AFFECT and AMERICAN LITERATURE in the AGE OF NEOLIBERALISM

RACHEL GREENWALD SMITH

Rachel Greenwald Smith's *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* examines the relationship between American literature and politics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Smith contends that the representation of emotions in contemporary fiction emphasizes the personal lives of characters at a time when there is an unprecedented, and often damaging, focus on the individual in American life. Through readings of works by Paul Auster, Karen Tei Yamashita, Ben Marcus, Lydia Millet, and others who stage experiments in the relationship between feeling and form, Smith argues for the centrality of a counter-tradition in contemporary literature concerned with impersonal feelings: feelings that challenge the neoliberal notion that emotions are the property of the self.

RACHEL GREENWALD SMITH is assistant professor of English at Saint Louis University. Her work has appeared in journals such as *American Literature*, *Twentieth Century Literature*, *Mediations*, and *Modern Fiction Studies*.

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For my parents

The emotion of art is impersonal.

– T. S. Eliot

Acknowledgments

This book calls into question the notion that we own our own feelings. Likewise, writing this book has been a persistent reminder of how little we own our own thoughts. The ideas enclosed here are not in any way exclusively mine: they were fostered, challenged, and refined by the brilliance of those with whom I came into contact during the process of its evolution. Most of all, this book is a reflection of the intellectual culture of my family, in which my mother's insistence on the importance of political critique was answered by my father's interest in the ability of works of art to access the strange, intuitive, and unknown. In this and in so many other ways, this book would not have been written without the unceasing support and inspiration of my parents, Marta Greenwald and Gary Mac Smith, and my sister, Sophie Smith.

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Introduction
The Affective Hypothesis

This book is an argument against the ubiquity of what I call the *affective hypothesis*, or the belief that literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience.[1] Like most commonly held beliefs, the affective hypothesis is so prevalent that it tends to function invisibly, silently supporting a range of critical practices: it lurks in reviews evaluating recently published novels, in critical appraisals of authors' hallmark styles, and in large-scale assessments of literary movements. And it is just as often employed by nonspecialists in literature, appearing in institutional appraisals of the value of literary study to a larger college curriculum and in justifications for the inclusion of literature departments in interdisciplinary initiatives. In all directions, among critics, scholars, administrators, and casual readers, there is an odd and unsettling consensus: We read works of literature because they allow us direct contact with individuals who are like us but not us; they allow us to feel what others feel; they provoke empathy; and they teach us how to understand what it means to be a unique human being.[2]

What could be wrong with that?

As it turns out, plenty. While the affective hypothesis is not a recent invention, it has found renewed support, particularly in scholarly circles, since the early 1990s. The contemporary prevalence of the affective hypothesis therefore coincides historically with the securing of neoliberalism as a political, economic, and cultural dominant in the United States.[3] Neoliberalism began as a set of economic policies in the late 1970s and early 1980s aimed toward unfettering domestic and global markets, dismantling social safety nets, and privatizing previously public institutions. With the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the Clinton presidency, neoliberalism began to look as if it could exist in perpetuity, uncontested from superpowers abroad or political parties at home.[4] As a result, neoliberal policy has become increasingly normalized, accompanied by a corresponding shift in the social expectations that are placed

upon individuals. Neoliberalism's emphasis on the necessity of personal initiative, along with its pathologizing of structures of dependence, calls upon subjects to see themselves as entrepreneurial actors in a competitive system.

These subjective aspects of neoliberalism coincide startlingly with the assumptions underlying the affective hypothesis. While neoliberalism casts the individual as responsible for herself, the affective hypothesis casts feeling as necessarily owned and managed by individual authors, characters, and readers. Neoliberalism imagines the individual as an entrepreneur; the affective hypothesis imagines the act of reading as an opportunity for emotional investment and return. The neoliberal subject is envisioned as needing to be at all times strategically networking; feelings, according to the affective hypothesis, are indexes of emotional alliances.

Like any structure of belief that functions without contestation, the affective hypothesis is both totalizing and limiting, stuffing diverse literary practices into a single mold and excluding those that don't conform to its shape. Works of literature highlight, intensify, and transmit feelings in a wide range of ways. Yet when it comes to defining a work as warm or cold, emotional or flat, alive or dead, or determining whether it functions on the level of the heart or the head, the affective hypothesis shuts out the multiplicity of textual approaches to feeling.

This book argues that the feelings that are acknowledged under the affective hypothesis are largely what I call *personal feelings*. Personal feelings function like personal property. They are private, not in the sense of being secret or interior, but in the sense of being "privatized": they are personally controlled, even though they circulate outside the self; they are managed by the individual but they are augmented by connections with others; and ideally they enrich the individual through their carefully calculated development, distribution, and expansion.[5]

But there are also forms of textual feeling that tend to be overlooked in contemporary literary criticism because of the prevalence of the affective hypothesis. I call these *impersonal feelings*. Impersonal feelings do not straightforwardly conform to a market model, because they are not easily codifiable or recognizable; they do not allow for strategic emotional associations to be made between readers and characters; and they emphasize the unpredictability of affective connections. As a result, these modes of textual affectivity, if they are recognized and defined as forms of feeling, challenge the principles of subjectivity that underpin not only our aesthetic judgments but our economic, political, and social convictions as well.