

Activist Affect

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Qualitative Inquiry
2019, Vol. 25(6) 563–565
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DOI: 10.1177/1077800418800753
journals.sagepub.com/home/qix



Abstract

This brief essay considers what new materialist thought and affect theory in particular might bring to activist politics, particularly the need to sustain the energy and power of public assembly in the form of political marches into a movement that persists in and through time. We consider the site of both terrorist and activist acts not only as a public space—or stage—upon which both acts occur, but instead as public body that keeps the movement moving.

Keywords

affect, activism, autoethnography, movement

The Westminster Bridge in London spans 250 meters across the River Thames, stretching from County Hall and the London Eye on the east to the House of Commons and the Palace of Westminster on the west. Built in 1862, it has kept a strong and silent watch over the brackish water below. While the bridge might seem inanimate, an object made of iron and stone, an autoethnography of the Westminster Bridge might suggest a different perspective on its life and the ways in which its own story and the events of history are more actively intertwined than first meets the eye.

Consider the bridge as Kathleen Stewart would, a “space of shared impact” (Stewart 39). Consider more recently two related events, two affective performances in which the bridge is a space of shared impact, a crucial player. On March 22, 2017, Kahlid Masood drove through a crowd of tourists walking over the Thames before crashing the gates at Parliament, taking the lives of five people and injuring 50 before he came to a stop (Allen & Henderson, 2017).

About 4 days later, scores of Muslim women, wearing blue as a symbol of hope, linked arms and formed a human chain of resistance (Pasha-Robinson, 2017). Without a word, they rejected the driver’s use of the bridge as an instrument of fear. By making a bridge over the bridge, they resisted the business as usual that pretends the car and the driver and the impact they made had never happened. In that simple, silent action, the women and the bridge broadcast to the world a different kind of activist affect. So we ask, if one were to identify an affect of terrorism, and an affect of activism, what might they look like, and might they have more in common than we think?

Siegworth and Gregg (2010) suggest that “Affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon” (p. 1). In the midst of a workday afternoon—as the women locked arms and the mist of everyday life

(and death) swirled below them in the Thames, above them in the clouds, and among them on the bridge, they chose to refuse the refusal that is terrorism. Affect “is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human and nonhuman), in those resonances that circulate about, between and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds” (Siegworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1).

At first blush, both the terrorist act and the activist act have a familiar—and similar—emotional tenor: angry and defiant. A gathering of emotion that eventuates inevitably into a cathartic public event. The emotionality that drives people to the streets can be galvanizing but threatens to replace long-term activism. Aristotle taught us the power of collective emotion and catharsis. Autoethnographers too, know this truth. But Brecht warned us of the danger of replacing sustainable social action with emotional identification and quick-fix collective catharsis. And Kathleen Stewart (2007) argues that what autoethnographers do best is offer us broad-ranging explorations of “what happens to people, how force hits bodies, how sensibilities circulate and become . . . collective” (p. 661). In other words, emotion is a circuit, not an endpoint.

The women on the bridge—and the bridge itself—offer us a different kind of *activist affect*, different kind of action—more particularly a re-action that is not reactive, but instead a resistive reclamation of that space. Their agentic, if quiet, refusal might be one way to overcome the danger of siphoning off the energy expended by raging

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bodies—over and over again—and avoid the battle fatigue we are all feeling now. The overwhelm itself becomes a kind of terrorism, and there's no time or space for being overwhelmed.

Since the proliferation of the women's marches across the globe,¹ we've asked ourselves how to turn a march into a movement. The women and the bridge pose a slightly different question—how do we turn the *energy* of a march into a movement. Movement, as Erin Manning (2009) has it, is really a question of “readiness potential,”² the “immanence of movement moving [or] how movement can be felt before it actualizes” (p. 6). So the power of the “event on the bridge” is a suggestion of how to keep that movement moving.

Their re-action involves taking a stand on and with others. The bridge becomes a player on the human stage—it is not only public space, it is a public body that keeps the immanence of movement moving. Judith Butler (2015), following Hannah Arendt (1958), argues that politics is bodies acting together (p. 75). The women and the bridge connect—the “singularity” of one person's experience and one event's meaning in time into what Brian Massumi (2002) describes as a “vital movement” that can be “collectively spread” (p. 250). And although the women filed off the bridge that day in March as darkness fell, the energy they set in motion remains, not just as a memory but also as a future—in the readiness potential of a march that becomes a movement. In standing *with* the bridge and not only on it, linking arms in solidarity over the brackish water below.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Reports indicate that hundreds (if not more than a thousand) with estimates of participants ranging from 2 to 4.2 million participants spanning the globe were inspired by the Women's March on Washington (Frostenson, 2017; Spector, 2017).
2. Theron Schmidt (2015) the neuro/philosophical construct describing how voluntary movement—the blink of an eye, the turning of a cheek, the embrace of a lover—is preceded by a movement in the brain, a spark of electricity that accompanies the intention or the decision to move (p. 5). Readiness potential is what Erin Manning (2009) describes as the “immanence of movement moving: how movement can be felt before it actualizes” (p. 6). We can think of readiness potential as a gathering, a “moment of unformed and unstructured potential,” an affective intensity (Shouse, 2005, par. 5).

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