French philosophy is of special interest to this study, the absence of an examination of Nancy's correspondence with Irigaray and, for that matter, Cixous, might be read as neglectful. On a more generous note, it would be appropriate to acknowledge that one of Derrida's gifts to his readers is a body of work that unquestionably sets thought in motion, while leaving plenty of room for work to come. Quite moving are Derrida's expressions of hesitation, and while they might be read as conventional, his humility comes across as genuine. In approaching the end of the book, in a proclamation of his sense of his own limitations, Derrida asks us to eschew what he has written: "I'm now sincerely asking that this book be forgotten or effaced, and I'm asking this as I wouldn't have done—with as much sincerity—for any of my other books. Wipe it all away..." (301). Derrida, the faithful and close reader, shares his writings only on the condition that his readers do not resort to the mistake of substitution; just as touching necessarily touches upon a limit that marks an inaccessible beyond, Nancy's works will always exceed the minds, no matter how great, that attempt to think them.

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The Cultural Politics of Emotion
SARA AHMED
New York: Routledge, 2004; 224 pages.

Sara Ahmed argues that emotions are social, cultural, and political rather than personal or primarily internal phenomena. According to Ahmed, the everyday understanding of emotions takes an inside-out approach: emotions are interior, subjective, and psychological. They are my emotions. I may exteriorize emotions by acting on them or expressing them. You may then respond to them, showing the movement of emotions to be from the inside out. A less common theory of emotions, held by certain sociologists and anthropologists, is that emotions are social and cultural practices. This theory takes an outside-in approach in studying phenomena such as group and crowd psychology. In the latter case a psychological model continues to be employed, wherein the crowd is psychologized as an individual who "has" emotions prior to any member of the crowd, but the direction in which emotion is thought to move has been reversed: the emotions of the group are internalized by me, moving from the outside in.

Ahmed's approach is closer to the outside-in theory but is also distinct from it in that she problematizes the distinction between an outside and
an inside that pre-exist emotions. On the contrary, she argues that it is emotions that create the inside/outside distinction and that define the other as outside and create a sense of interiority. Emotions do indeed move—the etymology of emotion (emovere) already implies this—but they do not simply move between us or into and out of us but circulate in unpredictable ways. Moreover, emotions also stick: emotions can fix us, attach to us or attach us, prevent us from moving or being moved. One of Ahmed’s questions is, What sticks? She is thus concerned to analyze the stickiness of emotions and not just their mobility. For instance, following Wendy Brown, Ahmed discusses feminists who are stuck by their attachments to feelings of victimization. In this case, self-pity has stuck to them and they are attached to this self-pity to such an extent that it becomes an apparently permanent, immobile identity, preventing them from “moving on” or from achieving political mobility.

One useful formulation of Ahmed’s position on the sociality of emotions occurs when she writes of the “importance of understanding emotions not as psychological dispositions, but as investments in social norms” (56). For instance, when we feel shame, this has to do with our investment in a norm of the ideal subject and our own failure to achieve this norm. Similarly, hate in the form of racism is a hatred of non-whites because they do not live up to a white ideal or norms of whiteness. Similar arguments are made in each chapter for each emotion.

Ahmed’s book is divided into chapters that consider specific emotions, and it is important to note that the emotions she chooses to discuss are primarily negative. The one apparent exception is the chapter on love, however in this chapter it is an almost entirely negative view of love that is described. The emotions Ahmed discusses in the first chapters are pain, hate, fear, disgust, shame, and love. In the final chapters, Ahmed discusses “queer feelings” and “feminist attachments,” but again these are primarily negative, such as queer melancholia, mourning, shame, feminist anger, and feminist attachment to anger and self-pity. The discussion of emotions is thus a dark one, even if Ahmed tacks on some discussion of wonder and hope, and a few begrudging sentences acknowledge that love can also be a good thing, even if she does not explore it as such.

It is also important to note that Ahmed’s main examples are self-evidently social or public phenomena and events rather than more apparently private experiences. For instance, Ahmed discusses pain and shame by way of the case of indigenous Australian children being stolen from their parents to be raised and assimilated by white Australians. Hate and fear are discussed in terms of racism, and disgust is explored in terms of post-9/11 claims that terrorism is “disgusting.” Because Ahmed’s primary objective in this book is to argue that emotions are
social and political, she might have made a more compelling case if her examples had not already been self-evidently political. If apparently private emotions can be shown to be political she would have a stronger case for the claim that all emotions are.

Some of the examples Ahmed uses are also not very convincing cases of the emotions in question. Often they are more obviously examples of the word for a particular emotion being used, rather than of that emotion actually being felt. Love, for instance, is discussed primarily through the example of white supremacist websites that claim that far from spreading hate (of non-whites), white supremacists are spreading love (for Aryans). We might not think this is the most convincing case of "love." Obviously Ahmed can present love darkly when Aryan self-love is the example chosen, and again this makes it easier to argue that love is political than, say, that of a boy’s love for his kitten.

The example Ahmed uses to discuss shame is similarly unconvincing. Her example is the manner in which certain white Australians use the word shame to describe how they feel about the "stolen generation" of indigenous children. However, Ahmed argues that these Australians simply want the prime minister to say "we are ashamed" so that they can feel proud of this confession and go back to being self-congratulatory. It is not clear that any genuine shame is felt in this example. It is also worth noting that this is an example of claiming to be ashamed of something that one has done rather than of what one is, and Ahmed moves between an understanding of shame as being about wrongdoing and the more standard definition of shame as having to do with wrongdoing.

Likewise, the example for disgust that Ahmed discusses seems to be an instance of the word being used rather than the emotion being felt. The example is the statement "That’s disgusting!" which was so often heard in response to the 9/11 attacks. This may not be a convincing example of visceral disgust (rather than moral disgust), as Ahmed wants it to be. Ahmed claims that because we are viscerally disgusted by terrorists we want to eject or expel (vomit) all Middle Easterners from Western countries (and from our neighborhoods, the subway train we are on, etc.). However, it seems that if one moves away from someone who appears to be Middle Eastern on a subway car, this is not because of a nauseated feeling of disgust, a visceral desire to vomit, but out of (paranoid) fear and perhaps hate as well. The case of emotion Ahmed discusses seems once more to be misdiagnosed. The discussion of terrorism would have fit into the fear or hate chapters better than the disgust chapter, even if claims of (moral) disgust are frequently made. It seems that the constant replaying of 9/11 video footage shows visceral
fascination rather than visceral repulsion or a desire to eject (vomit) terrorists from our society.

There are similar problems with other chapters, and often Ahmed seems to multiply examples in order to analyze them in ways that are obvious to anyone not on the far right wing, and in ways that do not further her argument about emotions, but are simply opportunities for Ahmed to respond to various statements that racist groups, George W. Bush, and the American media have made. One must therefore plod through counter-arguments that one is presumably well familiar with and convinced by (such as why Bush was wrong to say "you are either with us or against us") in order to get to the passages that further the argument of the book.

Finally, there is little that is original in Ahmed’s book, with the exception of the introduction and her chapter on love. In the latter chapter Ahmed problematizes the psychoanalytic distinction between narcissistic love and anaclitic love (love for another), showing that anaclitic love is in fact narcissistic and, more in passing, that the reverse is also true. While Ahmed collapses the narcissistic-anaclitic distinction with respect to erotic and maternal love, she soon moves on to the more overtly political kind of example with which her book is primarily concerned, critiquing what she calls multicultural love. Multicultural love, according to Ahmed, is problematic because it is conditional on ethnic minorities loving the nation in which they live in return, and this entails expectations that minorities should integrate into and share the dominant values of that nation. Although sympathetic to her critique, it is worth noting that Ahmed simply presupposes a notion of love as ideally unconditional (although other theorists of love have undermined this assumption), for the conditional status of multicultural love is presented as a self-evident flaw.

While this chapter on love, or anti-love, is interestingly different from the standard éloges to the emotion with which we are familiar, in the remaining chapters Ahmed merely assimilates theories of emotion from various authors, and her contribution is to apply these theories to her examples. Unfortunately, as noted, these examples are not always convincing and much of the discussion is beside the point. The argument about the sociality of emotion is itself not new. More original recent explorations of the topic include Teresa Brennan’s The Transmission of Affect and Daniel Gross’s The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle’s Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science, both of which also explore emotions as psychosocial phenomena.

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