



Ugly Feelings

By Sianne Ngai

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Envy, irritation, paranoia--in contrast to powerful and dynamic negative emotions like anger, these non-cathartic states of feeling are associated with situations in which action is blocked or suspended. In her examination of the cultural forms to which these affects give rise, Sianne Ngai suggests that these minor and more politically ambiguous feelings become all the more suited for diagnosing the character of late modernity.

Along with her inquiry into the aesthetics of unprestigious negative affects such as irritation, envy, and disgust, Ngai examines a racialized affect called "animatedness," and a paradoxical synthesis of shock and boredom called "stuplimity." She explores the politically equivocal work of these affective concepts in the cultural contexts where they seem most at stake, from academic feminist debates to the Harlem Renaissance, from late-twentieth-century American poetry to Hollywood film and network television. Through readings of Herman Melville, Nella Larsen, Sigmund Freud, Alfred Hitchcock, Gertrude Stein, Ralph Ellison, John Yau, and Bruce Andrews, among others, Ngai shows how art turns to ugly feelings as a site for interrogating its own suspended agency in the affirmative culture of a market society, where art is tolerated as essentially unthreatening.

Ngai mobilizes the aesthetics of ugly feelings to investigate not only ideological and representational dilemmas in literature--with a particular focus on those inflected by gender and race--but also blind spots in contemporary literary and cultural criticism. Her work maps a major intersection of literary studies, media and cultural studies, feminist studies, and aesthetic theory.

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Editorial Review

Review

The book's worth lies in its ambition, even its overreach. This is no cultural-studies grab-bag: Ms. Ngai really is breaking new ground.

--Benjamin Lytal (*New York Sun* 2005-02-17)

Ugly Feelings tries to be many things in every chapter: a rhetorical reading of a set of 'marginal' avant-garde or popular texts, a deconstructive critique of 'blind spots and antimonies' in the way contemporary theory has approached a given problematic, and an articulation of a 'cultural predicament,' all through an exemplification of an affective quality that most commentators usually shy away from because of its 'minor' tone and 'negative' force. This is a most ambitious agenda--and one that Ngai succeeds admirably in carrying out. The analyses are beautifully crafted, complex without being convoluted, each judiciously drawing upon an appropriate subset of an impressive range of theoretical resources and cultural references. Although the book presents itself primarily as a contribution to literary and media studies, its impact will extend much further. In addition to developing highly original readings of its chosen texts, it reexamines pivotal political-cultural issues, concerned in particular with representations of gender and race, through a new revitalizing affective lens. In the uniqueness of the approach, familiar debates take on new life. The sustained engagement with affect and emotion, coupled with deconstructive technique, gives the book a certain unity across the differences in subject matter and the cultural-theoretical issues tackled by each chapter.

--Brian Massumi, author of *Parables for the Virtual*

One of the most intellectually dazzling and wide-ranging critical studies to appear in years. This is, in fact, far more than a book about emotions. Taken chapter by chapter, it is a series of commanding readings of notoriously "unfriendly" texts...At its broadest, [it] entails a rejection of Jameson's influential notion of "the 'waning' of negative affect" in late modernity or postmodernity, replaced by a glossily untroubled surface. Instead, Ngai asserts, we should recognize the consistent pockmarking of that surface by ugly feelings...Where other readings tend to see the ugly feelings in books...as a problem to get past--an indication, say, of "repression"--Ngai, characteristically, treats them in productive terms, as generative of the text's overall "tone"...To the extent there is a critical capacity to the ugly feelings she describes, then, it would seem to lie in their ability to make emotional quagmires from which we might rather turn away matter deeply to us. On an intellectual level, then, this is precisely the feat performed by Ngai's wonderful book.

--Jennifer L. Fleissner (*Modernism/modernity*)

Ugly Feelings is a thought provoking book in the aesthetics of negative feelings with insightful reflections upon the social and experiential impact of artistic creations.

--Dina Mendonça (*Metapsychology* 2005-10-27)

The book is rewarding for the originality of its perspective.

--G. D. MacDonald (*Choice* 2005-07-01)

Ugly Feelings [is] one of the most intellectually dazzling and wide-ranging critical studies to appear in years. This is, in fact, far more than a book about emotions...Taken as a whole, it is no less than: a broad new interpretation of cultural modernity/postmodernity; a concerted attempt to reinvigorate race/gender analysis by pushing beyond some of its most familiar impasses; and, most impressively--at a moment when the "return to aesthetics" has become a vague rallying cry in much contemporary criticism--a rigorous argument for, and consistent demonstration of, a distinct mode of reading that gives equal weight to formal and

cultural/political concerns. What may be most remarkable, however, is the way these features come together, such that each close reading is presented inseparably from a sustained theoretical argument that both stands strongly alone and contributes to the larger project of the book.

--Jennifer L. Fleissner (*Modernism / Modernity*)

Wow! That is almost all that I have to say about Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*. This is an amazing book, stunning in its depth and range, exemplary in its learning, and almost continually surprising in its inventiveness. Ngai seems to have read and seen almost every text and movie, and not just read and seen but imagined or reimagined them with dazzling intensity. And she writes a clear, precise prose replete with striking antitheses and inventive analogies. Most important for me, Ngai is the best-read theorist I have ever encountered--for her scope and even more for her ability to find the perfectly opposite argument to engage or to extend as she develops her own case.

--Charles Altieri (*Contemporary Literature*)

About the Author

Sianne Ngai is Associate Professor of English at UCLA.

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From reader reviews:

Keisha Kent:

Nowadays reading books be than want or need but also turn into a life style. This reading routine give you lot of advantages. Associate programs you got of course the knowledge even the information inside the book in which improve your knowledge and information. The data you get based on what kind of e-book you read, if you want send more knowledge just go with education and learning books but if you want truly feel happy read one with theme for entertaining for instance comic or novel. Typically the *Ugly Feelings* is kind of book which is giving the reader unstable experience.

Ralph Garibay:

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