

invisible to the eye (and silent to the vocabulary) of the historian, so the one who forgives must be open to the possibility that the person she pardons is, to a certain extent, also *not* culpable, that the guilty party is also, in part, *not* guilty. (Klaus Barbie, like Adolf Eichmann, was a murderer; but he is also, like Eichmann, a person who isn't defined by that term alone.) To forgive—to write under a condition of amnesty—requires that the writer be open to the possibility that in making plain the event, she will misrepresent it, or get it wrong. However, this isn't the same as saying she will lie. It means that the writer must always be attentive to crises of memory, and that through these crises, we might see, in Breton's terms, writing's *other*.



The Cultural Politics of Emotion, Sara Ahmed (New York: Routledge, 2004. 224 pages).

Reviewed by Rachel C. Riedner, George Washington University

Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* provides a close reading of the everyday, lived emotions that are part of larger material and discursive structures of the nation-state. Specifically, she investigates the work that emotion does—and what it produces—in the current formation of the capitalist nation-state. Her inquiry traces how a cultural politics of emotion creates “others” by “working through signs and on bodies to materialise the surfaces and boundaries that are lived as worlds” (191). Ahmed's book is part of emerging work on emotion in cultural studies and rhetoric, fields that share an interest in how discourses and practices construct possibilities and limitations for subjects in the current conjuncture.

For Ahmed, emotion works on the surfaces of bodies, aligning bodies with communities or situating bodies outside of communi-

ties, thereby creating social relationships that designate the rhetorical terrain of the nation. Her book makes an important contribution to scholarship on affect in that she provides a close reading of emotion within the structures in which it is lived and felt. Drawing upon rhetorical theory, queer theory, feminist theory, Marxist cultural studies, and poststructuralist theories of language, Ahmed's analysis allows us to see how, in the current conjuncture, emotions endow bodies with value and align them, and align us, in relation to powerful ideologies.

Ahmed's reading of emotion emerges from a Derridean philosophy of language where words are repeated and the effect of their repetition detaches the use of the word from the contexts in which it has emerged ("Signature Event Context"). Between signification and context there is a disjuncture. The material circumstances in which words are produced is lost, yet the traces of these contexts are carried through the word. As a result of this disjuncture, emotions, as signs, appear natural, personal, and ahistorical. The concealed material and historical contexts of emotions and the repetition of words that carry traces of them, Ahmed argues, allow signs, such as the word "Paki," to accumulate cultural meaning and value. The effect of their repetition is to generate bodily affects that carry the emotional value that emerges from their specific contexts. These signs stick to bodies, shaping them, generating the material effects that they name. As they are repeated, emotions accumulate value, producing affect through reiteration (92). And, it is the repetition of words that carry traces of context that prevents them from acquiring new meaning and value (91–92).

For example, to name something disgusting, Ahmed explains, "generates a set of effects, which *then adhere as a disgusting object*" (93). The repetition of a sign of disgust creates value through repetition. Repetition of signs designates which bodies belong to the imagined community of the nation and which bodies are abject to it. To name something as disgusting, as lovable, as hateful, or as an object of fear, generates a series of social and emotional values that defines the inside and outside of the nation-state. For example, in her analysis of hate speech, Ahmed argues

that “hate is involved in the very negotiation of boundaries between selves and others, and between communities, where ‘others’ are brought into the sphere of my or our existence as a threat” (51).

Emotion has power to generate meanings through the histories and contexts that they invoke. Even as their context may be obscured, it is this context that sticks to bodies: “signs are repeated . . . precisely *not* because the signs themselves contain hate, but because they are effects of histories that have stayed open. Words like ‘Nigger’ and ‘Paki’ for example tend to stick; they hail the other precisely by bringing another into a history whereby such names assign the other with meaning in an economy of difference . . . ” (59).

Ahmed argues that emotions do things; they generate and create meaning in the world. Emotions, as material rhetoric, have affective power:

Some words stick because they become attached *through* particular affects. So, for example, someone will hurl racial insults . . . precisely because they are affective, although it is not always guaranteed that the other will be ‘impressed upon’ or hurt in a way that follows from the history of insults. It is the affective nature of hate speech that allows us to understand that whether such speech works or fails to work is not really the important question. Rather, the important question is: *What effects do such encounters have on the bodies of others who become transformed into objects of hate?* (60)

Her analysis demonstrates how language works as a form of power “in which emotions align some bodies with others, as well as stick different figures together, by the way they move us” (195).

Ahmed extends discussion of power into emotion, asking, “Why are relations of power so intractable and enduring, even in the face of collective forms of resistance?” (12). This extension of power into emotion allows us to attend to the politics of emotion, the emotions that function as forms of social power that are not recognized as power. In other words, we can think through what emotions do, how they name objects and others, how they generate social affects, and how these affects are repeated as a form of

power. For example, in her discussion of pain, Ahmed asks: how can the language of pain align this body with other bodies? If pain is an emotion that cannot be felt bodily by other bodies, an impossibility, how can pain become a “demand for collective politics, as a politics based not on the possibility that we might be reconciled, but on learning to live with the impossibility of reconciliation, or learning that we live with and beside each other, and yet we are not as one” (39)? Here, there is recognition that sympathy is inadequate and empathy is impossible; it is this recognition of impossibility that becomes the basis of collectivity.

Ahmed’s discussion of emotion can be expanded into a discussion of how different social meanings and values bring together those designated as different or abject to the nation. In the tradition of Marxist scholarship on class formation that begins with *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Ahmed investigates how emotions are the grounding of social movements and can become the space of political work. In a Marxist tradition, classes are not formed naturally but are constituted historically and contextually through relationships to labor and through culture. Language, traditions, local practices, symbolic representations, ideologies, and emotions as well as relationships to labor are the bases of the formation of class. Emotions persuade people to identify with a class at the local level and can therefore be sites of political work through which a revolutionary class is constituted. Ahmed’s work on emotion enables us to ask: how can emotions become the site of collective politics? Why is it so difficult to generate new cultural forms, emotions, feelings, and allegiances? Why do we fall back on the traditions, feelings, and symbols we have inherited? What happens in the micropolitics of personal feelings that may or may not present obstacles to class formation?

Read in a Marxist tradition, Ahmed’s discussion suggests that emotions can form social alliances, particularly for queer and feminist politics. Emotions, as rhetorics, produce affects in particular cultural and personal contexts. Emotions are persuasive in the material ways in which they produce our very “modes of life.” “How we feel about others,” Ahmed argues, “is what aligns us with a

collective”; indeed, it is “through how others impress upon us that the skin of the collective begins to take shape” (54). Her close reading of fear, for example, demonstrates how fear works to preserve the subject and the imagined community that the subject is aligned with by “sticking” particular memories or histories with specific objects or others. Persuasion, in this context, becomes the process through which emotions stick to bodies, the transformative and generative affects on bodies and identities in the context of the specific histories that emotions carry. Ahmed’s analysis allows us to think through the emotional obstacles to formation of collectives (class formation not in the narrow sense of *The Communist Manifesto* but rather as constituting a collective across difference). She also allows us to approach emotion as political activity, not simply an excess, or worse, an inconvenient distraction from the real work of political organization. Ahmed’s approach positions emotion as an active means of making the world, as a place to effect modes of intervention—the “available means,” to borrow from Aristotle’s discussion of rhetoric—and effect action within a specific conjunctural moment.

In terms of social movements, emotion allows us to pose the questions necessary for constructing alternative relationships that form the basis of those movements. We can ask: what gets people to sit in the streets together in defiant acts of civil disobedience? What connections, relationships, and feelings are forged in those moments that might constitute another world? The emotion *courage*, for example, doesn’t come from an abstract concept; rather, it emerges from relationships forged in affinity groups, in groups of friends, or among strangers who meet on the streets for the first time yet feel a shared bond. Ahmed’s book contributes to a growing discourse through which we can closely examine the affective webs that play critical roles in making or breaking political collectives and social movements.

Emotions are openings into the social and material world; they are, therefore, sites of political and cultural work and potential sites of class formation—the work of activism. In the context of an analysis of what emotions do, their ability to effect action, and the

political possibilities they create, we can study emotion in ways that pay attention to who is feeling, who feels on behalf of whom, who is listening (or not) to these feelings, and how. We can study how emotions are seen as personal and unpack their relationship to larger social contexts, hierarchies, emergent forms, and dominant characteristics—the work of theory. We can trace the internal logic of feelings, analyze their structure, and track their relationship to formal or systemic beliefs and intuitions. In so doing, we can develop critical literacies of emotion.

For example, in the context of a nationally based politics that limits the cultural expressions of grief, grief has a politics. In the context of the nation, queer lives cannot be grieved because they do not exist as lives; therefore, “queer lives have to be recognised as lives in order to be grieved” (156). Queer activism is thereby directed to a politics of grief that Ahmed argues must refigure the feelings and possibilities of grief itself. As Ahmed argues, “The challenge for queer politics becomes finding a different way of grieving, and responding to the grief of others” (159). As such, she allows us to ask: what might a queer politics of grief look and feel like?

Ahmed’s work contributes to cultural studies and rhetorical theory by elaborating a process through which we can approach everyday emotional practices as rich and complex sites interwoven in struggles for social change. Many would agree that critiques of capital and theoretical work that analyze changes in capital’s social formation are deeply important and necessary for social movements. However, if these critiques and theories remain abstract, that is, if they are not supplemented by the nitty-gritty dynamics of social movements and class formation, then we risk having a rich theory while remaining poor in our understanding of the political implications of our relationships-in-struggle. That is, we cannot ignore the political implications of emotion in the ways that Ahmed helps elucidate: its role in constituting both the social relations of capital and the alternative relationships necessary for sustainable political movements. Interpretation, therefore, must include discussion of the political applications and objectives of re-articulating

emotion. Moving beyond a critique of emotion, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* helps us think through emotions that can be expanded to include different affects as an active means of making the world.



Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J.M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison, Sam Durrant (Albany: State U of New York P, 2004. 142 pages).

Reviewed by Kimberly W. Segall, Seattle Pacific University

How do literary critics assess postcolonial literature, which often moves among narration of historical details, traumatic events, and postmodern techniques of stream of consciousness or dream-like segments? What theoretical schools have emerged to describe literature after colonization, after war, after the Holocaust, and are there connections among them? How do critics make sense of the obvious gap between violence and writing?

Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning is part of a recent trend to redefine the postcolonial in relation to trauma studies, which emphasizes how atrocity cannot be represented. This theoretical emphasis aligns well with Gayatri Spivak's polemical question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" What makes these theoretical trends a bit discordant, as Durrant himself argues, is that the "postcolonial" literary project is often defined as claiming identities and defining historical losses from the perspective of the colonized, a kind of redemptive project. Whereas trauma studies, emerging out of Holocaust studies, challenges any redeeming metanarratives (even to the extent that Adorno's famous adage that there should be no lyrical poetry after the Holocaust is taken as a warning against the way language has a mimetic or beautify-