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Sentimental Cultures, Political Fantasy, and Unfeeling

Paula Barba Guerrero

Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America. By Xine Yao. 2021. ix+291p. \$26.95. Duke University Press. ISBN 978-1-4780-2210-7.

Amidst a growing scholarly interest in cultural representations of emotion, Xine Yao's *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* offers a fresh perspective on the role of affect and its historical use. *Disaffected* persuasively investigates the implicit violence of white sentimentalism, insisting on its inextricable connection to dominant power structures. Yao posits affect as crisscrossed by ideology, delineating a distinct coloniality of emotion and exchange that results in proper feelings or expectable emotional reactions marked by one's gender, sexuality, and race. Yao's monograph critiques these impositions, turning instead to reappraise the concept of 'unfeeling' in nineteenth-century America. Yao addresses the detachment and disengagement from white sentimentalism displayed in works that imagine alternative structures to organize and apprehend emotion, such as Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola Leroy*, or Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *Doctor Zay*.

'Unfeeling', per the author's use, responds to an 'alienation from affect', the misrecognition of racialized, gendered, and queer expressions that results from their previous pathologization or illegibility.¹ It relates to disaffection, which, as Yao puts it, '*threatens a break from affectability*' (5-6, Yao's italics) and foists expectations of

¹ Xine Yao, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), p. 11. Later references to Yao given in text.

sympathy on marginalized individuals that invalidate their true feelings. To be disaffected, then, is to refuse sympathetic impositions, expressing negative emotion instead; or, in Yao's words, to convey 'that which cannot be recognized as feeling—the negation of feeling itself' (5-6). Over time, disaffection has solidified a legacy of reductive tropes that speak to the precarious positions of racialized, queer, and gendered groups in the US: 'Unsympathetic Blackness, queer frigidity, Black objective passionlessness, and Oriental inscrutability' (6) are the specific examples that *Disaffected* explores. These clichéd representations, Yao argues, also enable a break from white politics of emotion, opening up the possibility to challenge oppression by feeling differently. Yao reads disaffection as an entrance into alternative modes of feeling that participate in the 'affective economies' that Sara Ahmed compellingly identified to reposition the racialized subject and their emotions within social space.² For Yao, it is disaffection—rootlessness from pre-existent affect structures—that elicits social transformation. In its detachment from the white sentimental order, 'unfeeling' potentially assembles communities, creates attachment, mobilizes agency, and elicits care.

The study of literature and affect is not new. Since the 1990s, many publications have explored the imbricate relation between literature, culture, and emotion, especially with regards to its social and political implications. Nonetheless, the obliteration of negative emotions as well as the critical neglect of racialized and queer experiences in the field needs further exploration. This is precisely the task that Yao sets out to explore in their book, productively engaging with negative, absent, and misrecognized emotions to discern an 'antisocial turn' (10) in the field. This turn, Yao observes, enables and develops new affective paradigms in its refusal of normative structures of feeling which originate in the long nineteenth-century's

² Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', *Social Text*, 22.2 (2004), 117-139 (p. 119).

sentimental culture. Because sentimentality conditions access to racialized and queer feelings, in the text ‘antisocial negativity’, inexpression, and unfeeling register as alternative emotional signifiers, questioning the very structure that set them in place (174-175). Hence, *Disaffected* participates in the ‘antisocial turn’ in that it minutely addresses the role of ‘unfeeling’ in the works of Melville, Phelps, Harper, Martin R. Delany, and Sui Sin Far. In conversation with recent studies carried out by Ahmed, Sianne Ngai, and Lauren Berlant on the politics of negative emotions, Yao’s monograph articulates affective dissent, dissatisfaction, indifference, inexpression, and resistance as catalysts for political intervention and social recognition.

Yao argues that the western culture of sentimentality has consistently sustained oppressive structures from which queer and racialized authors must disengage themselves if they are to imagine otherwise. ‘Be disaffected’, the author proclaims (2), challenging the expectation of sympathy that lies at the core of the United States’ national and colonial projects. ‘Linger in misrecognized feeling’, the book implicitly asserts. In disaffection, Yao identifies a recourse for political dissidence that not only escapes ‘appropriate’ affective and somatic expression, but also articulates counter-cultural emotions that condemn the supremacy of sympathy upon which visions of racialized humanity are contingent (7, 114). Drawing on Berlant, Yao reads sentimental sympathy as a cruel imposition: its colonial echoes and intimacies embody a promise of recognition that, in truth, only enables its opposite.³ Sympathy bolsters conditional, liberal recognition, which is based on the exclusion and dispossession of racialized and queer feelings. It is not simply that the nation-state administers belonging in the form of assimilation, through fantasies of inclusion or ‘good life’ that never fully materialize, but that its political fantasies entail emotional demands that hinder action, deter introspection, and regulate the

³ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

cultural representations of the self.⁴ To this end, the promise of inclusion inevitably reinscribes historical forms of structural violence.

In consequence, sentimental sympathy outlines emotion from the universalist lens of a ‘racial global hegemony’, which defined nineteenth-century cultural and political rationalities, as well as the scientific and legal apparatuses of the time.⁵ In Yao’s account, sentimentality rests on racial and gendered hegemonies that fortify visions of universal feeling and reproduce historical abuse. In line with Arlie Hochschild’s theories on emotional labour and inappropriate feelings, Yao identifies a connection between the alleged universality of emotion, political power, and social performance.⁶ The author delves into the erasure of racialized and queer emotions as a symptom of affectability and its pre-set racial signifiers, which prefigure Blackness as mostly inhuman, claiming antisociality, lack of passion, or ‘excessive’ anger to justify oppression. Yao examines the ways in which sentimental discourse was galvanized in nineteenth-century American culture, pinpointing a history of exclusion and abject feelings that can only be reclaimed after a resignification of emotion and its politics. Hence, only by refusing the sympathy characteristic of sentimentalism can ‘the unfeeling subject’ (13) reassert their right to feel otherwise or vindicate those obliterated histories and emotions ‘that fall outside or are not legible using dominant regimes of expression’ (11).

Disaffected offers the reader what it promises, a compelling exploration of ‘pathologized models of affective disobedience and agency that defy and rework scientific and legal discourses naturalized by the culture of sentiment’ (8). It carefully disseminates disaffection, as well as its cultural and political contexts, and identifies

⁴ Berlant, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁶ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 75-103. Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Emotion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

existing connections between one's emotional, political, social, and cultural lives. Although necessarily limited in scope, *Disaffected* serves as a primer for anyone interested in understanding emotional cultures and American sentimentalism from the nineteenth century to present. The monograph is an outstanding academic contribution offering an original and much needed take on the power of negative emotions and the affective significance of detachment. It provides a valuable resource on the analysis of counter-sentimental cultures, and an inspiring call for solidarity, affective accountability, and coalition. In seeking to give shape to the emotional architecture governing social life in nineteenth-century America, Yao has succeeded in revealing the crucial role of affect in creating and destroying community and political institutions. *Disaffected* begins to dismantle 'the master's house' by demonstrating that sentimentalism is contrived by biopolitical power, rather than simply emotion.⁷ In their monograph, Yao has opened room for further discussion and exploration of disaffected feeling in alternative contexts and texts.

The book is divided into five parts and a coda, each addressing a different mode of 'unfeeling'. The opening chapter, entitled 'The Babo Problem: White Sentimentalism and Unsympathetic Blackness in Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*', draws attention to the urgent need to decolonize affect studies, exploring refusal through the figure of Babo, one of Melville's Black characters in *Benito Cereno* (1855), and not Bartleby, Melville's best known example of allegedly universal resistance and transgression. Yao reads the Senegalese slave's ambiguously 'unsympathetic Blackness' (29, 31) in tandem with Captain Delano's sentimental worldview, concluding that the novel's sentimental style underpins nineteenth-century scientific and legal discourses on race. In illustrating the relation between sentimentality and racism, Yao reinterprets the unsympathetic Black

⁷ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 110-114.

character as an agent of resistance, also underscoring affect studies' racial bias. Yao's analysis compellingly foregrounds refusal to comply with the demands of white sentimentality as the ability to challenge—if not momentarily reverse—the sentimental order.

Extending the notion of unsympathetic Blackness, the second chapter, 'Feeling Otherwise: Martin R. Delany, Black-Indigenous Counterintimacies, and the Possibility of a New World', turns to Delany's *Blake, or the Huts of America* (1861) to ponder the possibility of solidarity and kinship among disaffected communities. It opens with an exploration of the transformative potential of unsympathetic Blackness and then examines possible affiliative attachments between Black and Indigenous communities based on mutual respect, shared decolonial worldviews, and enforced sentimental dispossession. United in their havoc, Black and Indigenous communities find common ground through their expressions of unfeeling towards whiteness, devising alternative world systems based on their own emancipatory desires. Interestingly, as Yao suggests, Delany's characters embrace 'bad feelings'—which are often obscured by public expressions of joy—to speak out against racism and legal injustice, refusing sympathy as a critical step towards freedom.⁸

Yao's third chapter, 'The Queer Frigidity of Professionalism: White Women Doctors, the Struggle for Rights, and the Marriage Plot', considers the fight of white women doctors for rights and self-definition against the backdrop of unchanged hegemonies of power. It specifically addresses the sexual and racial politics of emotion in works set in the medical world, primarily in Phelps' *Doctor Zay* (1882). Even as these women doctors were considered representative of the New Woman paradigm, Yao explains that their pursuit of a professional career was often perceived as an undoing of their gender, which complicated their social positioning particularly

⁸ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 65.

within the marriage plot. For Yao, these women become embodiments of ‘queer unwomanliness’ and medical institutions because of their ‘professional frigidity’. That state of cold detachment grants them the possibility to disrupt sentimental expectations about their lives. Yet, it also serves to pathologize and control their emotions, as these do not comply with the demands of sentimental heteronormativity. As such, drawing from Ahmed’s correlation between killjoys and painkillers, Yao interprets frigidity in captivating relation with the rise of anaesthesia, assessing the need to numb or manage the anxieties and conflicts related to marriage or family in order to assume semi-authoritative positions in society (111-12).⁹ The resultant agency therefore points more to a reproduction of patriarchal codes than to an effective detachment from them.

This discussion is expanded in the fourth chapter, ‘Objective Passionlessness: Black Women Doctors and Dispassionate Strategies for Uplifting Love’, which returns to the initial discussion on Blackness to assess the role of race within heteronormative gender regimes. Through the analyses of Watkins Harper’s *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892) and the accounts of the first Black women doctors, Yao addresses the historical exploitation of Black female bodies together with the ascent of Black women doctors in the U.S. For Yao, Harper suggests a correlation between the professional detachment that is expected of doctors and the protagonist’s unfeeling towards the white love interest in the novel, indicating a refusal to comply with white sentimentality that has political and historical undertones for both groups. Yao returns to discussions on transformative dissidence—reminiscent of Audre Lorde’s thesis on anger and its political uses—and

⁹ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

convincingly reads ‘passionlessness’ as a political tactic of conscious attachment and detachment to refute stereotypes of Black women’s affectability.¹⁰

The fifth and final chapter, ‘Oriental Inscrutability: Sui Sin Far, Chinese Faces, and the Modern Apparatuses of U.S. Immigration’, comes full circle, condensing the book’s main premise on the colonality of feeling. It evinces how the Chinese conception of ‘face’ reveals dissident emotional and somatic expressions that contest and decentre Western universality in Far’s work (183-85). Yao explains that universalist impositions, solidified in this case in the gendered trope of ‘oriental inscrutability’, reveal a crisis of cultural translation that leads to neocolonial fetishization and vilification of Chinese migrants. By shifting the gaze, however, Yao reorients inexpression beyond stigma. The inexpressive face develops into a ‘signifying zone of contact’ (180) wherein defiance to geopolitical hierarchies is exerted. Indeed, as Donald Pease suggests, in the U.S. certain expressions of emotion and agency are repeatedly denied under a national logic of non-belonging.¹¹ However, by re-interpellating the unfeeling subject, Yao discredits sentimental universality, calling for social recognition and counter-intimate solidarity. The book ends with a genuine reappraisal of disaffection as a cornerstone for decentring the national narrative. ‘Acknowledge, rather than disavow, your negative feelings about unsympathetic refusals’ (210), enjoins Yao in a spellbinding appeal for resistance that finds roots in a long nineteenth century still echoed in the anxieties of our times.

On the whole, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* is an important addition to the growing field of affect studies and an essential read for those interested in American literature and culture,

¹⁰ Lorde, ‘Uses of Anger: Woman Responding to Racism’, in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press 1984), pp. 124-133.

¹¹ Donald E Pease, ‘National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives’, in *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives*, ed. by Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 1–13 (p. 11).

critical race theory, gender and queer studies, and the history of emotions. It invites a decolonial reading of affect through nineteenth-century American counter-sentimental literature that, in its aim to ‘introduce a way of reframing the perennial Americanist fixation with oscillating between the structural complicity of sentimentalism or the feminist recuperation of its political and cultural work’ (8), persuasively proves that for as much as emotions are always political, there is only subversion in their disruptive negation of colonial universality.

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