Breathing Through: Feminist Politics of Affect

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Beyond Words: Privileging the Unspoken in Arts and Communities in a Posthuman World
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Based on

• Based on *Breathing Matters: Feminist Intersectional Politics of Vulnerability* (Górska 2016)

• Analysis of the enactments of breathing in black lung disease, phone sex work, and anxieties and panic attacks in order to argue that breathing is an issue of social justice.
Structure

1. Sia: *Big Girls Cry*
2. Why anxieties matter for feminist politics?
3. Politics articulated through anxieties
4. Conclusion
Artistic articulation of power of affect

Sia: *Big Girls Cry* (2015)

Performer: Maddie Ziegler
Power and breath

“the struggle for a breathable life is the struggle for queers to have space to breathe. Having space to breathe, or being able to breathe freely is … an aspiration. With breath comes imagination. With breath comes possibility. If queer politics is about freedom, it might simply mean the freedom to breathe.” (Ahmed 2010, 120)
Artistic articulation of power of affect

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NhKZWZpkw1Q

0:00-2:30 min
The power of anxiety

- Hidden life of anxious becoming
- Ongoing struggle to live
- Self-shaming, self-silencing and hiding
- Bodily and affective tottering and haunting thoughts
- Forces of social norms and expectations, and the “wounding attachments” (Berlant, 2011) of desired normativity
- Continuum of feeling better to feeling worse
- Acuteness and “dis/orienting” (Ahmed, 2006) daily negotiations of the bodily and affective vulnerability of living in un/livability
- Deadly despair and terror while continuing living “life as usual”
Why do anxieties matter for feminist politics?

Mainstream Western discursive delimitations of anxiety:

• contrast to what is normatively considered “proper human subjectivity”
• value and privilege certain forms of human subjectivity and embodiment in relation to particular concepts of well-being, success, health, happiness etc.
• stigmatization of diverse forms of affective and physical vulnerability —> subjective problems or signs of weaknesses, failure, not being able to “deal with life,” or not being strong enough, good enough, or determined enough
• if accepted: a temporary phase phase, reaction, to be overcome —> go on with life
Why do anxieties matter for feminist politics?

Blaming yourself and your body

• “My brain chemistry is fucking with me,” [said someone close to me once;] “I just need to learn not to trust my brain, take distance. … Now I know that all that happens is not true.”

• But is it not?
Why do anxieties matter for feminist politics?

**Differential enactments of anxious living**

- Different intensities, temporalities, embodiments and intersectional positions tell different stories of anxieties
- Intersectional positioning within particular local and global power relations
- Not only individual but structural matters — loss or transformation of privilege, or condition of living from the first breath onwards
- Anxieties as dynamics of intersectional privileging and deprivileging that materializes in differential ways and with differential effects
Why do anxieties matter for feminist politics?

Embodiment and subjectivity, individual situatedness and power structures as mutually relating

• “There is not occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other … the individual’s breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing.” (Fanon 1965, 65)
Why do anxieties matter for feminist politics?

Combat breathing

• It “names the mobilization of the ... subject’s life energies merely in order to continue to live, to breathe and to survive the exercise of state violence” (Perera & Pugliese 2011, 1).

• Individuals are compressed into “target bodies,” which are disposable, whose “energies are fully committed merely to surviving; [and how] the logic of state violence is predicated on ensuring that the subject cannot begin to expand their energies in resisting, contesting or subverting the power ...” (Perera & Pugliese 2011, 2).
Politics articulated through anxieties

• Politics where embodiment, affect and power are mutually constitutive.

• Politics where quotidian practices of breathing are a way of living in vulnerability, or rather a vulnerable living

• Politics that do not take place only on the streets or in forms of organized governmentality but also in everyday bodily and affective practices
Politics articulated through anxieties

- Sianne Ngai (2007)
- Heather Love (2009)
- Laurent Berlant (2011)
- Jack Halberstam (2011)
- Groups: Public Feelings; Feel Tank Chicago
- Art projects: *The Alphabet of Feeling Bad* (Michalski, 2012); *An Unhappy Archive* (Michalski & Baumann, 2014)
Politics articulated through anxieties

Depressions are “manifestation[s] of forms of biopower that produce life and death not only by targeting populations but also more insidiously by making people feel small, worthless, hopeless.” (Cvetkovich 2012, 13)
Politics articulated through anxieties

Affective dynamics more than just a reaction

- Enactments of and challenges to contemporary power relations that are enacted individually and structurally
- Transformative forces of living
- Enact specific materializations, productions as much as transformations and alternatives to the dominant social norms and power relations
Politics articulated through anxieties

Politics of ambivalence

• Not alternatives in the ideational sense of desired ways of being

• Enactments of different directionality's

• Articulation of human-embodied subjects in a differential way

• “alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal” (Halberstam 2011, 2)

• Immobility and potentiality, and painfulness and empowerment
Conclusion

• Dynamics of the complex and ambivalent articulations through the way anxieties break worlds apart and demand change

• Not simple acceptance of the failure to achieve the norm but recognition of the political power such failure enacts in calling out individual and systemic intersectional operations of power relations and in calling in (Trần, n.d.) for affinities through similarities and differences

• Social, cultural, geopolitical, and paradigmatic changes as well as for daily changes of living
Conclusion

• Not universal but intersectionally situated politics

• Politics that matter in matter in a quotidian, individual and structural manner

• Politics that are always provisional, under constant negotiation

• Shifting positions of privilege and lack thereof

• Dynamic coalitional and separatist vulnerable social justice work
Thank you
References

References


References


