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The Politics of Unfeeling

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Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism by Rachel Greenwald Smith. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 194 pp. Hardback: $102.00

In the years since the 2011 occupation of Wall Street by anticonsumerist activists, a palpable sense of positivity has saturated left-wing politics. This tenor has shaped a variety of contemporary progressive campaigns, from Jeremy Corbyn's "politics of hope" and Bernie Sanders's invigorating push for the Democratic Party nomination to the work of the popular antifascist organization HOPE not Hate. Against this cultural backdrop, however, there remain those critics of literature and visual arts who maintain an interest in the progressive political possibilities inherent in less palatable branches of affective experience: feeling bad, feeling nothing, or feeling something indefinable but recognizably unsettling. In 2015, three publications looked to the possibilities that artworks generative of typically "negative" affects might have for producing political change. Hal Foster's republished essay "Abjection" in his book *Bad New Days*, Nikolaj Lubecker's study *The Feel-Bad Film*, and the topic of this review, Rachel Greenwald Smith's monograph *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* all consider the role that traditionally "negative" affect might play in reconfiguring and resisting the hegemonic experience of neoliberal subjectivity.

In *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, Smith sets out to challenge what she terms

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"the affective hypothesis," defined as "the belief that literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience" (1). In the context of neoliberalism, Smith argues, this hypothesis has been transfigured into a contract between author and reader, wherein the latter demands of the former a tangible affective payout in return for a temporary emotional investment. This payout comes in the form of "personal feelings," which are private and recognizable and can be networked for further individual gain. For Smith, this formulation is strictly compatible with the neoliberal injunction to draw all forms of human behavior under the ambit of the market. In short, for Smith, reading has become transactional. Against these personal feelings and the contract model of reading on which they depend, Smith offers an alternative in the form of "impersonal feelings." These are feelings that are unpredictable and difficult to codify, and works that generate them are frequently labeled as "cerebral" or "cold." Drawing on key theorists of affect including Deleuze and Massumi, Smith sets out to describe how impersonal feelings generated by works of "cold" literature can catalyze "attitudinal states that suggest alternatives to the apparent permanence of the neoliberal status quo" (29).

Smith structures her book around a series of close readings organized into four thematically arranged chapters. Smith's case studies are acknowledged by the author herself to be a mixed cohort with few generic or generational affinities but are instead grouped by their shared experimentalism. In each chapter, she presents two of these case studies in tandem, with one example representing complicity with the affective hypothesis and one successfully challenging it: Paul Auster generates impersonal feelings, while Cormac McCarthy generates personal ones; Jonathan Safran Foer narrates the events of September 11 from a perspective complicit with neoliberal hegemony, while Laird Hunt manages to draw attention to the "deep entanglement" occluded by narratives such as Foer's; Dave Eggers generates a false sense of agency contiguous with neoliberal subjectivity, while Ben Marcus curtails and subverts this same illusion of autonomy; and Lydia Millet fails where Richard Powers succeeds to write an ecological narrative that neither domesticates wildness nor fails entirely to accommodate noncapitalist life in literary representation. Several theses thread through these chapters: a wariness of manipulative sentiment and overt appeals to empathy; a celebration of feelings that resist easy codification (such as unease or "metafeeling"); an attendant resistance to illusions of agency, control, and systemic representation; and an interest in

alternative systems for the circulation of both affects and the literary objects that generate them, most arrestingly in the form of the ecosystem.

In Smith's first chapter, she pits Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* against Paul Auster's *Book of Illusions*, arguing that the emotional economy of McCarthy's stark novel reflects the neoliberal belief that "extra-economic activities obey the same logic as market activities" (45). Auster's book, contrastingly, focuses its efforts on metafeelings—feelings about feeling—which lend a cerebral detachedness to a narrative that one would ordinarily expect to be highly melodramatic. Circumventing this emotional economy allows Auster to stage a resistance to neoliberal logic, whereas McCarthy becomes complicit. This is a cogently argued and forceful start to the book, and Smith admirably blends insightful close readings with dexterous theoretical work as she analyzes the two novels. The chapter also ends with an important disclaimer for those readers coming to Smith's work looking for a blueprint for how literature might stage a practical resistance to neoliberal policy. Smith qualifies that impersonal artworks are not explicitly critical of neoliberalism; rather, the way they operate "complicates the fundamental expectations of neoliberalism by placing a focus on aspects of life that fall outside its structures" (59). That is, they disregard personal investment and return, they depersonalize and deindividualize, and they break their "contracts" and are thus not easily incorporated into a market model of reading and consumption. The question is never whether a work is pro- or antineoliberal but rather whether it is complicit in allowing neoliberal values to go unchallenged. Auster's work, therefore, is not antineoliberal; it is just *not* neoliberal. Whether this is good enough for Smith's readers, I suspect, will depend on their preexisting position vis-à-vis the relationship between politics and aesthetics.

Smith's chapters skip along at a brisk pace, and the snappy, mostly dejargoned prose is pleasurable to read—a slightly ironic observation given the object of Smith's critique. Such neatness is less palatable when it comes to the structure of the book, however. The "good book versus bad book" template that Smith adheres to for the duration of the study occasionally feels needlessly schematic, and her inflexibility leads to some stretched close readings and moments of tenuous critical insight. The second, arguably weakest, chapter of the book is a good example of this problem. Focusing on the literature of September 11, Smith arrays Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* against Laird Hunt's *The Exquisite*. Representing September 11 is

highly problematic, Smith suggests, because "doing so tends to either exceptionalize U.S. deaths or testify to the rupturing force of the event, either of which simply reinforces dominant political positions" (70). It is into this pitfall that Smith sees Foer falling, his narrative privileging the event to a degree that supports its neoliberal instrumentalization. In contrast, Hunt challenges this dominant representation precisely by *not* representing September 11 in his novel set in New York in September 2001. Added to this formal elision, Smith reads an exchange between two characters concerning the herring-fishing industry as a broken metaphor for the event—purposefully broken, that is, to signify the "missing element" in conventional representations of September 11. This is a plausible—if shaky—reading; but Smith stops here, and I found myself wanting a more thorough analysis of Hunt's novel in support of Smith's thesis. The rigid structure of "good" versus "bad" book relies on deep and nuanced critical analysis, and here and in other places in the book Smith sacrifices this depth, I suspect, in favor of maintaining the neatness of her structure.

Smith's unwillingness to apply pressure to the structure of her book also leads to some critical gaps in her account of affect. At the book's most fundamental level, *Affect and American Literature* is an argument against overt empathy. But Smith offers little concession to the productiveness of empathy or to other equally codifiable, but no less potentially valuable, affects. Where, for example, is the discussion of feminist authors such as Kathy Acker, whose own experimental literature is grounded in a palpable state of rage, or Chris Kraus, whose novel *I Love Dick* reflects the author's highly successful attempt to make the political personal? Likewise, while the sort of affects Smith champions have their defenders, the affective hypothesis she rejects has also itself been harnessed to a position of anti-neoliberalism in, for example, the work of critics such as Adam Kelly, whose focus on the group of authors associated with the New Sincerity movement demonstrates the resistant potential of novels that elicit a faith-based contractual agreement from their readers.[1] Smith's book would have perhaps benefited from sacrificing some of the neatness of her structure in favor of a somewhat looser framework more capable of accommodating these alternative ideas.

If the second chapter of Smith's work is arguably its weakest, *Affect and American Literature* more than makes up for early shortcomings in its later chapters. For the book's final case study, Smith looks to the genre of environmental writing. As with September 11 novels, Smith suggests that writers tackling the

topic of ecology face a challenge: a paradoxical state whereby, on the one hand, an attempt to place an ecosystem into a human narrative risks domesticating the wild's wildness and thus the very thing that freights it with resistant potential and, on the other, failing to assimilate the ecosystem at all leads to a capitulation to the impossibility of representing nonhuman, noncapitalist experience in literature. For Smith, Lydia Millet's novel *How the Dead Dream* fails to resolve this paradox, its inability to subordinate the human narrative at the center of the novel leading to a resolution in which the text seems to conclude that "story and ecological consciousness . . . are, at root, incompatible" (104). Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker*, on the other hand, successfully balances a human narrative with a nonhuman one, ceding certain perspectives to nonhuman actors and mirroring an alternative form for the novel in which linear progression is sublimated under an erratic and unpredictable ecology of effects and affects. Smith convincingly argues that in Powers's novel, as in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, which Smith briefly analyzes in her introduction to *Affect and American Literature*, a literary form modeled on the ecological offers real possibilities to "catalyz[e] unlikely changes in readers, and provok[e] physical responses with unpredictable results" (124). These effects are loosely conceived—perhaps understandably so given that Smith is trying to work with affects that are by their nature uncodifiable; but the story she tells here and throughout *Affect and American Literature* provides a convincing foundation for future study, and I do not doubt that it will prove an influential and widely cited text in years to come.

Yet Smith's work also brings up larger questions about how we, as critics, are to engage with neoliberalism. At the end of her third chapter, Smith places Bruno Latour in opposition to Fredric Jameson and his famous concept of cognitive mapping. Smith problematizes Jameson's vision of an art capable of cognitively mapping a reader's place in the global capitalist system by drawing attention to this theory's congruences with a neoliberal belief in an unfettered personal agency that is in actuality illusive. Complexity means any cognitive map will be necessarily imperfect, and so the illusion of agency that such mapping confers can, for Smith, only be damaging. To support her argument, Smith deploys Latour's critique of artworks that attempt to "trace" network connections. For Latour, any such endeavor will naturally be reductive and generative of a false sense of autonomy. What is far more radically potent, for both Smith and Latour, is for artworks to shatter these false illusions of autonomy on which so many of neoliberalism's

claims rest. This, for Smith, is the ultimate power of "impersonal feelings." These feelings resist mastery and control, frustrate attempts at self-location, and force a confrontation with our limitations as actors embedded within a complex system. Only from the perspective of recognition can complicity then be rejected and challenge mounted.

Here Smith's broader claims become problematic. Smith's vision of an individual agent's limited knowledge of the complex economic system sounds surprisingly reminiscent of Friedrich Hayek's knowledge problem, with which the economist justified his vision of a neoliberal free market. To submit, as Smith does, to this neoliberal-endorsed concept of the market as an unfathomably complex system seems, to me, somewhat defeatist. Likewise, to reject positive affect in favor of coldness and cerebrality feels at times like a form of surrender and prompts the question, might we not wish to claim back affect from neoliberalism, rather than allow it to be taken? In a discussion of the concept of self-care as a neoliberal conspiracy, Sara Ahmed notes that "neoliberalism sweeps up too much when all forms of self-care become symptoms of neoliberalism." In the same discussion, she remarks that "talking about personal feelings is not necessarily about deflecting attention from structures."[2] Ahmed's point is that allowing neoliberalism to infect something as potentially generative as self-care or affect, and to operate as if this is an intractable truth, is to ultimately become complicit in that project.

Smith's book, then, is vital reading for its inventive exploration of neoliberalism as a formal problem but even more so as an entry point into the problem of the very possibility of critique under neoliberalism. Smith's monograph begs the question, is the critical work of the future about recognition or reclamation? Further scholarly work will be necessary to answer this question, but that work will undoubtedly owe a great debt to the rigorous and engaging foundation that Smith has built with *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*.

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NOTES

1. Adam Kelly, "Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace," *Post45*, October 2014, http://post45.research.yale.edu/2014/10/dialectic-of-sincerity-lionel-trilling-and-david-foster-wallace/.
2. Sara Ahmed, quoted in Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 192.