

*The Affect Theory Reader*. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011. xi and 402 pp. \$24.95 paper (ISBN: 978-0-8223-4776-7).  
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In *The Affect Theory Reader*, editors Mellissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth curate an impressive collection of theoretically and methodologically innovative essays by a number of influential writers hailing from cultural studies, communication and media studies, gender and sexuality studies, sociology, psychology, human geography, and anthropology. The aim of the volume is to provoke interest, excitement, and even joy in the reader—not to flesh out a comprehensive or exhaustive theory of affect. The essays included here range from cultural commentary to empirically driven research on topics ranging from mental health to education. In their introduction Seigworth and Gregg ask what is perhaps the defining question of the volume: “Is [affect] a promise or a threat?” (10). The answers to this question are concerned with politics, economy, and ethics at various embodied scales. They are also colored by the affective stances, ranging from paranoid cynicism to hopeful optimism, that the authors in this volume take towards the virtual qualities of affect.

Part One of the volume, titled “Impingements,” includes three essays that address the effect of negative affects on people and practices. They also ask us to question the normative values we attribute to negative and positive affects. In “Happy Objects,” Sara Ahmed reflects on the moral economy of happiness. Through portraits of three

melancholic subjects: the feminist killjoy who points out sexism and racism, the unhappy queer who refuses to reproduce the happy family, and the unhappy migrant daughter torn between soccer and family, Ahmed shows how the values we attribute to good and bad feelings are assigned to certain bodies. By reflecting on these characters, Ahmed articulates an alternative ethics that does not equate justice with happiness, or require marginalized groups to silence their hurt feelings for the greater good of “getting along”.

Brian Massumi, in “the Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat,” shows how affect theory may be used to interpret the political climate and preemptive politics of threat that accompanied the recent “war on terror” and the “gut feelings” that were used to justify it. By analyzing statements and events related to the war on terror, Massumi outlines the performative consequences of threat. While the feeling of threat may be independent of reality, this feeling also has the power to create new threat filled realities. In “Writing Shame,” Elspeth Probyn gives a moving personal account of the bodily affects that accompany writing. Drawing on writers as various as Stephen King, Primo Levi, and Gilles Deleuze, Probyn articulates how writing shame must be conceived as both a bodily and an ethical practice. Writing out of shame causes us to think about how ideas affect our bodies, and how we get into the bodies of our readers. It might even cause us to blush, to sweat, to feel sick, as we begin to take responsibility for the implications of our writing.

The second part of the volume titled “Aesthetics and Everyday” contains three essays on everyday forms of politics, ethics, and aesthetics. In “Cruel Optimism,” Lauren Berlant discusses the affects and emotions that accompany various moments of American capitalism as they intersect with the lives of alienated suburbanites, urban hoarders, and

abused daughters in the works of John Ashbery, Charles Johnson, and Geoff Ryman respectively. The characters experience cruel optimism from their perch on the edge of life changing moments but remain paralyzed by their attachment to the promise/fantasy of a good-life in capitalism. Each of these stories illustrate that “shifts in affective atmosphere are not equal to changing the world” (116). Ben Highmore in his essay “Bitter After Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics,” elaborates on an approach to cultural inquiry as “a series of awkward materialities” that privileges the body (119). Through discussions of cross-class and cross-cultural encounters, Highmore shows how taste and social aesthetics can be ordered and reordered in ways that both reinforce and upset social inequality. This essay is exceptional for offering a glimmer of hope, and suggesting that affect might be central in pushing us toward developing more ethical tastes and habits. In “An Ethics of Everyday Infinities and Powers,” Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie use affect theory to analyze the relationship between a red-ship full of Afghani refugees, and the growth of conservative politics in Australia. Overall the authors do a great job pulling out some of the affective nuances of territory, however I think engaging with some of the geographic literature on this topic (e.g. Hyndman and Mountz 2007) would have improved this essay.

The essays in Part Three “Incorporeal/Inorganic” articulate the many ways that affect is not only embodied but created, shared, and managed between bodies. In “Modulating the excess of Affect: Morale in a State of ‘Total War’” Ben Anderson explains how the relationship between excess and affect is central to articulating an affective politics. By using examples drawn from World War II to articulate this relationship Anderson also challenges some of the claims that affective management is

something new or distinct to late capitalism. In “After Affect: Sympathy, Synchrony and Mimetic Communication” Anna Gibbs analyzes the “contagious” aspect of affect through the concept of mimesis. Mimicry is central to explaining how we come to feel and transmit certain affects, and is the basis of ethical dealings with others since it serves as “the cement of parent-child, peer, friendship, and love relations, and, under certain conditions, fleeting fellow-feeling with strangers” (202). In her essay “The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine, and Bodies” Patricia T. Clough discusses the emergence of a new biomediated body. For Clough affect is useful for elaborating a historically specific mode of organizing the material forces of the body, capital accumulation, and a shift from discipline to biopolitical power (208). Clough ends her essay by emphasizing the indeterminate qualities of affect and urging the reader to move beyond a retrospective analysis of political economy towards developing strategies for what is to be done.

The three essays in Part Four “Managing Affects” are broadly concerned with the management of affect at the scale of the body. In their empirically rich essay “Eff the Ineffable: Affect, Somatic Management, and Mental Health Service Users” Stephen D. Brown and Ian Tucker do an excellent job operationalizing affect theory to understand the lived, embodied, encounters of mental health service users. The authors use affect theory in a sensitive way that is appropriate to the particularities of understanding the somatic management of mental health service users. In her hilarious essay “On Friday Night Drinks: Workplace Affects in the Age of the Cubicle” Melissa Gregg gives an excellent rundown of snark and humor among the “creative class” on the TV show *Six Feet Under* and on the website [PassiveAggressiveNotes.com](http://PassiveAggressiveNotes.com). Data in the form of scenes

and notes derived from these sources is used to illustrate the manifold ways that the creative workplace requires new forms of emotional management. In her empirically driven essay “Desiring Recognition, Accumulating Affect” Megan Watkins discusses the various affects experienced by teachers and students to develop a theory of learning that attends to the role that habits, and accumulated affects play in producing the desire to learn.

Part Five “After Affect” contains an essay by Nigel Thrift, an interview with Lawrence Grossberg and a very personal and moving afterword by Kathleen Stewart. In his essay “Understanding the Material Practices of Glamour” Nigel Thrift uses the case of glamour to illustrate the ways that economies in general, and capitalism in particular functions by generating passion and interest. Linking affect, aesthetics, and ethics Thrift acknowledges the pervasiveness of ethical imperatives in consumption and the quirky possibilities in innovation. The interview with Lawrence Grossberg offers a history of affect theory, a personal history of cultural theory, and some valuable critiques and challenges for both. Grossberg challenges affect theory to move forward on the dual plains of politics and research. He suggests that there is still a lot more work that needs to be done to translate ontological concepts derived from Spinoza, Tompkins, Deleuze, and Guattari into empirical devices that can actually create some of the hopeful effects that affect promises. Grossberg also challenges cultural theorists to reflect on their critical, paranoid, capitalocentric stance – asking them to read J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006), re-think the economy, and create the conditions for hope in their research and writing.

*The Affect Theory Reader* is a useful contribution to the interdisciplinary project of affect theory, cultural studies, and social science more generally. The volume gathers

together a breadth of perspectives on affect that should be useful to curious social science students and cultural theory junkies alike.

References:

Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2006. *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hyndman, Jennifer and Allison Mountz. 2007. Refuge or Refusal: The Geography of Exclusion. In: D. Gregory, A. Pred. (Eds.), *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror and Political Violence*. New York: Routledge. pp. 77-92.