitchell & Kallio, 2017, p. 4). Finally, it substantiated tangible and perceived pressures and vulnerabilities (see, e.g., Strauss, 2020) on interpretive bodies over performance and its evaluation by other interpretive and diplomatic bodies in “emotionscapes.”

From an ethical perspective, interpreters are understandably reluctant to discuss the accuracy and fidelity of interpreting by their colleagues. There was a strong possibility that one or more of my participants had been involved in interpreting the Power-Churkin exchange, given their seniority and the highly sensitive Security Council meeting in which this took place. In order to avoid compromising the integrity of the roundtable meeting, I sent a C-SPAN recording of Samantha Power’s speech as it was delivered by the interpretive body in the Security Council, to five academics, each a native speaker of one of the UN languages (and also with fluency in English). This person was sent only the intervention in their native language as provided by the interpretive body and instructed not to listen to the English. They were asked to provide a verbatim account in their native language of Power’s intervention as undertaken by the interpretive body. They also provided me with a written translation of it in English. This bridged the methodological gap by enabling a comparison across the six UN languages of the interpretation of Power’s emotionally expressive behaviour.
4 | “EMOTIONSCAPE” OF INTERPRETING IN THE UN

“Emotionscapes” are where emotions circulate; language and behaviours helping to constitute emotional perceptions and steer emotional experiences in geopolitics. Language serves as the glue for emotion knowledge, binding it to embodied experiences and in turn shaping the ongoing processing of sensory information from the body and signifying environment to create emotional experiences and perceptions (Lindquist et al., 2015). In the UN, of course, the signifying environment is both cross-linguistic and cross-cultural, undercutting the hegemony of Anglo-centrism in (emotional) geopolitics (Müller, 2008; Wierzbicka, 2009). In this context, the role of interpretive bodies in the capture and communication of emotionally expressive behaviours takes on increased significance in “problematising the production and use of [geopolitical] knowledge in various orders of power and space” (Dalby & Ó Tuathail, 1996, p. 451). In the next sections, I address the “before,” “during,” and “after” of interpretive bodies’ engagement with and performance of geopolitics in the “emotionscape” of the Security Council to show how it is “grasped pre-reflectively, manifest spatially, [and] felt corporeally” (Trigg, 2020, n.p.).

4.1 | Preparing for the “Emotionscape”

On December 13th 2016 President Obama chaired a National Security Council meeting on the situation in Syria that was the most somber of my time in government … after Obama’s meeting, which I had joined by video, I walked across the street to an emergency UN Security Council session,7 also focusing on the assault in Aleppo.8 (Power, 2019, p. 439)

Power’s intent as she headed into the UN building for this emergency session was clear: to expose the role of Russia (and Syrian and Iranian governments) in the humanitarian catastrophe taking place in Aleppo and her utter contempt for Russian dismissal, denial, and diversion of responsibility for it. Meanwhile, for those interpretive bodies assigned to this Security Council session, the task ahead of them in the capture and communication of geopolitics in the “emotionscape” was clear, as an Arabic booth interpreter explained:

Being an efficient interpreter means almost not being there, the audience communicating without any intermediary. So that’s the ultimate objective – to create the impression that they are talking directly and understanding directly each other, and just having a small ear piece on and remembering that there is not any other person involved. It’s a performance by us. You fully relate to the person whom you are interpreting, you take the message that she is trying to convey, and to be able to convey it you need to be able to see it through her point of view, through her eyes. You do your best and are as close to the original as possible.

As a site of representation in geopolitics, interpretive bodies are conscious of self-positionality in the “emotionscape,” and the emotional pressures that weigh on them from enacting and performing state claims in global politics. This emotion on the self by the self is put starkly by one interpretive body as follows: “The idea is to not be a part of history. The interpreter is a conveyor of a message, it is not their message. They are responsible for delivering it completely, accurately and faithfully.” However, in its performance of geopolitical communication, the interpretive body struggles with the competence-confidence dilemma. One of my interviewees candidly acknowledged:

As far as I am concerned I sound confident when I know what I am talking about. The idea is to know what you are talking about, hence the preparation, hence the reading, possibly listening and watching similar meetings on the topic beforehand, but when I am not sure I pause. Process, think … once in my whole career I did say through the microphone that I did not know the speaker’s thinking. I wasn’t going to make up stuff and I wasn’t going to remain silent. I completely could not understand. I remember how unpleasant it was.

This admission prompted the Russian booth interpreter to confirm: “It’s not always a question of confidence, you might not be very confident about what you are hearing, and interpreting, but you need to project the image of being absolutely confident in what you are saying.” This was reaffirmed by the Chinese booth interpreter: “Competence is about displaying your confidence. It’s in the voice. When you press the microphone button ‘then you’re in charge.’” In performance terms, as the English booth interpreter interjected: “It’s a particular mastery.”
Despite interpretive bodies asserting the need for faithfulness in interpretation between languages, the “emotionscape” of the Security Council has its own language practices – in effect, institutionalised norms of language use in geopolitics. These practices serve to build and bind interpretive bodies in their common enterprise of capturing and communicating emotionally expressive behaviours. They direct geopolitical communication in ways that conform to communally accepted “ways of doing things,” framing rules for interpretive bodies (Hochschild, 1983). The Spanish booth interpreter described insightfully the “emotionscape” of the Security Council as one in which “delegates are neutral and the whole set up is more standardised … there is a certain way of speaking here.” Crucially, therefore, the capture and conveyance of emotionally expressive behaviour is “emotionscape”-sensitive. My interviewees offered much evidence of this sensitivity. Here, I draw on three examples.

How emotionally expressive language is mediated by particular interpreting practices is articulated by the Russian booth interpreter. By contrasting her/his own experience in two international [geopolitical] institutions, the mutation of geopolitical communication by different interpretive bodies is readily apparent:

When I was a freelancer working next to an experienced colleague in another institution, I was struck by the fact that she/he would use idiomatic Russian expressions when interpreting from English into Russian and it’s true they fit perfectly, but I thought the Russian delegate would be shocked hearing expressions that were very clear and familiar but by no means could have been used by the English speaker she/he was interpreting. So, here at the UN, I have never heard anything like that, we don’t do this, we choose the neutral option.

In the English booth, interpretive bodies are aware that “a large percentage of the audience are not native speakers because it tends to be the default language of those that do not have their language represented in the UN.” As a result of this:

We will try to not be overly national in our idiomatic language. Before I joined the UN, I was a freelancer working at a different [geopolitical] institution and I used the expression ‘the whole kit and caboodle’ and to see the face from a delegate … (laughs) … you can’t allow your interpretation to detract from what the primary objective of the speaker is saying. If we have options we will try not to go into cricketing metaphors, for example.

Above the Security Council table in the Chinese booth, interpretive bodies also tailor interpretation according to language practices operating within the “emotionscape.” My interviewee confirmed:

We use standardised formulations in Chinese which have equivalents in terms of English in the context of the UN and international relations more broadly. Outside of our bio-sphere we might have a selection of equivalents into English but use one set of equivalents in the legal [geopolitical operating] sense here.

Consequently, shifting focus onto interpretive bodies as loci at which geopolitical knowledge is made and contested, as these vignettes demonstrate, exposes how these bodies are charged with “gatekeeping” the range of possible meanings of emotionally expressive language and what it may be deployed to do in “emotion talk” in geopolitics.

4.2 | Participating in the “Emotionscape”

The Security Council booth is small, with an overwhelming claustrophobia – a console for two or three interpretive bodies, a side lamp, state of the art microphones, and a central monitor broadcasting images from cameras panning the “emotionscape” as geopolitics unfolds. Interpretive bodies are surfaces over and across which geopolitical struggles over meaning, power, resistance, and acquiescence are played out in the “emotionscape.” In this restricted physical space, interpretive bodies link geopolitical sites and scales, be it the Oval Office, the US mission in New York, the imposing Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Smolenskiy Bul’var, or the rubble of Aleppo. This coming together of geopolitical scales brings together the mundane and the personal with the brutalities and dramas of geopolitics. So, for example, as a Spanish booth interpreter explained:
Personally I try to prepare the night before so I’m generally relaxed when I get to the booth unless the subway has messed a lot with me which sometimes happens in NYC. So I think I’ve done what I needed to do to be ready for the Security Council meeting, and at this point I feel I know what to expect … I drink my coffee and am very happy to see my colleague, whoever he or she might be, and there’s nothing spooky about it in my opinion at least at this point in my UN career.

In the Arabic booth opposite, interpretive bodies are equally primed for the meeting – adrenaline-fuelled anticipation and anxiety in equal parts, prompting my interviewee to advance “we are ‘fighters in the booth.’” More soberly she/he adds:

Interpretation is damage control. There are so many factors. There is the topic that the interpreter must know, to the furthest extent possible, there are the accents, there’s the speed, there’s the state of mind on any given day. If you have some measure of control of any of these that makes your job so much easier. So if you know the topic well enough, of course it would be presumptuous to say ‘Ukraine – I know it’ … of course it’s not like that … but if you know the topic well enough then you can take care of the accents, you can take care of the speed, that is what I mean by we are working in ‘our house’ and this does not happen overnight. Two years in I was still struggling with a lot of things and 15 years later it’s not easy everyday but I am not shaking when I do a ministerial or a presidential meeting in the Security Council.

Security Council meetings in the chamber are often televised and open to the public and press. This mounts additional pressure on interpretive bodies, as a Russian booth interpreter admitted:

This means we have several goals to accomplish – not only giving the interpretation but also realising that our voices are being broadcast live to thousands, maybe millions of people. This is an extra challenge because you are not only interpreting but you are also like a TV anchor, you have to remember the sounds, the high quality of speeches, etc. You have not to move in the booth and not to create extra noises because we have very sensitive microphones, so even ruffling of paper can interfere for the listeners, so this is the most challenging when you know this is an extra sensitive meeting and that there will be many more people listening to you than just the people you see in the room.

The “emotionscape” is especially fraught and leads to interpretive bodies making emotional demands on others over respect for booth practices and etiquette. This is part of the tremendous intensity surrounding the performance of geopolitics in the “emotionscape.” Interpretive bodies are highly sensitive to any potential impairment of their performance. This is particularly so over disruptive noise. As the French booth interpreter made clear: “I can’t tolerate noise in the booth,” leading the Russian booth interpreter to confess: “Even the noise from the pencil … If there is noise interference coming and you need to concentrate on a very important and high-speech speech then yes, any single noise will be a nuisance.” The Arabic booth interpreter summed it up as follows: “When I’m in the booth I’d rather no one breathes!”

Interpretive bodies perform for 30-minute slots in the “emotionscape” of the Security Council. The Chinese booth, because it is tasked with interpreting both English–Chinese, and Chinese–English, operates on a 20-minute basis. The Chinese booth interpreter acknowledges the demanding nature of this but also the way perception of time is a referent for the evaluation of performance by the emotional self: “Hopefully at 20 minutes one is not feeling completely drained. I often need to be reminded that my time is up. If I’m watching the clock I know that I am not in top form.” The Russian booth interpreter added:

I don’t think anyone feels the passing of time as we do as interpreters. Sometimes you don’t even realise that it has been 30 minutes, while sometimes after 5 minutes if it has been extremely complicated it feels like it has been more than one hour … So it’s like that you are in a different time dimension when you are working.

I probed the impact of this “emotionscape” intensity on the interpretive body and my respondents vied to answer. One of them asserts her/his wish to answer for the group:
When Ambassador Power put down her notes and, in unscripted fashion, draw on their individual training and acquired interpretive practices in the pursuit and deciphering of meaning in Power’s emotionally expressive language. Here, interpretive bodies not only had to decode the emotionally expressive language and encode it into native language but also perform it. Consequently, in this way interpretive bodies exercise critical agency in the way they emphasise or suppress geopolitical knowledge; each decision they take in the moment of interpreting shapes how global politics is made and remade. Interpretive bodies are oriented to the pursuit and deciphering of meaning in the “emotionscape.” In practice, as the Spanish booth interpreter explained: “When we go into the booth we are looking for meaning not words. We interpret meaning. We try to stick as close as possible to the original and give all the meaning. And giving all the meaning doesn’t necessarily mean giving all the words.” However, interpretive bodies may be differentiated according to the way they capture and communicate emotionally expressive behaviours in the “emotionscape.” One interpreter offered important insights into how she/he responds to emotionally expressive behaviour and the impact on her/himself:

“I would rather see it as a matter of style. Each of us has their personal style of interpreting but fundamentally the standard is the same. There is nothing I prefer more than a verbal fight between two delegates, I am absolutely elated. My opinions are left at the door, it’s fantastic, and ‘you did this and you did that,’ ‘shame on you,’ and I am totally happy, the tone is there and I really don’t care who my speakers are, I might have very strong opinions about either one or both of them.

Conversely, I query whether some interpretive bodies will feel discomforted in handling and performing emotionally expressive geopolitical exchanges. Without hesitation she/he responds:

“But that’s my point, some interpreters might not like it but they interpret it all the same. Style might differ from one individual to another so yes, I will raise my voice, I will put the tone in accusation mode, you will hear the accusation in my voice, my colleague might be much more subdued in the way they deliver [the emotionally expressive behaviour] but the message will be the same.

When Power makes her emotional comments she is aware that they will not be confined to the diplomats around the Security Council table, but broadcast across the globe by media channels. Her intent is to shame Russia and expose the brutality of the Syrian regime for its inhumanity. Her choice of words – “barbarism” and “execution” – is combined with direct questioning of the diplomatic body’s ability to feel shame and its [de]sensitivity to the pain and suffering of others. Her choice of expression “gets under your skin” blends the physical with the emotional of diplomatic bodies, simultaneously exposing the hard exterior of the diplomatic fleshy body and the inability of geopolitics to penetrate it. By asking if it “creeps you out a little bit?” – an American colloquialism – this is intended to provoke the diplomatic body into an unsettled state through the discomforting intrusion of unpleasant feelings, nervousness, and fears. In short, her words are a call for an emotional “human” geopolitics in which the diplomatic body is oriented by a moral compass. By asking rhetorically “Is there nothing you will not lie about or justify?” the diplomatic body is confronted with how it can disentangle the self from the geopolitics it is called on to represent.

As Power speaks, the red lights on the microphones in the interpreting booths are switched on. The interpretive bodies become immediately intrinsic to the relational fluxes, currents, and flows of emotion – its potentialities; they must identify and relay the emotionally laden language of Power for others in the “emotionscape.” In doing so, they are wrestling with more than just words but seeking to capture emotions and geopolitics between real-life people in real places.

In the Spanish booth, Power’s emotionally expressive language is captured and conveyed as follows:

If meetings are fast paced and you have speeches delivered at maximum speed, you finish your two rounds of 30 minutes and it’s like taking a beating. It really is, physically and mentally. No matter how well you handled that … there are so many parameters that you have to control – your voice, your grammar and your enunciation. You end up being extremely tense, and by the end of the day … the neck hurts, the shoulder hurts.
¿Realmente acaso no son ustedes capaces de sentir vergüenza? Literalmente, ¿no hay nada que los pueda avergonzar? ¿No hay ningún acto de barbarie perpetrado contra civiles, ninguna ejecución de un niño que les ponga un poquito la piel de gallina? ¿No hay nada sobre lo que no vayan a mentir o que no vayan a justificar?

[Are you really unable to feel ashamed? Literally, isn’t there anything that could make you feel ashamed? Isn’t there any act of barbarism perpetrated against civilians, any murdering of a child that gets you a little bit gooseflesh? Is there anything you are not going to lie about or justify?]

Here, the interpretive body subtly repositions the diplomatic body away from Power’s shaming of it. For Power, the issue is whether the diplomatic body can be shamed. This interpretation foregrounds the physical but not the emotional reaction of the diplomatic body. The use of “goose flesh” (goose bumps) only partially addresses the overriding discomfort that Power is seeking the diplomatic body to feel over the atrocities in Syria.

The interpretive body in the Russian booth conveyed Power’s comments for the Russian diplomatic delegates in the Security Council as follows:

Вы что вообще не знаете что такое чувство стыда? Для вас это чувство незнакомо? А что когда убивают ребенка, когда расстреливают людей, неужели вам не становится страшно? Вы все равно готовы все оправдывать и лгать на эту тему.

[Do you at all know what shame is? Are you familiar with this feeling? Are you not scared when a child is murdered, when people are murdered? Still, you readily justify it all and you lie about this.]

In Russian, the diplomatic body is asked the meaning of shame, and its experience of it – not quite what Power had intended. The Russian diplomatic body is queried over whether the murder of individuals scares it; barbarism and execution are omitted from this interpretive account. While the diplomatic body is accused of justifying and lying about murder, it is not confronted with the fuller range of atrocities it is prepared to ignore. This only partially addresses Power’s intention.

The Arabic booth interpreted Power’s emotionally expressive language in the following way:

[Are you truly incapable to feel shame and compunction? Do your bodies not shiver with what is committed against children? Is there anything you do not lie about, or you do not find a justification for?]

In this interpretation, as with that of Russian, the interpretive body omits reference to barbaric acts, civilians, and execution. However, the emphasis on children symbolises for the Arabic interpretive body the atrocity committed. This is addressed by the use of the word “shiver.” Moreover, the shame intended by Power is reinforced by the Arabic interpretive body in its additional use of the word “compunction” alongside shame. The American colloquialism, however, is not interpreted but the diplomatic body’s ability to lie and justify is covered.

On the other side of the chamber in the French booth, Power’s emotional intervention is interpreted in a more neutral, and arguably, much less emotive way:

“Êtes vous veritablement incapable de ressentir la honte? N’y a-t-il rien qui puisse vous faire honte? N’y a-t-il aucun acte de barbarie contre les civiles ou d’enfants qui vous gêne – un tant soi peu? N’y a-t-il rien qui vous entraîne mentir ou à présenter des justifications?

[Are you truly incapable of feeling shame? Is there anything that can make you ashamed? Isn’t there any barbarous act against civilians or children that bothers you – not even a little? Is there anything that won’t cause you to lie or provide justifications for?]

Power’s expressions “get under your skin” and “creeps you out a little bit” (which could have been translated as “vous donne des frissons” and “vous glace le sang un tant soit peu”) are not directly interpreted but, rather, combined in the use of the French verb “Gêner” – to bother or embarrass. Here, the feeling of shame is foregrounded over its physical affects.

In the Chinese booth, the interpretive body is more direct in capturing Power’s emotionally expressive language but not necessarily its emotional geopolitical nuance:
Here, there is no mention of barbarism or execution but, rather, violence. The diplomatic body is not questioned about the spectrum of emotional affects of atrocities but solely its capacity to feel “remorse.” Power’s accusation about the diplomatic body’s propensity to lie and justify geopolitical acts, whatever their nature, is similarly omitted.

The performance of interpretive bodies in capturing the emotionally expressive behaviour of Samantha Power is surveyed by the diplomatic bodies present in the “emotionscape.” This occurs because the use by diplomats of emotionally expressive language has calculative intent. The diplomatic “emoter” uses this language to secure political advantage, enhance standing, or discredit the claims of others. For example, the Chinese booth interpreter explained how:

The Chinese Ambassador corrects us on the spot, speaking Chinese into the microphone. He is listening (in English and to our Chinese), and sometimes he takes his ear piece off and his entourage is listening and if they hear something they don’t like, or is not accurate in their reckoning then they will ‘alert’ him and they will also take this up with the UN Secretariat.

In the Spanish booth, interpretive bodies are conscious that:

The Press would be the first to pick up things with diplomats as a general rule, and maybe it’s a UN thing, but I think ‘no news is good news.’ If no one is saying anything it means that everything is fine and that they are basically satisfied [with my performance]. I think that is the case most of the time, you know.

This diplomatic tracking of how interpretive bodies capture and communicate emotionally expressive language places additional and considerable pressures on them. Each interpretive body performing in the “emotionscape” is forced to accustom itself to the geopolitical language and its meaning as favoured by the particular delegation it serves. This symbiosis between interpretive and diplomatic bodies leads, for example, to the Russian booth monitoring the Russian used by the Russian diplomatic delegation in meetings and how, in particular, the English booth interprets it. My Russian booth interviewee admitted that: “the Russian Ambassador has given us the permission to use the same terminology that he just used. And then we switch and understand how he measures the English terms to the Russian translation.” In this way, interpretive bodies through their practices fix geopolitical meaning in “emotionscapes” around “lexical selection and semantic and syntactic encoding” (Seeber, 2018, p. 82).

Other interpretive bodies are also monitoring linguistic capture and evaluating its conveyance in the “emotionscape.” Heads of interpretation units continue (though less regularly) to work in the booth at various sessions. One of my interviewees commented:

They can listen as we work together. Also they might listen to the webcast or the recorded speeches and they can also sit in the room discretely and listen to the proceedings. They may also rely on other senior interpreters who are also working in the booth and assessing colleagues on an ongoing basis … There’s no final exams or anything! We all took a very difficult exam to become staff interpreters and like after that it’s just an ongoing process.

4.4 | “Emotionscape”: reflections by interpretive bodies

Participating in the “emotionscape” is an emotional roller-coaster ride for interpretive bodies: emotionally expressive geopolitical exchange in a context of emotional labour – self on itself, self on others, others on self. To what extent does being called on to interpret emotionally expressive geopolitics affect interpretive bodies? Here, my interviewees provide a range of not altogether unanimous experiences. First, some maintain that the interpretive body is quite separate from the emotions being expressed by diplomatic bodies. My Chinese booth participant argued this point in the following way:
You are talking about emotional investment? Normally I have no time to go to that level of dealing with my own emotion. I have only little time to process what is being said, and I have no time to bring up an emotional response to the message which is to be delivered. It’s coming thick and fast, and honestly I don’t have that space to process my own emotions to it. I don’t have the temporal space to process it and come up with a reaction to it.

However, emotionally expressive behaviour by diplomatic bodies can influence positively the performance of the interpretive body. It can, according to my Russian booth participant, “define the quality of interpreting.” So, for example, the Spanish booth participant explained:

If we have a speaker who shows emotions it can enhance our performance as interpreters, because as a human being it might be easier to connect with someone who is feeling an emotion. If the emotion is something upsetting we still have the training and experience necessary to adjust and keep going.

As a highly sensitive UN Security Council meeting draws to a close, and the desk lamp is switched off in the cramped booth, what emotions circulate through and around interpretive bodies as a consequence of their interfacing with geopolitics in the “emotionscape”? There is no doubt that interpretive bodies are performance sensitive – they are immersed in emotional labour. English and Arabic booth participants respectively explain the self-reflection on their emotional labours, how emotions work, are “lived out,” and tied to the interpretive bodies and their perceived agency in the “emotionscape”:

I think when you begin you have sleepless nights. You are always thinking of your performance but you have to strike the right balance. You can’t go home all the time terminally depressed. At the beginning you always have this sense of ‘oh I wish I’d said this or that,’ and you try to work it in the next time. Though I am always much encouraged when I … say something and the room responds because they do understand. That’s the magic of interpreting geopolitics.

You seldom leave the booth thinking I wasted, to be honest. You do your best and it’s not in the angelic vision of things … and you have to deliver, that’s a given. I am rarely happy with myself. Ethically for me, you have to leave the booth thinking I did all I could. Yes, I have stories of mistakes, live, some you realise and some you don’t, some that lead to a complaint, some that don’t, thankfully never anything major.

These accounts reveal the vulnerability of interpretive bodies and their insecurities in the tension-filled production, consumption, and circulation of emotionally expressive geopolitics. Without doubt, interpretive bodies play a highly significant yet largely unacknowledged role in the enactment, performance, and power claiming of cross-language, cross-cultural contemporary geopolitics. These testimonies not only confirm the uncertain and emergent ways in which interpretation and geopolitics collide in co-producing geopolitical knowledge, but also how interpretive bodies are subjected to immense pressures as they wrestle with linguistic meaning, its accuracy, and its fidelity to emotionally expressive behaviours in “emotionscapes.”

5 CONCLUSIONS

The study of emotions has gained increased traction in human geography and, notably, in research in political geographies and critical geopolitics in recent years. This increased analytical sensibility has inspired research that now seeks to connect emotions, space, and geopolitical process. Within this work is a growing focus on the body as a site for both the making and remaking of global politics and also on how emotions flow relationally between bodies in/and places. This “embodied geopolitics” offers much potential for understanding contemporary political dynamics and process. In this paper I have argued for the closer study of the connections between emotions and interpretive bodies – sites of representation entirely ignored in scholarship in human geography. By connecting embodied interpretation and emotionally expressive behaviour with geopolitical communication in spatial settings, the paper has extended recent research on embodiment in geopolitics in a new substantive direction. I have contended that it has been all too easy to overlook the role of the interpretive body in rendering geopolitical knowledges. This omission is addressed conceptually in this paper by drawing on detailed personal accounts provided by interpretive bodies operating in what is arguably the most important international geopolitical organisation.
I contend that there is much purchase to be gained from investigating how the performance of emotionally expressive behaviours in geopolitics is mediated by interpretive bodies in specific socio-cultural contexts, what I have termed in this paper “emotionscapes.” This focus enables emotion’s potentiality to be explored in its spatial setting. Emotionally expressive behaviour is a process of the emotion; a potentiality to be realised. My focus on “emotionscapes” emphasises in explicitly relational ways the inter-language, inter-cultural, and inter-individual contexts of emotionally expressive behaviours – in effect the contingencies of place, people, and context. As the paper has shown, “emotionscapes” bring together particular emotional, relational, and material qualities that are mediated by bodies and their senses. In the “emotionscape” of the UN Security Council, interpretive bodies are clearly intrinsic to the relational fluxes, currents, and flows of emotion – its potentialities. Their practices seek to capture and communicate the emotionally expressive language of others for others in geopolitical exchange. However, interpretive bodies have differentiated agency in “emotionscapes.” They are freighted with their own relations, expectations, and experiences, and this shapes the ways in which geopolitical knowledge is communicated by them. Each decision they take in the moment of interpreting shapes how global politics is made and remade. This renders interpretive bodies a lot more than just spectators of geopolitics.

Interpretive bodies face particular challenges. “Emotionscapes” have intensity – time-pressurised settings that test the cognitive ability of interpretive bodies to capture and transmit emotionally expressive behaviours in immediate ways, and under the critical scrutiny of other interpretive bodies and audiences. There are therefore tangible and perceived pressures and vulnerabilities on interpretive bodies over performance and its evaluation. Using an emotionally expressive speech drawn from a highly sensitive UN Security Council debate on Syria, I have shown the role performed by the interpretive body in geopolitical communication in this “emotionscape” and the potentials for misinterpretation and misunderstanding that stem from this. The importance of this, I argue, has been crucially overlooked in research to date.

This paper hopefully stimulates a number of possible avenues for future research investigation by human geographers, not least the prospect to examine “emotionscapes” in other equally substantive contexts. Connecting interpretive bodies to emotional settings, be it the border, the courtroom, or the refugee camp, would offer much potential to advance the discipline’s conceptual, methodological, and theoretical bases.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTES

1 Samantha Power was US Ambassador to the United Nations from August 2013 to January 2017.
2 Vitaly Churkin was Russian Ambassador to the United Nations from May 2006 until his death in office in February 2017.
3 The Security Council exchange can be viewed at https://www.c-span.org/video/?420101-1/un-ambassador-power-syria-is-literally-shame-you (accessed April 2021).
4 My emphasis on ‘bodies’ is to expose the psychological and bodily dynamics of situated human behaviour. This focus on embodied exchange between diplomacy and interpretation serves to progress and challenge recent scholarship on the emotional, affective, and embodied aspects of everyday practice.
5 Interpretation is the rendering by an interpretive body of a spoken or signed message into another one, while preserving the register and meaning of the source-language content. This messaging is done either simultaneously or consecutively (once the speaker has finished). Interpretation is often and wrongly confused with written translation.
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