

COMMENTARY AND CRITICISM

Methodological Fatigue and the Politics of the Affective Turn

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Depressed? It Might Be Political (Slogan, Feel Tank Chicago 2003)

This short essay reflects on the status of methodology within feminist media studies and briefly considers one of the current sites of methodological innovation within the field—the “affective turn.” In my use of the term “methodology” I include not only the specific methods, concepts, and theories used in the analysis of media texts, forms, and practices but also the more foundational philosophical, political, epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin this field. Methodology in this sense refers not only to the tools employed in analysis but the organizing principles, motivations, and political commitments that shape feminist media studies—and its scholars its research questions, research practices, and objects of study. I begin by exploring the claim that the “turn away” from ideological critique has left feminist media studies methodologically fatigued.

Post-Feminist Media Culture

In *Gender and the Media* (2007) Gill skillfully guides us through the key transformations in feminist media studies of the last four decades, detailing the methodological, critical, theoretical and political perspectives which have shaped this field. Through a series of detailed case studies she explores the key methodological approaches employed in the field in the last three decades: content analysis, semiotics, audience research, poststructuralist approaches, and queer theory. Gill suggests that these approaches and the methods associated with them have to some extent been foiled by the rise of what she describes as a “post-feminist sensibility.” Describing post-feminist media culture, she writes:

Confident expressions of “girl power” sit alongside reports of “epidemic” levels of anorexia and body dysmorphia; graphic tabloid reports of rape are placed cheek by jowl with adverts for lap-dancing clubs and telephone sex lines; lad magazines declare the “sex war” over, while reinstating beauty contests and championing new, ironic modes of sexism; and there are regular moral panics about the impact on men of the new, idealized male body imagery, while the re-sexualization of women’s bodies in public space goes virtually unremarked upon. (Rosalind Gill 2007, p. 1)

Gill argues that post-feminism, whether understood as an historical phase, a backlash against feminist politics, or an epistemological shift within feminist theory itself, is characterized by an “extraordinary contradictoriness” that is played out within both critical scholarship and popular culture. “Everywhere,” she writes, “it seems, feminist ideas have become a kind of commonsense, yet feminism has never been more bitterly repudiated” (Gill 2007, p. 1). I cannot do justice to the insights and intricacies of *Gender and the Media* here, but I want to highlight Gill’s implicit claim that some scholarship in the field has become complicit with the sexual and political neo-liberalism and individualism which saturates popular culture. For example, Rosalind Gill remarks in her conclusion:

It seemed to me when writing this book that compared with the confidence and certainty of early media critique, today’s feminist media scholars were more tentative and less certain. They had a much more secure institutional base than in the recent past and a rich vocabulary of theoretical languages, but were much less sure of what—if anything—should be the target of critique. (2007, p. 271)

A number of feminist media scholars have expressed similar concerns that something is “missing” from contemporary feminist media studies. Certainly, I have been repeatedly struck by a growing sense of methodological uncertainty in the field and find myself wondering if feminist media studies research risks becoming complicit with a more general “post-feminist revisionism.”¹ To address this perceived impasse Gill calls for the repoliticization of the field, but I think we could usefully reframe this as a methodological issue and ask: How, and from where, should feminist media studies muster the methodological resources to critically respond to the complexities of this “post-feminism” era? One of the sources of methodological fatigue is the fact that since the 1990s feminist media studies (and feminist theory more generally) has, in Judith Williams’ words, “deprived itself” of many of its key theoretical concepts, most notably “sexism.” As Williamson cautions on the concept of “sexism”:

What [has] become passé isn’t actually sexism, which is doing just fine, but the concept of sexism, in advertising or anything else. This concept (unlike “racism”) has fallen into disuse in recent years, and is now rarely employed in public debate . . . increasingly our culture presents sexism as a kind of 60s or 70s phenomenon, to be enjoyed as kitsch, rather than as a contemporary problem to be addressed as unjust. (2003)²

In the case of “sexism,” it is as though the word became sullied by association with backlash caricatures of feminism and at the same time weighed down with an “earnest sincerity” that wasn’t “playful” enough to survive the ascendance of postmodernism. In “moving away” from more direct forms of ideological analysis, feminist media studies has not only lost a fabulously loaded vocabulary but has dislodged some of its key methodological foundations. However, whilst Gill’s suggestion that we revitalize debates about sexism is crucial, a return to an earlier and more direct vocabulary wouldn’t solve the difficulties of engaging critically with post-feminist media culture. Rather, we need to reflect on the bigger foundational questions, namely what is the current status of the relationship between “feminist politics” (in its multifarious forms within and outside academia) and “media analysis”: for it is the dynamic and sometimes fraught relationship between these two terms/sites that drives “feminist media studies” as a field of scholarship. How would we characterize this relation in a political context in which feminist scholarship is reviled for being “out of time” and is diminished as political force for social justice? What kinds

of interventions in knowledge and understanding of both specific forms of contemporary media and general modes of mediation, do we imagine that feminist critique might want or need to make today? I cannot address these questions in any depth here, but in response to calls for more effective critical responses to post-feminist media culture, I want to briefly consider the pitfalls and potential of one key methodological development within the field, the turn to affect.

The Affective Turn

It is now frequently claimed that media and cultural studies has taken an “affective turn.” This “turn” is often understood as a “turn away” from the perceived limitations of ideological and representational critique. Whilst this focus on affect is enticing there are radically different theoretical versions of affect currently circulating within media studies. Risking over-simplification I would suggest there are two main models of affect at play within media studies. What differentiates these models is their relative attempts to either engage with or abject ideological critique. Indeed, I suggest that whilst one strand of affect theory imagines itself in distinctly “post-political” terms, in contradistinction an emergent feminist strand of affect scholarship focuses on the politics of affect.

The first model evidences, in Hemmings’ (2005, p. 548) words, “dissatisfaction with poststructuralist approaches to power, framed as hegemonic in their negativity and insistence of social structures.” Indicative of this school of affect is Massumi, who argues in his influential *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, that “Affect holds a key to rethinking postmodern power after ideology” (2002, p. 42). Massumi conceives of affect as a force prior to and in excess of social and cultural inscription, a vital materiality that has been “left out” of analysis of media focused on meaning, signification, ideology, and difference. The aim, as Massumi puts it, is to liberate media studies by rethinking “body, subjectivity, and social change in terms of movement, affect, force, and violence—before code, text, and signification” (2002, p. 66). Indeed, Massumi suggests that approaches to media analysis that focuses on “gender, race, and [sexual] orientation” as central analytic categories are “dead-ended.” These approaches are, he suggests, “deadly” (deadly boring, deadly representative, joyless) because they restate social categories in ways that are “self-augmenting” (Massumi 2002, p. 12). According to this logic, a focus on gender operates as a block to thinking both “the before” of gender (that which precedes and is in excess of gendered inscription), and as a block to transforming the kinds of social and cultural inequalities that feminist approaches to media might purportedly aim to contest. In the place of what Massumi describes as a self-fulfilling negative, and policing constructivism, he proposes a new inventive joyful approach to the study of media, an approach centered in affect. Massumi challenges his readers to “hang up the academic hat of critical self-seriousness, set aside the intemperate arrogance of debunking—and enjoy” (2002, p. 12). The implication of this is that the labor of making visible ideologies of sexual inequality and the work of analyzing how inequalities are mediated through social and cultural representations—is not only self-augmenting but robs scholarship—its subjects and objects of analysis—of pleasure. Hemmings (2005) offers one of the few critical accounts of what she terms the current “affective celebration” within contemporary cultural studies. As Hemmings argues (2005, p. 548), we need to understand this strand of the “affective turn” as a project which aims to “free” media studies from the imaginary constraints of feminist, anti-racist and queer, media analysis. In her view, the affective turn is “a break” not

only from particular kinds of analysis seen as “bogged down” within “representational paradigms” but also—if we read it more “ideologically”—as a break from an entire history of scholarship which has insisted on the primacy of differential power relations, the historical transmission of inequalities and “the counter-hegemonic contributions of postcolonial and feminist theorists.” In this account, affect theory can be understood as part of a larger backlash politics against feminist critique. Indeed it shares many of the characteristics of the post-feminist sensibility described by Gill wherein an insistence on categories such as gender, race, and sexuality are read as an unwillingness to “move forward.” Whilst there is nothing new about feminism being interpellated as the site of negative affect (feminist killjoys), I am nevertheless concerned that the pull of “the affective turn” could have a prohibitive effect on feminist media scholarship—an effect we could characterize as a shift from research driven by the politics of inequality to research understood as both “pre” and “post-political.” I should note, however, that the idea that this model of affect could be prohibitive is a nonsensical formulation within Massumi’s model—where affect is understood as radically in excess of sociality.

For Massumi (2002, p. 27) affect, feeling, and emotion are understood as conceptually distinct, they “pertain to different orders.” Affect is automatic pre-personal intensity, feelings are personal experience and emotions are the communication of feelings and are fundamentally public and social. In short, feeling and emotion require a subject and affect does not—it exceeds and disrupts the realm of subjective experience. I want to question the possible effects of these categorical distinctions. In particular, I want to highlight the way in which Massumi’s influential account of affect, reliant as it is on the dubious theoretical opposition between the subjective/objective, expresses a desire for a concept (of affect) which is *purified* of power and resistance. According to Shouse (2005), it is important not to confuse affect, feeling and emotion, because the power of affect (as both a theoretical concept and as a “real” transformatory force) lies in the fact of its unformed and unpredictable excess. However, the danger of embracing the autonomy of affect is precisely that this claim of affect is beyond power and is thus both uncontestable and unresistable. It is important to refuse the absolute distinction between affects, feelings, and emotions not only because the purification of affect abjects an entire history of counter-hegemonic scholarship but because affect is by definition unanalyzable and thus critically and politically useless. Indeed, to illustrate this point, in a recent essay titled “Fear (The Spectrum Said),” Massumi (2005) himself confuses the distinctions he earlier relied on by describing the “affective manipulation” of the public through terror as a form of governmentality.

Within feminist media studies there is another history of affect, feminist work on media, such as film and television, and genres, such as melodrama, have always been concerned with affective registers and feminist theory has long been concerned with women’s “emotional labor.” Moreover, feminist scholars have always been attentive to the affectivity of their own knowledge production and their research practices, a theme taken up by Rebecca Coleman (see her contribution below) in her provocative account of affect as an ethical methodology in empirical media studies research. As well as highlighting this longer feminist history of affect, a history that is often displaced in accounts of the affective turn as “new,” what I want to focus on is the way in which feminist politics is shaping new affective methodologies. The best feminist media studies scholarship in this area acknowledges the longer history of feminist work on affect and emotions, experiments with

methods and pays close attention to the processes of repetition, circulation and figuration that characterize the (unequal and differential) mediation of affect, feelings, and emotion.

In my view, the most interesting contemporary feminist scholarship on affect doesn't understand affect in opposition to ideological critique. On the contrary it explores and interrogates political affects as they shape contemporary media and manifest in the contemporary geometries of the new world order. Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005), and Berlant's brilliant work on optimism (2004, 2006, 2007) are indicative examples of the ways in which feminist theory and studies of media are making a distinctive political turn to affect without abjecting the urgent need for ideological critique. Within this scholarship it is variously acknowledged that whilst affect and affective responses may indeed exceed or disrupt any secure naming—affects are nevertheless mediated—even whilst this means rethinking and radicalizing what “mediated” means. Affect is channeled within and across media with political consequences and we need to theorize these affects as not only unpredictable (which it can be) but also as strategic, and performed. Indicative in this regard is the work of the group “Feel Tank Chicago” (Lauren Berlant, Debbie Gould, Mary Patten, Rebecca Zorach) who in their artistic/activist/academic practices—marches, conferences, publications, blogs, websites, posters, art installations, reading groups, and talks—are forging new paths through a prevailing climate of methodological and political fatigue. Whilst the vocabulary of Feel Tank Chicago feels “new” and “distinctive,” in fact their practices acknowledge a long history of reciprocity between activism and research within feminist media studies. Indeed, Berlant states that she understands her involvement with Feel Tank as part of a larger project she titles “Feminism Unfinished” (2004, p. 450).

Alongside the largely US-based feminist work on affect cited above, there is an emergent body of transnational feminist media studies scholarship which engages, albeit in a different register, with theories of affect. I think it is fair to argue that some strands of feminist media studies have become too narrowly focused on the textual and ideological analysis of (primarily western) popular culture. Feminist media studies originating in Europe and North America, has too often “ghettoized” studies of nonwestern media under a “third world” label, has neglected entire geographical and geo-political arenas of cultural production, such as eastern European media, and failed to engage with either postcolonial, and transnational feminist theory or the global women's movement. In a new edited collection, *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media* (2007), Marciniak, Imre and O'Healy bring together a range of new scholarly work in this area in a provocative attempt to constitute a transnational feminist media studies. What is interesting is the central role that theories and notions of affect play in the emergence of a transnational feminist media studies. Indeed, in *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media* (2007) notions of political affect are deployed not only in the analysis of specific media, but in understanding transnational processes of media flow and, crucially, in enabling a vocabulary and register in which differently located feminist scholars can speak together across borders about the mediation of ethnicity, race, gender. Affect here becomes the shared methodological basis for new transnational collectivities of feminist media scholarship.

Returning to the concept of methodological fatigue with which I began, I would like to end by making two points. Firstly, whilst the ideological and methodological approaches that initially shaped feminist media studies as a field may feel inadequate to the task of critical engagement with the transformations effected by post-feminist media culture,

digital media, and the politics of transnational media culture, we should be cautious about viewing a move away from “critique” as in any way “progressive.” Rather we need to articulate more explicitly what “we”—a diverse, transnational body of feminist scholars—imagine the limitations of previous methodologies are and what methodologies might be adequate to the task to effectively respond to the stark and violent inequalities of the political present tense. Affect may be central to the development of new methodologies within this field, but it is crucial that feminist scholarship refuses the “post-ideological” prescriptions of affect theory.

Secondly, we need to remember that the “second wave” began in and with fatigue—certainly for Betty Friedan and the millions of women her work politicized in the late 1960s, it was a recognition of the politics of fatigue—specifically in this context the fatigue of white middle-class suburban housewives in the USA—that kick-started an energetic women’s movement. If the current sense of methodological fatigue is tied to wider currents of social and political “depression,” then we should not dismiss the affectivity of this state, but following Feel Tank’s lead, interrogate and mobilize political depression in our search for new methods of response. In place of Massumi’s call for an affect theory anchored in the “joy” of being “post-ideological” we need affective methodologies which acknowledge the unfinished histories and projects of feminism and postcolonialism. As Feel Tank Chicago provocatively suggest in their slogan, “Depressed? It Might Be Political.”

NOTES

1. Thanks to Jane Arthurs for suggesting this formulation.
2. Thanks to Rosalind Gill for drawing my attention to this article.

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Bodies, Ethics and Immanent Research: Deleuze's concept of affect as methodology

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While it is now widely noted that affect is increasingly significant to social, cultural and feminist theory, its methodological implications are less examined. In this short piece I focus on a notion of affect that Deleuze produces in his essay "Spinoza and Us" ([1970] 1988) in order to consider some of the ways it might be taken up as a methodology for empirical research on bodies, and their relations with images. My intention here is not so much to provide a "blueprint" for how feminist work should proceed as to raise questions for feminist media and cultural analysis, and to consider how these questions might open up research areas and debates.

Bodies of Affect, Immanence, and Ethics

Deleuze's ([1970] 1988) essay on ethology is an exploration of Spinoza's conception of bodies as "affective capacities" ([1970] 1988, p. 124). Gilles Deleuze discusses multiple definitions and examples of bodies as affect but here I will concentrate on the following explanation:

a body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity for affecting and being affected that defines a body in its individuality. ([1970] 1988, p. 123)

In this quotation, Deleuze suggests that, for Spinoza, "a body in its individuality" is defined by its "capacity for affecting and being affected." A body, then, far from being conceived in terms of its "form" (as a human being or subject, or a certain species of animal, for example) is defined by "the affects of which it is capable" ([1970] 1988, p. 124). Furthermore, the shift from understanding a body as form to a body as its affective capacities requires thinking in terms of connections and relations; an "individual" body is defined in terms of how it "affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies" and thus "a" body is always in relation with other (human and nonhuman) bodies.

An understanding of a body as affective capacities and as, therefore, defined in and through its relations with other bodies has, I suggest, many implications for methods and methodologies in social, cultural and media research. It is immediately clear, for example, that the bodies involved in research can be conceived in terms of affect; research involves different capacities of affecting and being affected. Feminist research has long pointed to the disparities in traditional research relations, with researchers having a higher threshold of affecting the data than the researched, and has argued the need for researchers to consider the *ethics* of research design, implementation, interpretation and distribution. Deleuze's notion of bodies as affective capacities also points to the question of ethics; indeed, one of the reasons that Deleuze gives for the way in which Spinoza's ethology

“calls out to us” ([1970] 1988, p. 125) is that “Spinoza’s ethics has nothing to do with a morality; he conceives it as an ethology, that is, a composition of fast and slow speeds, of capacities for affecting and being affected on this plane of immanence or consistency” ([1970] 1988, p. 125). To simplify for my purpose here, ethics are about affects and these affects are composed on a plane of immanence.

The notion of the plane of immanence that Deleuze introduces here in relation to Spinoza’s ethics also appears in some of his other work (for example, Deleuze 2001; Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Immanence refers to the “in-itself” of a thing; “Absolute immanence is in itself: it is not in something, *to* something; it does not depend on an object or belong to a subject” (Deleuze 2001, p. 26). The “plane of” immanence, in the sense discussed here, refers to the field in which relations of affect are composed; not as a “morality” but as immanent ethical connections. As affective capacities on a plane of immanence, bodies cannot be understood as forms—as subjects or species, for example, which take on particular meanings, significations, and representations—but as immanent (“in-itself”) affects. This is both a definition of a body as to its affects and an opening up of a body to its multiple and diverse connections. Indeed, in opening up how a body might be conceived through its immanent affective relations, Deleuze suggests that, “you do not know beforehand what good or bad you are capable of; you do not know beforehand what a body or a mind can do, in a given encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination” ([1970] 1988, p. 125). A body’s capacities are not knowable in advance of the given relations of affecting and being affected. That is, the affective capacities which define a body are not knowable in advance of the specific relations that produce them.

Two important points are raised here by the inter-connected notions of affective capacities and immanence which I will explore in the rest of this piece. The first is that the capacities which define a body are produced in and through that body’s affective relations. The second is that, as such, a body’s affective capacities cannot be known in advance of those relations. If, as I suggested above, research can be understood in terms of the affective relations between bodies (of the researcher[s] and the researched for example), questions of methodology emerge. For example, if the affective capacities between bodies cannot be known prior to the relations specific to the research, how are the relations of research to be taken into account in its planning? What does it mean for research not to know, in advance, how a body is to be understood, what its capacities of affecting and being affected might be? What might it mean for research to focus on bodies as affective capacities, rather than as subjects/subjectivities? What might it mean to do immanent research? In order to begin to address these questions, I discuss below one example from my own empirical research on the relations between bodies and images and the ways in which these relations were methodologically approached through Deleuze’s notions of affect and immanence. While clearly not answering these questions comprehensively, the discussion may indicate some possible methodological lines of enquiry for feminist media, cultural and social research on bodies. In particular, the “ethology” that Deleuze conceives as emerging through the affective capacities of bodies on a plane of immanence might extend the long-standing feminist interest in the ethics of research and in the relations between bodies and images.

How Might Affect as Methodology Work in Practice?

The research to which I refer here explored how thirteen 13- and 14-year-old white British girls knew, understood, and experienced their bodies through images

(Coleman forthcoming b).¹ Bodies and images were conceived not as separate or separable entities but as processes of becoming; bodies become through their relations with images. The research involved an initial meeting to explain the research, focus groups, individual interviews and an “image-making session” with the girls, who attended two schools, one in south east London and one in Oxfordshire, where the interviews took place within the school day. In terms of working through the questions regarding the methodological implications of an approach which highlights notions of affective capacities and immanence, a concern raised by some of the girls at initial meetings provides a helpful example.

In supplying their consent to continue as participants in research, some of the girls expressed concerns about what the research might be used for and how I might use their interview data. Their concerns seemed to settle around an anxiety that I would “go beneath” the data and interpret them according to ideas that they might not be familiar or comfortable with. Of course, it could be argued that this is what my research does; use difficult concepts through which to understand bodies, images, and the relations between them. However, while approaching bodies as capacities of affecting and being affected which become knowable through the relations immanent to those bodies is a difficult task, drawing on Deleuze’s discussion of ethology, I suggest it is also an ethical task. For example, the focus of my research is the relations between bodies and images and through a methodology of affect and immanence I am exploring bodies and images as constituted through their relations. That is, I am not attempting to understand *the girls* through data produced about relations but rather am attempting to understand the relations through which the data was produced. In this way, then, the research does not attempt to “go beneath” the data to interpret the girls’ bodies (as “forms,” for example) but instead focuses on the relationality of affective capacities. In a Deleuzian sense, the research is ethical in its understanding and exploration of bodies as affective capacities on a plane of immanence.

The research might also be considered ethical in its not knowing in advance of the plane of immanence of the research relations the affective capacities of the bodies involved. Put another way, a methodology of affect could not presume in advance how bodies might affect each other. In terms of my research, then, and again in relation to the initial meetings with the girls, it was important for me not to presume what relations between bodies and images would be important, what ways bodies and images might affect and be affected by each other. The initial meetings and focus groups were relatively unstructured and, after open questions such as “what images are important to you?” the girls discussed issues they experienced as significant. On a number of occasions the girls stopped their discussions and apologised for going “off topic”—I reassured them that they were not, and that I was interested in them discussing images that were important to them. By asking open questions and encouraging the girls to follow through issues interesting to them, I was trying not to presume in advance what kinds of affective relations there would be between bodies and images. (I was, of course, presuming my own capacities to affect the research relations and “direct” discussions in certain ways.)

Some quite significant data was, I think, produced through this methodological approach, and not least in the opening up of which images might be important to think about. For example, from initially discussing how mass media images made them feel bad about their bodies (the focus of much feminist empirical work in area, see Coleman forthcoming a), the girls began to talk much more interestingly about images of their bodies produced through their relations with boys, girls, and girl friends, images that might

have been “off topic” in research which “already knew” the relations between bodies and images. The concept of affect in this case provides not only a means of understanding and interpreting the interview data in terms of affective research relations but also, crucially, insists on a methodology which is open and unfolding. That is, Deleuzian affect as methodology suggests the production of data on a plane of immanence, through an immanent field of connections and affects.² The research, in this sense, can be considered “ethical” in its attention to images that the girls discussed as important to them, rather than as knowing, in advance, that the research would be concerned with relations between bodies and mass media images. While my methods of relatively unstructured focus groups and interviews are common to sociological research, and my following through of what is significant to research participants is not specific to a Deleuzian approach, my suggestion here is that a methodology of affect stretches the possibilities of an intense area of research where both government and academic research tends to know, in advance, that mass media images are the most significant relations between girls’ and young women’s bodies and images (Coleman forthcoming a).

In exploring some of the methodological questions and possibilities that a Deleuzian notion of affect suggests for feminist research on the relations between bodies and images, a number of inter-connected issues emerge. In particular, in suggesting that research ethics emerge through the immanence of the research relations and that the affective capacities of bodies cannot be known prior to “a given combination,” the foundations of feminist media, cultural and social research become uncertain. For example, what happens to feminist research on bodies and images when a methodology of affect cannot presume in advance which concepts, situations, relations will be important to its participants? Will categories such as sex and gender, which have grounded feminist analysis, emerge as significant? If not, what becomes of feminist research? What happens to the link between feminist research and social and cultural change if ethics emerge through immanent combinations? Whilst the uncertainties that these issues raise are potentially unsettling, such uncertainty can be understood not as necessarily placing feminist research in crisis but instead as productive; as a becoming of feminist research.

NOTES

1. It is worth noting that this was a sociological research project and that affect was mobilised as a sociological methodology. However, as the interest in the relations between (girls’ and women’s) bodies and images is trans-disciplinary, my argument here, therefore, resonates with feminist work in other disciplines, not least media and cultural studies.
2. This methodological point is underpinned by an ontology of process or becoming (Braidotti 2006; Deleuze & Guattari 1987) which conceives the world as constituted through constant movement and change. A methodology of affect, then, must itself be open to this transformation which, as I have suggested, is not knowable in advance.

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Beyond the Fourth Wall: Reading, passing, and intervention in internet research

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I. Panic

However familiar we may be with the internet as an element of everyday life, its representation in the popular media continues to be characterised by a continual reproduction of "newness," through narratives of both wonder and threat. The internet is still discussed largely in superlatives: it is a bazaar in which it is possible to find anything: the rarest and most exotic foods; the subtlest perfumes; the most evil paedophiles; cannibals; images of violence, rape, executions real and staged (and the trial coverage of a high-profile child pornography case emphasised that the defendant also had easy access to images of torture); terrorism (both the planning of attacks, and "justifying or glorifying" thereof, as UK law has it); perverts and predators of every type imaginable; the best bargain EVER; Diana death pics; the love of one's life. Online encounters may be lived as authentic, but in the popular imagination they are haunted by a desire to fix and authenticate a "truth" which is assumed to exist "in real life." Whilst the internet is constantly and contradictorily constructed as simultaneously a feast of wonders and a space of unimaginable transgression, the fantasy persists that control can be re-established if only one establishes what is real. Every online encounter takes place against this background of cultural anxiety. Who or what is out there?

How, then, to intervene in this discourse of panic? Here, I want to consider how a feminist media studies methodology informed by queer theory might engage with online texts and subjects, without reproducing a discourse of panic. I argue that such a queer methodology is capable of doing justice to the ways in which, in online spaces, the boundaries between texts, identities, and subjects are constantly disrupted, in challenging but also productive ways. By engaging with queer theory, it is possible from online feminist research to give up the seductive fantasy of the research process as an attempt to discover some authentic "truth," to fix what is "real" (and the fantasy of realness need not mean establishing who subjects are in their everyday, offline lives; the notion of fantasy selves as authentic is just as seductive, and just as limiting). In this paper, I offer some reflections on my own work as a starting point to consider how a queer feminist methodology might engage with online texts, and what such a methodology might be.

II. Passing and Intervention

The starting point for a methodology for online research is, for me, a recognition that the online texts do not exist in isolation, but are embedded in a cultural context in which identities are always already mediated; that *all* identities are produced through stories, fantasies, and technologies. By taking this into account, it is possible to avoid reproducing the notion that online identities are superimposed on a pre-existing authentic self. The research on which I am going to reflect here—particularly my two projects on pro-anorexic websites and online cross-dressers' blog—is not simply concerned with the theoretical implications of online texts, but also with the wider cultural contexts from which they emerge. This means that, alongside my reading of online texts I track three separate and interlocking discourses within the popular media. These are commentaries on the internet as a cultural phenomenon, responses to the actual communities I am studying, and the wider cultural representation of the anorexic and the transvestite as figures.

Moral panic about the internet relies on a sense that the reader is being deceived and is hence always implicitly a narrative of *passing*. The internet is seen not as a set of texts, but as a freak show, a theatre in which everyone is putting on an act, adding up to one vast, grotesque spectacle. The Other is assumed to want to pass, to "get one past us": much of what passes for commentary on virtual life is no more than a performance of not—being—fooled. In this it recalls the practice of "outing." In my research on crossdressing, conducted with Simon Lock, subjects spoke wearily of the constant need to fend off concerned outsiders pointing out that the "lady" walking down the street was *really* a "bloke in a dress" (Ferreday & Lock 2007): one long conversation on a bulletin board concerned the best times to walk down Canal Street in Manchester without having one's wig snatched off by some belligerent drunk intent on not being fooled. Emily Howard, the self-deceiving trannie from the comedy series *Little Britain*, her catchphrase "I'm a lady" uttered in a grotesque, fluting parody of feminine speech, became a figure around which online communities defined their identity precisely as the *absence* of a desire to try and pass.

The recent furore over size zero models has taken a similar trajectory. Open any celebrity magazine, any week, and see a plethora of models and actresses being outed as "really" anorexic (indeed, there are a number of websites dedicated to collecting "skinny celeb" articles, of which the best known is *Skinny Celebrities*). A recent caption in *Heat* magazine published under the heading "Walking Skeletons," says of the actress Keira Knightley, "Keira . . . [maintains] that she is naturally skinny. But this picture of her bony chest does little to silence her critics" (2007, p. 24). Again the narrative is one of passing: beneath the designer clothes, the rare jewellery and skilfully applied makeup, there is assumed to lurk pathology, disease, vomit. The skinny actress is a walking skeleton, a figure of liminality: presuming to embody youth, beauty, health, but in reality half dead already. The reader's gaze, looking on this abject spectacle, is absolved of prurience through a language of critique, of intervention ("will do little to silence her critics") that conceals its production of a relation of power in which only one form of intervention is acceptable; one which produces the female body as abject. If identity is a performance, increasingly, everyone is a critic (or indeed a heckler).

Like the hecklers on Canal Street (and the trolls who post offensive comments on blogs), this magazine positions itself as speaking back to what it constructs as a hegemonic celebrity culture that is trying to get one over on the reader; a deception which is embodied in the undecidability, the queerness, of the too-skinny body. Such a speaking back, however, is limited since its trajectory is always to restore order by reading the body

in question “as” anorexic. In this model of intervention, it is unimaginable for the anorexic herself to speak; since to occupy an undecidable identity position is, by its very nature, to lack the integrity necessary for authoritative speech. Hence the internet becomes the focus of fears about “real” identity precisely because it allows for the production of identity performances that are not fixed, that speak *from* a position of multiple subjectivity that is defined as abject, as a non-subjectivity that is always Other. Online identity performances are threatening, not because we do not know who is out there in each individual case, but because they undo the very fantasy of authority that underpins the desire to know: that is, they threaten the pleasure of knowing *who we are* which is implicit in a model of identity based on performance and audience.¹

Above, I raised the question of how a queer feminist methodology might engage with online identity performances. When I am asked what I mean by feminist research, I usually reply that it is research that makes an intervention.² Yet as my research leads me across media and across social contexts, I constantly find myself speaking *against* interventions, whether these take the form of the public violence of outing, the censorship of web communities by ISPs, or the more implicit forms of concern voiced in the language of therapy culture (and indeed of feminism). I do not think the answer, here, is to try and intervene in a more correct way; instead, I think we need to interrogate the very notion of critique itself. How, then, might a feminist methodology do justice to the complexity of online identity performances, without reproducing the violence of passing?

In trying to answer this question, it is instructive to think about how we might imagine a queering of the relationship between researcher, subject, and technology. Butler’s notion of queer agency is particularly helpful here. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler writes of queer agency as that which “finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavours to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them” (2004, p. 3); however, such a subject risks becoming “undone,” to use her evocative term, when it is no longer recognisable. This is the very paradox from which, for Butler, critique emerges: “I may feel that without some recognisability I cannot live. But I may also feel that *the terms by which I am recognized* make life unliveable” (2004, p. 4; emphasis added).

Butler’s understanding of critique, here, as “an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living,” notwithstanding the impossibility of defining feminist critique as a single, unified object, seems a good place to start, not least because it recognises that online identity performances and feminist research come from the same roots, that both occupy multiple, shifting and dialogic subject positions that are embedded in social norms (and hence to be wary, for example, of the fantasy of scholarly authority that precisely constructs the researcher as somehow beyond those norms).

III. Through the Fourth Wall? (Dis)Respecting the Story in Online Space

Above, I touched on the problem of performing identities in a cultural context in which one is constantly subject to critique and heckling. The theatrical metaphor was suggested to me by the concept of “the fourth wall,” which was used by a research participant, Siobhan Curran, to describe the way in which “male mode” photographs disrupt the viewer’s fantasy of the transvestite “as” woman (Ferreday & Lock 2007, pp. 167–168).³

I want to develop this concept further as I think it provides a useful starting point for working towards a queer feminist methodology for researching online and offline identities.

In theatre and film theory, to “break the fourth wall” is to acknowledge the presence of the audience, as when a character in a television show speaks directly to the camera, apparently addressing the viewer. In traditional theatre and also naturalistic cinema and television, it is considered undesirable: it breaks the illusion of reality, making the suspension of disbelief impossible to sustain. On the surface, this seems like an odd way of conceptualising online texts; after all, the point of a blog is to engage in dialogue with the (actual or imagined) reader: it is a text that encourages speaking back. In this sense it may seem that the internet is never a theatre of the fourth wall.

For Siobhan, however, the breach occurred not when she engaged in dialogue with her audience; this dialogue was an integral part of her online performance of transvestite identity. Instead, the perceived disruption is an effect of the refusal to pass, the moment at which the male images refute the reader’s fantasy that he or she is looking at images of a woman (or indeed of a subject who desires to pass as a woman). The concept of the fourth wall precisely suggests that the performance on stage is not fixed, but is produced through dialogue between performer and audience: as the game developer Sheldon points out, the notion of breaking the fourth wall is implicit in text-based games with instructions written in the second person, such as “you open the door and walk into the next room,” since “whenever there is a ‘you,’ there is also an ‘I’” (2004, p. 182). In modern games, the breach occurs when the game characters speak direct to camera as it were, addressing the gamer. This, he says, is often a bad idea, since it contradicts the need to “respect the story”:

Another reason writers of games break the fourth wall ... [is] an attitude of superiority where the writer feels the need to reassure the gamer that he knows it’s all nonsense... the writer can reassure the gamer that, like he, the writer is far hipper than the material he’s writing. He isn’t, of course. Those who feel themselves above the material come and go, but genres endure. (Lee Sheldon 2004, p. 182)

What, then, does it mean to see identity performances as a theatre of the fourth wall, but one in which the fourth wall is constantly breached, indeed in which the breaking of the fourth wall is written into the performance; and what implications might such a view have for researching online subjectivities as well as for other forms of research? This notion of identity as a performance that always implies a “you” and an “I” potentially have powerful implications for feminist research since it allows for new ways of thinking through identity performances, including those of researcher, feminist, and critic. Such a methodology pays attention to the ways in which performances are embedded in the enduring genres of social norms, but precisely allows for a belief in the critical and transformative possibilities of a space in which it is possible *not* to respect the tired old stories of identity and passing that are endlessly recirculated in popular culture. Online space thus enables both performer and audience the fantasy of seeing identity not as a performance staged for an audience of hecklers and potentially hostile critics but as a mutual production that “speaks back” to the audience. Turning Sheldon’s formulation on its head, we might say that genres may or may not endure, but this does not negate the experiences of those who “feel themselves to be above the material.” The project of feminist research is to pay attention to the ways in which identity performances *might* be “hipper than the material” of social norms, whilst also acknowledging their enduring power.

However, I also think we need to be wary of conceiving of ourselves as being above the material questions of power and difference that inform feminist research. It should not be assumed, then, that a queer feminist methodology should always favour the breaking down of boundaries between researcher and subject, or that it is incapable of making judgements. Instead, it is capable of reframing the relationship between researcher and subject, of recognising the futility of research as a fixing of the truth that is “out there,” and acknowledging that the unknown other who is “out there,” for members of online communities may well be the researcher herself. A queer feminist methodology, then, needs to deconstruct the model of researcher/subject as critic/performer that is implicit in discourses of moral panic, whilst refusing the fantasy of being above these material relations.

NOTES

1. This idea is developed further in Ferreday (forthcoming).
2. I am grateful to Rebecca Coleman for helping me to define this notion of feminist research as intervention.
3. The ethical implications of drawing concepts directly from research participants' blogs is far too complex to be properly addressed in a paper of this length. I think the concept of research participants *as* theorists, proposed by Nahman (2007), has great potential for thinking through questions of participation, authorship, and theory in feminist research and I intend to explore this further in a forthcoming longer version of this paper.

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