



Stephanie D. Clare. *Earthly Encounters: Sensation, Feminist Theory, and the Anthropocene*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2019. 222 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-7587-5.



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Stephanie Clare’s theoretically rich *Earthly Encounters: Sensation, Feminist Theory, and the Anthropocene* weaves together, negotiates, and condenses multiple contemporary fields to examine encounters between earth and those who inhabit it. At first glance, *Earthly Encounters* might seem to be situated within environmental philosophy’s emergent field of eco-phenomenology. Edited collections such as *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself* (2003), *Nature and Experience: Phenomenology and the Environment* (2016), and *Place and Phenomenology* (2017) all represent the bringing together of environmental critical inquiry and the phenomenology of place.[1] Timothy Chandler defines eco-phenomenology as that which considers “perception to be the most apt way of dealing with the spatiotemporal aspects of environmental problems.”[2] However, as Paul Guernsey in the article “Western Environmental Phenomenology as a Colonizing Practice: The Question of Land” rightly critiques, Western environmental phenomenology is complicit in white supremacist analyses of land as the “ontological

ground of human experience” and further, he argues, “perpetuate[s] settler colonial ideology.”[3] *Earthly Encounters* often approaches analysis of the more-than-human world by way of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), yet its approach cannot be classified as eco-phenomenology per se or even as tied to a particular philosophical tradition. Clare emphasizes that *Earthly Encounters*, rather than interpret *Phenomenology of Perception*, instead articulates an approach to phenomenology founded in feminist, ecocritical, and critical race studies (p. xxix). Key to supporting this fundamental aim and to maneuvering the problematics Guernsey lays out is Clare’s theory of sensation. Rather than start from a Western, universalized conceptualization of land, Clare begins with the immersive sensation of rain.

Reading weather at the end of Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* (2015), Clare concludes that gendered and racialized subjectivities “inform and are informed by sensations of the more-than-human world, such as the rain” (p.

xv). This moment foregrounds race, gender, and class in the book's argument but also in its reading method. Clare takes the weather not as, respectively, metaphor, metonymy, or even realist description but as "linguistic event" (p. xvi). Turning this on its head, Clare reads the rain in Coates's text as sensorial encounter of the metaphoric, metonymic, and produced reality of rain, all while recognizing that "language is not a transparent medium" (p. xvii). This interpretive mode indexes the many sensations of being in a more-than-human world but resists falling into abstraction. Sensations as "lived by particular people in particular places" emerges as unifying theme throughout the book and accounts for many uneven encounters with inhabited environments (p. xviii). Clare locates *Earthly Encounter's* archive in the twentieth century and organizes it around representative sensations: feeling cold in Canada, warm wind in rural Botswana, the sense of submerging in the north Atlantic Ocean, and the feeling of containment in Algiers. Clare develops a methodology that both intervenes in and builds from the nexus of feminist theory, critical race studies, and environmental humanities. A methodology of such scale might prove weighty and overwhelming to the many individual interventions at hand. Still, one of the most impressive aspects of the book is Clare's ability to summarize entire fields, and shifts in fields, clearly and succinctly. Each chapter navigates analysis of a cultural object through a particular theoretical vein such that its argument can be taken on its own or in relation to the book as a whole.

In chapter 1, "Feeling Cold: Phenomenology, Spatiality, and the Politics of Sensation," Clare argues that a phenomenological approach to the bodily sensation of cold "makes visible the intertwining of the symbolic and the sensory as well as the connections between subjectivity, spatiality, and territoriality," which leads us to consider "what it is to be social, cultural, and biological beings on this planet, earth" (p. 4). The chapter centers the sensation of cold as metaphor and lived

experience in Rashmika Pandya's phenomenological essay "The Borderlines of Culture and Identity." In this, cold is not universal nor does it "exist in a vacuum" but draws on sensation within a particular context (p. 3). Clare contextualizes Pandya's sensation of feeling cold that "gets inside her" (p. 13) within Canada's nationalist history of settler colonialism and immigration policy, which framed the cold climate as suitable for a certain individual, specifically the white male. However, Clare reads Pandya's sensation of cold not as a reinscription of the Canadian white settler but as a "navigation of the position of the 'alien'"—one who is not strengthened against the cold but carries it within (p. 14). This reading counters Merleau-Ponty's understanding of spatiality, which "assumes temperate conditions" (p. 14). Pandya instead experiences the ambient weather of cold as a turning in, a contracting of space, or a seeking of internal shelter. Framing this primary analysis are readings at the beginning and end of the chapter on the racialized and gendered objectification sensed through and with weather in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and Sandra Bartky's *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (1990). Objectification, Clare writes, is to feel like the "earth is uncomfortable" and "to sense the temperature and to imagine the difficulty of surviving within it" (p. 18). To highlight this point, the chapter ends with an anecdote from the author's time at Oxford where the expected gendered clothing often resulted in women feeling cold or "being in a space that is not properly [one's] own" (p. 19). Clare ponders if, as a result, many of the women "became frigid" (p. 20).

Chapter 2, "Locating Affect, Swimming Underwater," picks up the first chapter's assertion that an "approach to the sensation ... departs from contemporary critical scholarship on emotion and feeling, which often subsumes bodily sensations into emotions" (p. 21). Clare goes further by critiquing the argument that affect is "autonomous or asocial" and suggests that the "social is sensory"

and “positionality produces and is productive of sensations” (p. 22). Where Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari connect affect to the aesthetic, Clare instead creates a critical autobiographical account of swimming as a social practice that arouses affect. This highlights a departure from moves in cultural studies and feminist, queer, and critical race studies that draw on Deleuze and Guattari to theorize embodied responsiveness to the world. Clare emphasizes that these run the risk of “cleav[ing]” affect “from positionality, identity, and the social” (p. 25). On the other hand, swimming as the sensation of being in water localizes one in a particular place that is shaped by race, nation, gender, sexuality, class, and environment. In this case, Clare locates her love of swimming—better yet, play in water—within the settler-colonial context of Canada’s lake culture and its artistic tradition, her relationship with her family and especially with her mother, coastal Cape Cod and the United States National Park Service’s vision for the elite urban man, and the changing climate. In a particularly powerful moment, Clare describes a trip with her mother to a Cape Cod beach they had visited since she was a child. Expecting to find the old sandbars, they found an altered landscape of deep, tumultuous waters. In this moment of critical autobiography, Clare in “writing the self ... considers the contexts that make that self possible” (p. 42).

Turning from feminist theory to queer theory, chapter 3, “Being Kissed by Everything’: Race, Sex, and Sense in Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*,” reconsiders erotic desire to include forms of embodied pleasure not necessarily sexual but sensual. Here, the sensual encompasses something as everyday as “the touch of a particular material brushing against the skin” and as wide as the pleasure of embodied interaction with the vast more-than-human world (p. 47). Theorizing the sensual therefore allows for the decentering of kinship and identity and instead foregrounds new forms of belonging that are “apart from the nation-state, gender, race-based violence and exclu-

sion” (p. 47). To make this argument, Clare intervenes in existing scholarship on Bessie Head’s 1974 autobiographical novel *A Question of Power* to explore how reading with the sensual opens new forms of belonging. Split into two primary readings, the first section of the chapter shows how Head “entangles the sexual with forms of racial belonging and spatial exclusion that the novel ... seeks to undo,” and the second section reads an alternate sensuality with the more-than-human world (p. 48). Central to this reading is the immersive final moment in the novel, when the protagonist, Elizabeth, finally feels a sense of belonging in the touch of wind, softness of falling asleep, and the “feeling of being kissed by everything” (quoted on p. 48). This, Clare argues, remains tied to the local historical context of agriculture in Botswana yet also imagines a sense of belonging that does not possess or deny but recognizes “a common humanity that exists across racial and gendered divisions” (p. xxxviii).

Chapter 4, “Psychic Territory, Appropriation, and ‘Geopower’: Reading Fanon, Foucault, and Butler,” breaks from the discussion of sensation and moves toward an analysis of *geopower*, as it is termed. Clare defines geopower as “the force relations that transform the surface of the earth” (p. 66). Pushing Judith Butler’s understanding of psychic power but more immediately Michel Foucault’s understanding of power to both their “limits,” geopower here includes all the more-than-human material forces in an encounter of forces that constitutes power relations. Geopower manifests especially in Frantz Fanon’s writing as settler-colonial power, which through violence transforms the earth into a “spatial occupation [that] takes psychic form” (p. 65). The chapter makes two main arguments. First, that Fanon introduces a kind of “vitality” that requires “access to space and land” and when that space is not available, causes the psyche to “retrac[t], and ... [reform] into musculature” (p. 66). Second, that Fanon expands a concept of territorial subjectivity where “the subject emerges as it partakes in geopower, giving

shape to the earth and partaking in the process of appropriation” (p. 66). However, there remains the issue of gender, as Fanon’s writing partakes in imagining decolonization tied to masculine appropriation of land. Clare ends the chapter with the “feminist goal” of a non-appropriative relation to the material world that develops “politics and thought (praxis) that makes room for the more-than-human while attending to inequality between humans as well” (p. 83).

The final chapter, “Location, Sensation, and the Anthropocene,” situates the book’s argument for earthly encounters alongside recent discourse in environmental humanities on the Anthropocene. Clare acknowledges the valid critique of the term that it can too heavily rely on universals of humanity and a single earth system. However, Clare argues that we might retain the universal figure of earth if it is also accompanied by a second set of “place-based imaginaries” in both politics and criticism. This is the place where global change “is lived and will be lived as crisis” (p. 88). Returning to her phenomenological approach, Clare shows that the spatial imaginary of the Anthropocene requires a perspective of life located and sensed in many, differentiated places. To do so, she discusses the multimedia exhibit by Will Wilson titled “AIR (*Auto-Immune Response*).” AIR, in focusing on inhabitation, demonstrates how “planetary change affects lives” and necessitates an “attention to particular places” (p. 111).

Notes

[1]. Bryan E. Bannon, ed., *Nature and Experience: Phenomenology and the Environment* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016); Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine, eds., *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); and Janet Donhoe, ed., *Place and Phenomenology* (London: Rowan & Littlefield, 2017).

[2]. Timothy Chandler, “Reading Atmospheres: The Ecocritical Potential of Gernot Böhme’s Aesthetic Theory of Nature,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary*

Studies in Literature and Environment 18, no. 3 (September 2011): 553–68; 554.

[3]. Paul J. Guernsey, “Western Environmental Phenomenology as a Colonizing Practice: The Question of Land,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, isaa 189 (December 2020): 1-22; 6.

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