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Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. x + 422 pp. ISBN 0674015363.

Reviewed by Eu Jin Chua, The London Consortium, University of London

Sianne Ngai admits at the outset of *Ugly Feelings* that her book may be nothing more than a "bestiary of affects," but as far as bestiaries go, this is a fine and fascinating one that contributes to a burgeoning scholarly literature in what may be called the "affective turn" in the humanities. (Other titles that come to mind include Charles Altieri's *The Particulars of Rapture*, Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual*.) But if the genus here is affect and emotion, then the particular sub-species of affect in which Ngai's book is interested is that of the minor negative emotions such as envy, irritation, paranoia, or anxiety (each of which gets a chapter to itself). There is even a hybrid beast here called "stuplimity"—Ngai's portmanteau coinage to connote that particularly postmodern compound of numb stupefaction and expansive sublimity.

Her corraling of such affects into a bestiary is by no means trivial, for Ngai suggests that these mean and ignoble affects are indexes of social conditions of powerlessness and frustration: "obstructed agency" is the term she uses. In other words, there are many things to feel bad about when one lives amid—and through—the injustices, inequalities, and alienating effects of late capitalism, and it would do well for us to pay attention to these ugly feelings as they appear in cultural texts and artworks—and in ourselves—in order to diagnose such conditions. (In fact, in Ngai's picture of things, these cultural texts and artworks are not simply expressing our sense of ineffectuality and impotence, but also *art's* own sense of ineffectuality and impotence in a utilitarian age in which the domain of the aesthetic is marginalized as useless and irrelevant.) This is a unique and powerful premise for a book. Indeed, the implication is that "strong" emotions such as anger and fear may have less to tell us about present conditions than the weak ones that Ngai analyses in her book, for the unlocalizability and diffuseness of such emotions perhaps correspond to structures and institutions and practices that operate diffusely and without discernible manifestation—structures that may indeed be constituted out of assemblages of ugly feelings directed toward oppressive ends. "[D]ysphoric affects," notes Ngai, "often seem to be the psychic fuel on which capitalist society runs" (3). Sources of cognate ideas which Ngai invokes include Paolo Virno's analysis of how disaffected emotions become themselves "the very lubricants of the economic system which they originally came into being to oppose" (4)—for example when insecurity and anxiety in the workplace foment competitiveness and hence enhance productivity—and Herbert Marcuse's delineation of tolerance as a disposition that may be repressive if it means weak passivity, ineffectuality, and an even-keeled acceptance of received policies (340-42). (This last idea of Marcuse's is an example of the more standard view that the *strong* emotions of negative critique—anger and revulsion at injustice, for instance—constitute more powerful forms of resistance, which presents a problem for Ngai's argument that weak ones may do so as well, a problem that she never quite resolves. More on this below.)

Ngai's approach yields many insights that ring true, often in relation to issues of race and gender. For example, she points out that envy, a paradigmatic ugly feeling, can be an *actual* recognition of social and economic inequalities—and yet our culture's tendency is to stereotypically dismiss envy as a merely "feminine" affect and hence, in this prejudicial logic, merely trivial. Or else

envy is dismissed as a purely subjective affect: "it's all in your head" or "you're the one with the problem." This is an important point, for ugly feelings, according to Ngai, operate at the border between internal feeling and objective reality, between affective consciousness and material political conditions. This is precisely where their diagnostic power lies, but this power that derives from their liminality can be tamped down when, as in the case of envy, they are too reductively converted from one side to the other, from actual "polemical engagement[s] with the *objective* world into [reflections] of a *subjective* characteristic" (21). Irritation, the subject of another chapter, is similarly liminal, being an affect that applies equally to "psychic life *and* life at the level of the body"; it connotes the epidermal and the psychosomatic. Ngai does a reading of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*—a novel featuring a protagonist prone to irascibility—to argue that, in Larsen's story at least, irritation functions as an affective index to the chafing violence of an essentialist logic that insists that the colored person should exhibit her ostensibly deep-seated racial characteristics at the level of her skin. In other words, Ngai reads the irritation, both physical and psychic, of Helga, *Quicksand*'s heroine, as quasi-hysterical—her irritation is a symptomatic reaction to the impossible demands of the logics of racism. In the novel, according to Ngai, Helga tends to be only half-aware of the racist imperative to conform to particular essentialist stereotypes; nonetheless, her body registers the effects of this imperative as *physical* irritation. Conversely, *physical* acts of racist violence upon non-white bodies that Helga witnesses but refuses to consciously register—such as a white man defiling a receptacle of drinking water set aside for the black occupants of a segregated train—are converted into a diffuse and unlocalizable psychological irritation.

In a chapter titled "Animatedness," Ngai points out that the concept of emotionality itself can be racist when persons of color are stereotyped as excessively effusive or lively or zesty—this attribution of surplus liveliness to the raced subject supposedly being a sign of his or her closer and more authentic contact with the realm of nature and the body. Ngai analyzes instances of, and resistances to, this trope in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the animated TV show *The PJs*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, all of which contain depictions of the earnest, over-expressive, over-emotional black body, the excessive liveliness of which functions as a spectacle for white audiences. Even more notably, Ngai points out a paradoxical logic in which this emotional effusiveness of non-white bodies is attributed to *both* their ostensible proximity to an unfettered state of Rousseauesque nature, *and* to this "body's utter subjection to power ... its vulnerability to external manipulation and control" (101). That is, this body cannot help but express what comes naturally, as when Uncle Tom breaks out into his effusive sermons, yet, at the same time this natural expressiveness is also the effect of a "ventriloquism": Uncle Tom cannot control the way in which Scripture seems to speak *through* him, to animate his body like a puppet, thus emblemizing the puppet-like powerlessness of persons of color who frequently are heteronomously "animated" or ventriloquized via particular preconceptions, stereotypes, voices from the "outside." Excessive emotionality here becomes the paradoxical index of a very real subjugation, the sign of a racial logic in which rational (emotionless) autonomy is ascribed only to white male subjects.

All the chapters and indeed the book as a whole are virtuoso performances in which Ngai manages to pull together all manner of cultural references and theoretical apparatuses into the service of her rich and complex arguments. Ngai demonstrates a great deal of skill in triangulating the most astonishingly disparate texts in support of her theses: the ambitious scope

of the book is dauntingly rich and wide. The arc of the chapter on anxiety, for example, moves from Hitchcock's *Vertigo* through Heidegger's *Being and Time* to Herman Melville's *Pierre*, all the while making illuminating links between these unlikely bedfellows. In all three of these texts, notes Ngai, "the projective configuration [that] anxiety assumes becomes inextricably bound up with the trajectory of a male analyst's quest for understanding or interpretation" (215). That is, according to Ngai, all three texts show how anxiety is the characteristic affect of a certain kind of male intellectual who desires to shore up his masculine agency. To put it in the briefest terms, this is because anxiety, as in psychoanalytic delineations, has to do with the projection outward of the repressed internal psychic irrationality at the heart of the knowledge-seeker's subjectivity that would otherwise contaminate the rational objectivity of the knowledge sought.

Ngai is in fact particularly good on Melville, whose literary texts are touchstones for a number of the book's arguments. As in her treatment of *Pierre* in the chapter on anxiety, she discusses *The Confidence Man* in a chapter on "tone," and elsewhere deploys *Moby Dick* and "Benito Cereno" as examples. And *Bartleby the Scrivener*, the literary character who is a locus for many of the ugly feelings that permeate the Melville short story bearing his name, functions as a kind of mascot for Ngai's book, given that the character's weak, barely expressed emotions have an ambivalence that crystallizes many of the problematics of Ngai's arguments: Can these weak emotions work as forces of dissent and resistance in the same way that *Bartleby's* passivity works as a powerful trigger for unexpected effects in the bureaucratized world depicted in Melville's fiction? Or are these emotions merely ineffectual—for, after all, *Bartleby* dies at the end of the story?

One problem that couldn't be avoided is that the book's premise necessarily forces Ngai to foreclose on the more unpredictable a-significatory aspects of affect. Her effort to argue that ugly feelings can be diagnostic of material conditions and social inequalities (a very convincing argument) means that Ngai has to instrumentalize the register of the affective a bit too much. The book tends too far, I think, toward a conception of affect as a form of bodily knowledge that is concrete and already meaningful, rather than paying attention to affect's unpredictable autonomy. This is not really a criticism as such, for, in an explicit disclaimer, Ngai says that her book will not engage with the distinction between "affect" (unstructured and a-significatory states of the body) and "emotion" (affect already processed into structured meaning)—a distinction which critics like Brian Massumi and Lawrence Grossberg are careful to make. It is of course Ngai's prerogative to set the parameters of her study by focusing on "emotion" in this latter sense rather than "affect" as such, but it is disappointing nonetheless when, for example, Spinoza is invoked a single time on page 2 and then never heard from again. Spinoza's *affectio* and *affectus* might have provided valuable contributions, reorientations, and counterpoints to the bases of her arguments. For example, her implicit critique of a Cartesian theory of affects in which affect is *either* psychologically inside the mind *or* materially outside the body, or her idea that negative affects ("sad" affects, in Spinozist terminology) can be effective forms of negative critique and political agency.

This last idea is another source of discomfort, i.e. that Ngai attempts to go beyond the diagnostic uses of ugly feelings in order to argue that such emotions can also be sources for critical resistance. In other words, Ngai wants to conflate the two meanings of "negative" in "negative emotions"; she wants to move from "negative" meaning wretched or undesirable, to "negative"

meaning oppositional or antagonistic (as in "negative critique"). The aim is to argue that ostensibly undesirable emotions ("negative emotions" in the first sense) are actually desirable because they are potentially oppositional ("negative emotions" in the second sense). This move is a brave and much-appreciated one—after all, the book has to try to take its premise as far as it will go—but Ngai has varying degrees of success with it. That is, it is counterintuitive from the start to argue that affects which sap political agency or which index the sapping of political agency can themselves be a source for political agency. The limits of this argument can be seen particularly in the chapter in which Ngai tries to salvage envy as a potentially productive affect for sustaining political—especially feminist—collectivities. Here, Ngai is actually rehearsing the well-taken point that political collectivities must constitute and reconstitute themselves from within in an always provisional fashion rather than modeling themselves against an exemplary ideal. Such an aspiration is always doomed to failure, as when collectivities fall apart over the question of who counts as a "real feminist" or a "real socialist," or indeed a "real conservative." So no collectivity should have such a strict party line as to discount room for internal antagonism—which is to say that a certain amount of negative emotion among its members is required.

But why elect envy as the negative emotion necessary for sustaining collectivities? Surely there are other affective dispositions that would work better to avoid the proprietariness to which political coalitions often succumb? Ngai herself is quite aware of the difficulty here, and, in the end, even seems to concede that envy doesn't quite do for her argument what she wants it to. Feminist "compoundedness," she eventually says—at least as depicted in the film she analyzes, *Single White Female*—can be actively strengthened through "disidentificatory and anti-proprietary practices, *if not directly* by the ugly feeling [i.e. envy] that inspires them" (168; emphasis added). Another way of putting it is that the book is too eager to conflate emotions that are negative in the first sense ("negative" meaning undesirable or wretched or "bad" or "sour"), emotions that are negative in the second sense ("negative" meaning oppositional or antagonistic), and emotions that are just weak (low in power and amplitude). I agree that the presence of weak emotions can be an index of actual material inequities, of powerlessness (tautologically, an emotion without much power is a sign of powerlessness). I also agree that the presence of emotions that are negative in the first sense (wretched, sour) can function the same way. And, by definition, negative emotions in the second sense (oppositional, antagonistic) have a great deal of critical purchase. But I'm not sure that one can collapse all three types of emotions together. Emotions that are weak and wretched may indeed have diagnostic power, but not necessarily critical power—and it's a tough job to argue that they do. Compare Paolo Virno's more convincing choice (which Ngai cites) of the affect of "eagerness" that capitalist opportunism encourages. Virno argues that an "eager" disposition is ambivalent and can be directed toward more liberatory ends, since to be eager is also to realize that "our relation with the world tends to articulate itself primarily through possibilities, opportunities, and chances, instead of according to linear and univocal directions"—and hence eagerness, "even if it nourishes opportunism, does not necessarily result in it." This example works precisely because eagerness is a minor affect, but *not* a negative one—rather it has, as Virno writes, a "neutral kernel," and hence can simultaneously diagnose oppressive practices as well as contain within itself the possibility of resisting them (4; quoting Virno). Indeed, "eagerness" works as an example of an ambivalent affect precisely because it is an *affect*, with a great degree of unpredictable autonomy, rather than an *emotion* that has already been given negative or positive meaning. This is all to say that Ngai's

argument about the critical potential of weak negative emotions stumbles precisely at those points where she is most faithful to this premise, as with the chapter on envy, a paradigmatic weak and negative emotion. I think that the burden of proof for this premise simply presents too rocky an uphill climb to be surmounted. My reservations undoubtedly have to do, of course, with my own theoretical predilections—I concur with Spinoza and Nietzsche in thinking that "sad passions" or *ressentiment*-type emotions can't be effective sources of progressive, non-reactionary political action or indeed effective resources for living. Most of the time, undesirable emotions are just that—undesirable, i.e. negative in the first sense of the term.

More successful than "envy" is the chapter on stuplimity—one of the strongest and most fascinating parts of the book—which is a defense of the critical efficacy of modernist techniques of repetition and senselessness, especially when these techniques are taken to such a deliberate extreme that they generate vast emotions of tedium and numbness. Samuel Beckett and Gertrude Stein are the most familiar examples given here, but poets such as Dan Farrell and Kenneth Goldsmith, and artists such as On Kawara and Ann Hamilton, also get a look in. Kawara's *One Million Years (Past)* (1970), to take one example, is a by now classic work of conceptual art consisting of ten hardbound volumes containing a chronological list in Arabic numerals of all one million years from 998031 B.C. to 1969 A.D. The work is also available as a recording in which the epic list is read out loud by performers, and has even been performed live over the course of several days. The "stuplimity" in such modernist and postmodern works—their simultaneous sublime and stupefying qualities—leads to an "open feeling" (Stein's term), a "state of receptiveness" that "depends on slowing down other emotional reactions, much the way states of extreme excitation or enervation do" (284). And, Ngai continues, "while stuplimity offers no transcendence, it does provide small subjects with what Stein calls "a little resistance" in their confrontations with larger systems" (294).

This is a fascinating and largely convincing reading of the power of these texts as aesthetic forms of resistance to oppressive systems. But the argument works here because stuplimity is a feeling that functions critically not so much through its negativity but rather through its deflatedness. In other words, stuplimity is weak but not strictly negative. Ngai's point is that certain modernist aesthetic techniques are acts of resistance because of their blind and weak emulation or affirmation of sublime institutional structures which one would otherwise be hard-pressed to defy. The painstaking transcription of one million years in Kawara's work, for example, constitutes a critique of the "administered society" precisely because it takes bureaucracy to its pedantic extreme, deliberately "stag[ing] its own failure" (294). This strategy of emulation is not exactly the same as oppositional negativity, though it is indeed "weak": it has more to do with repeated gestures of obedience or affirmation to the point of exhaustion, to the point of mechanical failure. "What might happen to a machine when the exaggeratedly obedient cog within it, which continuing to maintain its function, goes limp" (295)? As in *Bartleby the Scrivener*, this is a series of accumulated yeses that operate, effectively, as one big "no." Indeed, the argument here seems to be one about the power of cumulateness—weak actions of resigned affirmation in themselves don't function oppositionally, but they will if you repeat them often enough. Strong resistance emerges out of a weak acquiescence taken to a deliberate, metronomic, parodic extreme. In this sense, stuplimity isn't even really weak in the strictest sense—it is rather the strong, global product of many weak, local actions that accumulate progressively. Stuplimity, as the reference to the sublime suggests, is a feeling of grandeur and vastness, and its efficacy,

one might say, has to do with this sense of overwhelming vastness, not with puniness or weakness or wretchedness. It can only function once it reaches, through a cumulative process, a critical threshold of size and strength and power. A simple weak or wretched affirmation on its own can do nothing. In this sense, the best thing about the chapter on stuplimity is that it seems to be on the verge of proposing a way of rethinking negative critique—in certain circumstances, it would seem, effective resistance may have less to do with oppositional negation than with limp affirmations progressively building up into a kind of sublime, powerful agency. (And another reason that the chapter finally works is that stuplimity is more explicitly a *tactics* rather than merely an affective by-product of an intolerable, oppressive situation—I can see how one might call for the promotion of a tactics of stuplimity, but less how one might promote envy or paranoia or irritation as an oppositional tactics.)

It is telling of the sharpness of Ngai's analyses that, though she never resolves the difficulty that she sets herself in attempting to recuperate the minor negative emotions for politics, she does, at the end of the book, pinpoint the problem with penetrating clarity, thus opening it up for further dissection. The book concludes with a chapter on disgust—a negative but by no means weak emotion that puts into relief the stumbling blocks that the previous chapters had to encounter—and in the final sentences, Ngai writes:

disgust does not so much solve the dilemma of social powerlessness as diagnose it powerfully. But while all of the negative affects we have discussed call attention to this problem, the poetics of disgust seems to have drawn us closer to the domain of political theory, perhaps even of political commitment, than the others. In its intense and unambivalent negativity, disgust thus seems to represent an outer limit or threshold of what I have called ugly feelings, preparing us for more instrumental or politically efficacious emotions. It therefore brings us to the edge of this project on the aesthetics of minor affects, marking the furthest it can go. (353-54)

As an analysis of how weak negative emotions may serve as diagnostic tools, *Ugly Feelings* goes very far indeed. It is itself a powerful and illuminating diagnostic tool. As an analysis of how such emotions may serve as modes of critical resistance, Ngai's "bestiary" of affects goes as far as it can go—and it makes me want to see Ngai compile another (a sequel?) in which she turns her attention to other, less intractable, perhaps more politically promising creatures.