

BOOK REVIEW

## *Earthly Encounters: Sensation, Feminist Theory, and the Anthropocene*

Stephanie D. Clare. Albany: SUNY Press, 2019 (ISBN: 978-1-4384-7588-2)

Hannah Stark

English Department, University of Tasmania, Australia  
Email: [hannah.stark@utas.edu.au](mailto:hannah.stark@utas.edu.au)

*Earthly Encounters: Sensation, Feminist Theory, and the Anthropocene* is a multifaceted work. Stephanie Clare is interested in sensations that arise from being a body in the world, particularly in relation to encountering “natural” phenomena. However, far from reading these sensations as unmediated experiences, she is astute in her understanding of embodied experiences as mediated by culture and power. The book works in sophisticated ways with the imbrication of nature, culture, and power and the impact of this on how sensations are rendered meaningful. Straddling philosophy and literary studies, *Earthly Encounters* is wide-ranging in its engagement with theoretical frameworks and literary works: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze, Audre Lorde, Frantz Fanon, Bessie Head, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, new materialism, queer theory, feminist theory, and antiracist and decolonial theories are brought together to interrogate how particular locations are experienced through the sensing body. The book works through themes of belonging, dispossession, sexuality, racism, and exclusion to consider questions such as: What kinds of sensations move through the body? What shapes these sensations? What is the lived body’s experience of the world? How is gender and race informed by sensation of the more-than-human world? How is sensation differentially distributed? How does identity shape the experience of sensation? What does this mean for the Anthropocene?

The first chapter, “Feeling Cold: Phenomenology, Spatiality, and the Politics of Sensation,” focuses on how temperature is sensed, with a particular interest in how it is experienced differently by different bodies. The chapter takes as a case study Rashmika Pandya’s “The Borderlines of Culture and Identity,” which details the author’s experience of feeling cold after she migrates as a child from Kisumu, Kenya to England and then to Saskatoon, Canada, where the average January winter temperature is 0 degrees Fahrenheit. The case study highlights how border crossings are experienced through sensation, and how our movement through space is a movement through ambient conditions. It also foregrounds the way that the experience of sensation comes to constitute a sense of who we are. Clare offers a close reading of this text, which provides a method for unpacking the complex interplay of nature, culture, and power. The cold triggers for Pandya feelings of discomfort, of being out of place, and of disconnection. However, eventually she will experience an identification with the cold, and this will signify her sense of belonging as a Canadian citizen.

Clare focuses on the way that sensation, particularly of the cold, is racialized, gendered, and classed in Canadian contexts, and how particular sensations are always already experienced through their cultural framing.

Chapter 2, “Locating Affect, Swimming Underwater,” engages with the sensation of water touching skin while swimming. Drawing from Deleuze via Brian Massumi, the chapter focuses on affect in feminist, queer, and critical race theory. For Clare, affect is situated and experienced through positionality rather than being pre-personal or experienced at the limits of identity, as it is often theorized in work indebted to Deleuze. The second half of the chapter swerves to the autobiographical, and Clare’s personal history is melded with the history of the parks and waterways in Canada, with a particular focus on Nauset Spit. Although there are some lovely moments in the autobiographical account, it felt like an abrupt shift in tone and needed to be more fully articulated in relation to the Deleuzian affect theory with which the chapter opens. There were some missed opportunities in this chapter. For example, engagement with Astrida Neimanis’s *Bodies of Water* would have connected this chapter with the phenomenological account of sensation in the first chapter. A second missed opportunity is that Clare does not engage with Deleuze’s own evocative description of swimming as a powerful illustration of learning in *Difference and Repetition*.

The third chapter, “Being Kissed by Everything’: Race, Sex, and Sense in Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*,” turns more fully to queer theory as a framework. Sticking to the terrain of the autobiographical, this chapter focuses on Bessie Head’s 1974 autobiography, *A Question of Power*, to examine how the text shifts eroticism from the sexual to a sensual engagement with a more-than-human world. Clare reads the sensual experiences in the text as a site of love and belonging that goes beyond hetero- or homosexuality and extends not only to all that surrounds Head but also to all humankind. This is significant in relation to the context of Head’s work, which is set in apartheid South Africa and as such the analysis of race, space, and sex is central to a reading of Head’s writing. The chapter ends by raising important questions about how sensation might enable a figuration of space that could disrupt colonial possessiveness and not replicate structures of inequality. There are some lovely moments of textual analysis in this chapter, but I would have liked to see the reading of Head’s text more fully integrated with the earlier discussion of queer theory. In what ways does this sensuality constitute a queer eroticism? What does this mean for queer belonging in place? How can a nonpossessive relation to space be read as both feminine and queer?

Chapter 4, “Psychic Territory, Appropriation, and ‘Geopower’: Rereading Fanon, Foucault, and Butler,” is concerned largely with Fanon and offers close readings of *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*. Clare’s interest in these texts is in the way that Fanon brings race and racism to bear on psychoanalytic theory and on his interest in how humans relate to and manipulate earth surfaces. Clare works with the concept of geopower, which she defines as “the force relations involved in the physical transformation of the earth, especially its surface” (69). Building on work done in chapter 3, chapter 4 also asks what a nonappropriative relation to the earth—a relation constitutive of subjectivity—might look like. As the introduction notes, this chapter moves away from a discussion of sensation. Although the chapter covers interesting territory, I am not convinced that it is fully integrated into the larger argument of the book.

The final chapter, “Location, Sensation, and the Anthropocene,” does important political work in contextualizing the previous discussions of sensation, race, gender,

and location with the Anthropocene. Conceptual engagement with the Anthropocene has tended to be disembodied and universalizing, and has projected a vision of a single earth system. This book is refreshing in that it emphasizes the local and embodied effects of human planetary impact. This means that it is sensitive to the “centrality of difference and inequality when thinking about global change” (86) and to how the Anthropocene is differentially experienced in relation to gender, race, class, and geographical location. Clare diagnoses the universalizing tendencies of the Anthropocene as a theoretical concept as a problem of representation. Her key question becomes “how might the earth be imagined differently?” (97). Turning to Amazonian cosmologies as an alternative system of knowledge and meaning, Clare offers a reading of the Anthropocene in which the earth is experienced through sensation and is therefore localized, particular, and diverse. Clare concludes with a reading of Navajo man Will Wilson’s exhibition *AIR (Auto-Immune Response)*. This exhibition is staged to have at its center a hogan greenhouse (traditional Navajo structure) containing a metal cot. Surrounding this installation are photographs of Wilson and other refugees (some of them wearing gas masks) in a postapocalyptic landscape. Clare reads Wilson’s work as revealing resilience to inhospitable environments in the Anthropocene and offers a reading of climate change in relation to indigenous politics.

This book is genuinely and convincingly interdisciplinary. Its movement between philosophy and literature is rich and interesting, and brings together theoretical analysis, close reading, political commentary, and autobiography to render sensation as a complex phenomenon. This interdisciplinary reach has the potential to increase the impact and significance of the work for broader debates in the humanities. At times the sheer volume of critical touchpoints, methodologies, and ideas can make the book feel a little unfocused. The chapters feel relatively short, and I couldn’t help wondering what arguments could have emerged through a longer treatment of each chapter topic. However, I applaud the author for taking intellectual and stylistic risks. This book is tied together through its focus on settler-colonial and colonial contexts. The political and historical context for these locations is handled admirably well. Clare is sensitive to the politics of race, gender, class, sexuality, and indigeneity, and it is in interrogating inequality that her work really shines.

**Hannah Stark** is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Tasmania, Australia. She is the author of *Feminist Theory after Deleuze* (Bloomsbury, 2016), the co-author of *The Theory of Love: Ideals, Limits, Futures* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), and the co-editor of *Deleuze and the Non/Human* (Palgrave, 2015) and *Deleuze and Guattari in the Anthropocene* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016).