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SENSATIONAL VULNERABILITIES

EFFIGIES OF PERSONHOOD, INTIMACY AND CITIZENSHIP IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SOCIAL CHANGE

As an undergraduate I became fascinated with the relationships between performance and protest. One production I collaborated upon used spoken word, skits, interviews, and archival footage to explore contemporary collisions between gender, race, and sexuality at my small, privileged college in New England. It sparked some thoughtful discussions among the student body about how varying degrees of disprivilege condition values and standpoints. Interestingly, several protests challenging the power inequalities and cultural callousness derived from those asymmetries in power

were less successful, despite being couched in the same language. This disparity between the effect of performance and that of protest sparked my interest in how these mediums interact with their context and audiences, creating different possibilities for dialogue and change. After teaching for a few years at a public high school in rural New Hampshire, I returned to graduate school to explore the role of performance in social protest. In my four years in the Women's Studies doctoral program, I have become intrigued by how more dominant ideologies and political agendas are able to harness theatricality to shore up





their power. In the months leading up to the 2008 election, the role of sensationalism and spectacle-oriented distractions seemed particularly central.

Consequently, my dissertation examines how sensationalist, activist performances generate symbolic and political purchase for three–twenty-first century conservative movements opposed to liberalized immigration, abortion, and gay marriage laws. Xenophobic immigration discourse, proliferat-

ing Defense of Marriage Acts, and renewed “pro-life” platforms warn that American culture, heterosexual intimacy, and human life are positioned as vulnerable and on the brink of extinction. Their conservative supporters use highly visual, dramatically oriented tactics—repertoires— to generate emotional outrage in response to this sense of vulnerability, as well as a moral identification with being at risk. By focusing on the repertoires of the anti-immigration, anti-abortion,

and anti-queer movements, my research maps how vital understandings of masculine citizenship, personhood, and intimacy are being reworked, often in ways that reinvigorate seemingly archaic, but actually quite pervasive, racist, gendered, and homophobic habits. I examine how each movement deploys visual imagery, figurative language, and performance to generate an emotionally persuasive repertoire that attempts to influence contemporary ideologies of nation, life, intimacy, and security.

Garbed in pioneer or militia clothing and wielding signs such as “An Illegal Immigrant Stole My Identity,” the Minutemen self-deputize themselves to monitor significant crossing points on the US–Mexico border. Anti-abortion groups such as the Genocide Awareness Project juxtapose photographs of live smiling infants, with toddlers killed as casualties of war, with presumably post-abortion dismembered fetuses to equate the military and biological tragedies of the latter two with risk to the first.

And after the May 2008 California Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage and granted sexual orientation the same robust anti-discrimination scrutiny extended to race, the conservative Family Research Council published full-page advertisements in major US newspapers urging readers to enjoy what might be the last Father’s Day, since the status of “husband” is being rewritten as “spouse” on state marriage licenses, and “father” might meet a similar fate.

Despite their sensationalism, these strategies have garnered significant cultural and political traction. The 2007 US Supreme Court decision upholding President George W. Bush’s “partial birth abortion” ban legally enshrines what had been an anti-abortion symbolic tactic pitting mother against fetus. To date, 45 states have exclusively defined marriage as a heterosexual institution through legislative and ballot-based Defense of Marriage Acts. And the Minutemen’s video surveillance of border activity has direct feeds to

open-virtual networks and in some cases, the Department of Homeland Security.

Rather than signaling grounds for dismissal, it is precisely the sensationalist tenor of these activist campaigns that makes them effective. If anxiety accompanies the transformation of ethnic demographics and sexual values, then these conservative activists use sensationalism to sharpen that anxiety into a feeling of vulnerability. When they monitor the border in pioneer-reminiscent clothing or declare abortion to violate the civil rights of the unborn, performance-oriented tactics endow formerly abstracted tropes of citizenship with a more material salience. By often literally embodying emotion-laden American mythologies (that is, the frontier, liberty, the family), these strategies retrofit them with contemporary emotional purchase. The Minutemen, for example, refract pop-historical understandings of moral rebellion through the modern lens of terrorism and global capitalism to position the

nation itself as insecure and in need of militarized protection. Corporeal, emotional, and theatrical tactics flesh out abstracted notions of a vulnerable body politic with a heightened emotional urgency that often translates into political action—what I term *political affect*.

Social movement scholars contend that disenfranchised groups must employ theatrical, public tactics to cultivate cultural support when more mainstream political channels are denied them. Consequently, it is notable that these resource-rich, conservative groups, too, deploy a highly symbolic repertoire of dramatic and corporeal strategies to make their political claims of vulnerability and insecurity. Because they frame their struggles in terms of *retaining* or protecting “traditional” icons (the border, the baby as newborn citizen, and the institution of marriage) of national identity rather than transforming or petitioning for inclusion within them, conservative social movements can arguably leverage symbols *more* persuasively in visual

and dramatic activist modes. Rather than leading to easy dismissal, sensationalist tactics generate *more* political traction precisely because they conflate emotional and corporeal sensations with politics.

This dissertation, then, takes an alternative look at the political valences and the effects of activist repertoires, particularly their sensationalist configuring of vulnerability and corporeality. Vulnerability, fear, and insecurity have particularly potent political affects that many humanist-oriented scholars have championed as a generative site for responsive social change. Judith Butler and Martha Fineman, among many others, observe that by acknowledging the shared human risk of bodily vulnerability we can generate a politics of compassion across disparate economic, national, and ideological differences, without obscuring how some groups are more systematically exposed to vulnerability than others. By reorienting ontological, legal, and human-rights frameworks to address vulnerability, particularly

the body at risk of pain, we are better able to substantively address these structural power asymmetries than arguments for equal protection or liberty allow.

What needs more attention is how it is precisely corporeal vulnerability that is also used to ideologically justify violence and discrimination, such as the invasion of Afghanistan or proliferating Defense of Marriage Acts. Conservative political platforms particularly rely upon valuing the physical vulnerability of some constituencies while obscuring that of others. This is evident in the revived protection of the “fetal person” in the law and public policy and the simultaneous shrinking of social welfare and civil rights protections for poor pregnant women and women of color. Indeed, vulnerability is among the conditions of possibility authorizing discourses and public policies espousing a national state of emergency and protectionism of an insecure body politic.

It is my preliminary contention that vulnerability—including but

not limited to corporeal vulnerability—is more easily intelligible when wielded by conservative ideologies. Across political topographies, the vulnerable body—especially the body in pain—is supposed to act as irrefutable evidence testifying to violations of basic human rights. The dismembered hand of a fetus can only signal the violence of abortion a moment ago, off-frame. Consequently, the wound is supposed to be immune to ideological manipulation of its meaning. It functions as an icon of the real that can quell political quibbling and expedite moral action and justice.

But conservative movements fix the meaning of vulnerability and pain outside of history and discourse, using the realness of the body as a placeholder, an effigy, for narratives that are now invested with the same irrefutability attributed to the corpse. The fertilized egg or a fetus is equated with a born person, the particular fragility of unborn or new life generalized to all humanity, irrespective of their

social situatedness. Consequently, the body in pain is paradoxically used to detach vulnerability from the physical realm and asymmetries in power. It allows abortion to be analogized with war, the aborted fetus equated with a victim of genocide.

In this process, the right draws upon dominant national imaginaries of security and homogeneity: persons should be whole, American culture uniform, marriage heterosexual. Sensationalized vulnerabilities become a means of reminding us of our failure to fulfill these fantasies, as well as their potential recovery through conservative social and political change. When a Genocide Awareness Project activist cradles a live infant in one arm and waves macabre placards of dismembered fetuses with the other, the wholeness of the toddler petitions for the right to life of the fetus. Fantasies of a homogenously white, monolingual United States are resurrected in English-only local initiatives. And nostalgia over the lost paradise of uncomplicated

heterosexual families is supposed to be sharpened by images of two women in suits getting a marriage license. Sensationalized vulnerabilities emerge as a potent political tool that performs fears of personal and cultural insecurity to refresh an affective, sense-based nationalism.

By starting on the right rather than the left as social movement, performance, and cultural projects often do, I hope to better understand how aesthetic-oriented tactics of -twenty-first-century social justice campaigns across the political spectrum generate cultural and political change, register the conservation and transformation of vital national mythologies, and gesture to the limits of our political and social frameworks. I assess how these movements' strategic repertoires draw upon dominant cultural myths and nationalist iconographies to engender political affect, gain cultural traction, and generate rights claims that are codified into public policy change. How do these performance idioms revitalize lackluster positions with new interest,

appealing to— variously—nostalgic ideals of belonging, classically republican notions of personhood, anti-intellectualism, and fears over a vulnerable body politic? What nationalist mythologies and racial and gendered inequalities are supported in this pursuit and what alternative configurations are forgotten or distorted? And finally, what do these mobilizations have to teach us about the anatomies, potentialities, and limits of our political frameworks and social change idioms themselves? As part of a larger transformative political project, I want to intimately learn the anatomy of that critical place where the repertoires of democracy stiffen into rote reiterations of fearful cultural mythologies.

Katie Oliviero is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Women's Studies at UCLA. Her research interests include performance, socio-legal, American, and cultural studies, with an emphasis on the roles of embodiment, memory, and pedagogy.