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Book Review

Emotional Geographies (2005), edited by Joyce Davidson, Liz Bondi and Mick Smith begins to address the complexity of how emotions and emotional life are both affected by and effect geographies and the production of place. The editors draw on a range of authors from interdisciplinary backgrounds to piece together a patchwork of situational geographies at multiple scales which illustrate some of the different contextual features that affect human experience. In other words, they try to show how emotions matter and that we should not dismiss their material impact(s) on the world around us.

The book is divided into three sections that deal with the tentative themes by which the editors believe theorizing emotions in the larger world of geography and Social Theory can begin. The first section, Locating Emotion, focuses on health and embodiment through the micro-geographies of the body that range from dying to aging, healing to grieving. The second section, Relating Emotion places the structures of emotion in the attachment to place through geographies of identity and social relations which produce certain socio-spatial movements and encounters. Finally, the third section, Representing Emotion concentrates on how we produce emotional
landscapes through particular responses to symbolic meanings that have socio-temporal and spatial dynamics. These empirical studies help to illuminate the importance of theorizing the spatial affects of emotional life.

In the first section of this book, we are presented spatial and temporal geographies of emotion which become embodied through our abilities to experience pain and pleasure within the micro-geographies of our bodies. What does it mean to be dying and what kinds of emotional economies does that produce in choosing destinations for the final care of cancer victims? This is the question that Sara Morris and Carol Thomas seek to answer. Marion Collis then takes us on a journey of loss through the redefining the body of post-hysterectomy women, their emotional loss, re-discovery and acceptance of self through the micro-geographies of body trauma and displacement. John Urry asks us to think about the distinction between land as a productive material commodity that sets the stage for socio-economic spaces and patterns of every day life and landscape which becomes the embodied attachments to these material stage-sets and are then articulated in particular economies of desire that never leave the body. These contributions display the complexities with which we react to our environments and our bodies that produce particular emotional responses of attachment through pain and loss, pleasure and desire.

The second section, Relating Emotion, shows how these emotional attachments to our bodies and landscapes produce particular daily/situational patterns that produce the social relations and ritual movements and diffusions of our every day lives. Colleen Henan asks us to explore how consumer culture is gendered in particular ways to produce certain problematic emotional cues for women and how that relates to the production and sustenance of eating disorders such as anorexia. Jenny Hockey, Bridget Penhale and David Sibley theorize how memory and attachment become emotional sites of grief and displacement as we grow old, lose bodily abilities, and social relations begin to change, disrupting the symbolic landscapes that produced our younger, virile identities. The geographies of ‘Going Out’ are scrutinized for their emotional embodiment through the spatial movements and interactions of ‘Evening Economies’ in Phil Hubbard’s piece, contributing to the theorization of the emotional lives of youth culture and how an attachment to mobility produces social interactions. Along with the other contributions in this section, these studies show us how emotional cues attach us to and/or repel us from spatial interactions and engagements that have material effects on the landscape.

Representing Emotion, the final section, reveals the ways in which humans produce cultural cues and responses through our emotional lives which have socio-spatial implications for the rituals and practices that constitute desire. While the case studies in this section are excellent; from how the act of hugging in Western culture becomes the semiotic clue for intimacy and closing in on personal relationships (Thien) to how ethical feelings about ‘Nature’ produce a semiotic ecology which then produces particular attachments and desires (Smith); particularly interesting is Liz Bondi’s contribution on the emotional life of social science researchers. As social scientists, we are often compelled to conduct research that requires personal relationships with the people we are studying. How do we parse out and understand our own investment in paradigms of research without exploring our own emotional lives and the impacts that our research has on us? That Liz Bondi begins to investigate this pressing and seminal question is invaluable.

This book is masterfully edited and put together. Each section adds depth and nuance to this growing study on emotion. The sections are well laid out and each of the contributing authors’ empirical studies exemplifies the stated mission of the editors. By doing so, each contributor adds another layer of complexity to the endeavor established by this project. It would be impossible for any academic project to say in exhaustive terms that it has figured out emotion and how emotion constitutes histories, geographies, and social relations. The possibilities for these productions through emotion are limitless. However, this volume does begin to piece together a foundational approach to theorizing emotion in the production of space and time.