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The Multiple Futures of Feminism

BAD FEELINGS, THE POTENTIAL OF STORY-TELLING, AND UNRULY POLITICS

Tuija Saresma, Katariina Kyrölä, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen & akshay khanna

Feminism as a concept and as a movement tends to provoke ambivalent responses. Although gender equality is a commonly shared value, feminism remains hotly debated in Finland, and explicit anti-feminism often intertwines with homophobic, xenophobic, and racist currents. To resist reactionary mobilization, new generations of feminists are defining their feminism as intersectional. For them, analysing gender and gender-based subordination is not enough, but racism, homophobia and transphobia need to be tackled just as urgently.

The possible futures of feminism, its utopias and dystopias, were the topic of a panel discussion at the annual Finnish gender studies conference organized by the University of Jyväskylä in collaboration with the Association for Gender Studies in Finland (SUNS) in Jyväskylä in November 2017. The invited participants were akshay khanna, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Katariina Kyrölä. The discussion was chaired by Tuija Saresma.

POLITICS OF AFFECT AND THE MULTIPLICATION OF FEMINISMS

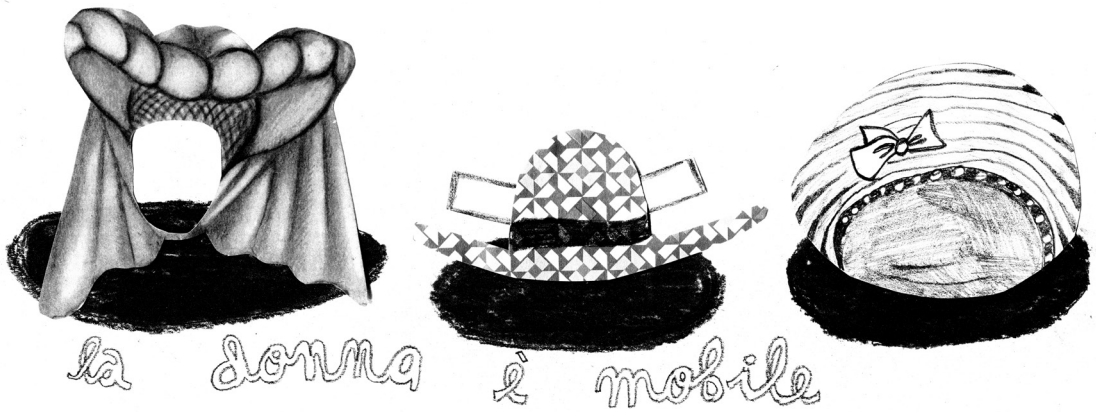
KATARIINA KYRÖLÄ: I want to propose two challenges for the future of feminism. The first concerns the politics of affect, in particular the politics of bad feeling. What kind of feminist work can feeling bad do? How can we transform bad feelings about injustices into action and practice?

The second challenge concerns the diversification and multiplication of feminism. It seems that feminism will continue to multiply and divide into new subfields and aligned fields. What should we do with this multiplication? How can we choose what to read and what to teach?

A lot can be said about how the world, and perhaps the social media and especially the political situation, make us feel bad about ourselves and about others who suffer. It may easily seem like the future opens up before us as a bottomless pit of more

bad feelings. However, bad feelings are also key motivators for getting things done. Feminist scholars, myself included, are used to turning anger and pain into forces driving our work. Sometimes a bad feeling may be the only feeling one can feel good about. However, feeling right is still not the same thing as acting right. My concern for the future of feminisms is this: what if we get stuck in bad feeling?

bell hooks has called such a state “learned helplessness” (2003, 6), referring to white liberal attitudes towards racism or other types of oppression which acknowledge the marginalizing nature of the structures and one’s own privilege enabled by them, yet keep the focus on the bad feelings of white people. Similarly, Sara Ahmed (2010) talks about the tendency of the privileged to perceive voices of the marginalized as those of troublemakers and producers of bad feeling, instead of recognizing that they point out injustices that must be corrected. So, how



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to translate the powerful engine of bad feeling to transformative action that does not smooth over the injustices, or continue to prioritize the privileged?

Let us move on to the second challenge, the multiplication of feminisms. Here is a list, only one of many possible lists, of what might be the key directions in the future of feminist scholarship: trans theory, black feminist theory, decolonial feminisms, critical studies of whiteness, indigenous feminist theories, feminist fat studies, feminist disability studies, crip theory, feminist post-humanisms, new materialist feminisms, Southern feminist theories, and the list goes on.

Many of us may feel a pang of guilt or discomfort when confronted with such lists. Perhaps some of us also felt slight annoyance since I failed to name a theoretical field they consider as essential. When bad feeling bad stops at guilt, it is a problem. And the worst thing that can come out of bad feeling is avoidance. Like the Sámi feminist scholar Rauna Kuokkanen (Knoblock & Kuokkanen 2015) has argued about white feminists' relationship to indigenous feminisms, the problem is not an outright opposition but non-recognition and indifference.

But one of the most enduring forces of feminisms, what it thrives on, is opening itself up constantly to change and to internal critique. Some of the mentioned fields of theory may be used as part of a neo-liberal language of newness (Bilge 2013). Some have existed for a long time, just not in the field of vision of white feminist theories. I think that opening up

and multiplication are keys to the survival of feminisms in the future – as they have been in the past.

SCIENCE FICTION, STORYTELLING, AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

AINO-KAISA KOISTINEN: When I was asked to join this panel, three concepts immediately came to my mind: science fiction, storytelling, and the Anthropocene. Science fiction is of course easy to connect to the idea of future feminisms, as it is at the core of the genre to imagine different worlds and futures. Another important element for science fiction is estrangement. The genre's stories create worlds that differ from the readers' lived reality while remaining in some manner recognizable to them (Suvin 1979). Because of this estrangement, science-fiction stories can comment on various cultural, ethical, and political phenomena perhaps more easily than genres that are more reliant on mimetic representation.

Ever since the proliferation of feminist science fiction in the 1960s and 1970s, this form of cultural commentary has often centred on essentially feminist themes. Indeed, science fiction has inspired many feminist scholars, such as Veronica Hollinger (e.g. 2003), Rosi Braidotti (e.g. 2003), and Donna Haraway (e.g. 2016). Hollinger notes that for Teresa de Lauretis (1986, 11) telling new stories is an important part of feminism. The practice of imaginative storytelling therefore connects feminism and science fiction. (Hollinger 2003, 127–128.)

Haraway also argues for the significance of storytelling for feminist theory, and advocates for the power of science fiction in telling these stories. At a time many would call the Anthropocene, usually meaning the epoch of human domination over the earth, we need to tell stories about how to live ethically with the non-humans who share the world with us. Haraway thus argues for practices of storytelling that take into account the evolution of humans, that still continues, in messy entanglements with other species. (Haraway 2016, 2–3, 49–50, 60–67; see also Karkulehto, Koistinen, Lummaa, and Varis, forthcoming.)

Haraway (2016, 1–4) is nevertheless critical of telling stories about the future, as these stories all too easily end up advocating either techno-utopias or post-apocalyptic dystopias. In doing so, they tend to evoke either false optimism, especially regarding technology, or dire pessimism. Both might stop us from doing anything in order to achieve conditions that would allow both humans and non-humans to flourish in the present. Here, I see a connection to what Katariina was talking about with dystopias evoking bad feelings leading to avoidance.

The science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin (1976) argues that instead of future-oriented extrapolation, science fiction should be seen as thought experiments grounded in the present, in the now. These experiments invite us to see our world differently. Le Guin (1976) also claims that “[t]he future, in fiction, is a metaphor”. I take this to mean that the artist’s task is to metaphorically show us how our present affects our future. This can inspire us to act in a manner that will enable us to achieve a better future. Thus, telling stories about a feminist future may transform our present as well as our future. Going back to Katariina’s talk, can we use stories to transform feeling bad into action?

DIGITALIZATION AND THE TEMPORALITY OF MEMORY, POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY, AND POLITICS OF CONDEMNATION

AKSHAY KHANNA: A group of us came together to look at politics that highlights things that have not been traditionally looked upon as elements of politics. We started calling this “unruly politics”.

Unruly politics is not a description of a new form of politics. It is about being able to see elements that were not earlier visible to traditional forms of analyses of politics.

I feel that we are living in a moment when representational democracy has been so entirely appropriated by capitalism that representational democracy is the old thing. We are pushing against that and demanding a new imagination, a new way in which we organize ourselves. Most of the experiments that have happened, such as what happened in Tahrir Square, are demonstrations of deliberative, direct democracy.

That, to me, seems to be the meta-narrative. How is this articulated in feminist politics? Let us look at the ‘Me too’ campaign, which was articulated in different ways in different parts of the world. I don’t think there is just one way in which the ‘Me too’ campaign has unfolded. But around the world it has created a rupture, and for a moment, we have been able to glimpse several truths about the articulation of patriarchy in work and educational spaces. We can perceive the prevalence of male entitlement, not just of women’s bodies but of the bodies of all those who are not in possession of penetrative penises.

In the Indian context, this moment has also been about feminist crises, and generated a crisis within feminism itself. The ‘Me too’ campaign occasionally shifted into a ‘Him too’ campaign by naming the abuser. An Indian feminist wrote a solicitation on Facebook saying we are going to make a list of all the men who have harassed us. And within a few hours there were 40 or 50 people on the list and it kept expanding, including a large number of well-respected professors, young and old, many of whom happen to be leftist and extremely vocal in their opposition to fascism in the Indian context.

A group of feminists responded the next day, saying that she had simply named people without actually making accusations or providing narratives. That she had at once become the judge, the jury, and the executioner. And they said that her actions undermined three decades of work in creating laws and institutions in the academia for addressing the problem of sexual harassment.

And from that moment onwards, rather than being about patriarchy within these institutions,

within academia, the movement has become about a crisis in feminism. It is now about, “you old school feminists versus us young ones”. It is a question of generation and of class. The woman who originally posted the list makes a claim to a *dalit* identity and calls these other feminists upper class. Multiple fractures and a multiplicity of feminisms are articulated at this one moment.

I want to connect these events to unruly politics. They are by definition unruly politics, irreverent to the ways in which the state has defined politics, also irreverent to the way long-standing movements have functioned.

What are the material conditions that allowed for this to happen? For a large part, social media and the internet have been celebrated as democratizing forces. Social media articulates politics in various ways. If you look at Tahrir Square, which was called the Facebook revolution and the Twitter revolution, the function of social media was simply to get people on the streets. With the ‘Me too’ campaign, the site of politics itself, the site of the struggle for justice itself, is virtual.

There are two points that I want to make about the virtual and social media performances. One is that social media, the digital, intervenes in the mechanisms of memory and temporality. A debate that takes place on Facebook and everyone has to respond to it. It is like, “oh my god the world is exploding”, and yet next week there is another event, and you have moved on. The affect you experienced has become inaccessible to you. The way we outsource our function of memory into the digital is the cause of some very critical changes.

The second challenge is that political subjectivity is not an ideology anymore, but something always articulated in relation to various other articulations. How is politics contained in the virtual? Something happens and there is an imperative to comment on it, and most often you are either with us or against us. That is the frame that the digital tends to take. The political subject is already articulated as an assemblage. This leaves us with politics as condemnation, or condemnation as politics. When the list of male names I mentioned earlier was created, it was imperative that one had to condemn all the people on that list, or clearly state that you are

opposed to the list: there were only two positions you could take, and whichever side you pick, you will be condemned by the other. How do we address the reduction of politics to condemnation?

INJUSTICE AND TAKING ACTION

A question from the audience: is feminism not about spotting injustices rather than about feelings?

AINO-KAISA KOISTINEN: I immediately connected the idea of spotting injustices to estrangement and storytelling because I think that the potential of storytelling is in helping us to spot an injustice. In science fiction this can be done by creating a world that is different from ours yet in some ways relatable to ours, inviting us to view how our world is constructed.

AKSHAY KHANNA: It is a very complicated question. The unruly impulse is to claim justice outside of the frame of law, in terms of democratic procedures, which have up until now failed the marginalized. I think that a lot of the new movements that we see are showing that justice can be brought into being without or in spite of the legal system, in spite of the state and of existing power-structures.

KATARIINA KYRÖLÄ: I think that the question of justice and injustice is very deeply a question of affect. Feminism is about revealing injustices and trying to transform them. But most often, when one encounters injustices, one gets angry, one gets disappointed. These feelings are just, and they can serve justice.

THE PROBLEM OF SOLIDARITY

A question from the audience: How to acknowledge one's privileges and show solidarity, and how to practice this instead of only theorizing?

AKSHAY KHANNA: Actually, to me the language of solidarity is a bit problematic. I am opposed to the politics of solidarity because it assumes discontinuity between the struggles. The same applies to the idea of an ‘ally’. It implies the possibility of imagining oneself outside a given problem. But there are

deep continuities, whether we recognize them or not. The women's movement in Afghanistan has to be my movement as well, as long as I do not take on a position of appropriation and speak for that movement. So rather than being an ally or showing solidarity, I have to recognize myself as part of it. I have to figure out what I need to do in order to contribute to that, to be part of that movement. Solidarity is too easy a way of cutting ourselves from the responsibility but also from the possibility to act.

AINO-KAISA KOISTINEN: I ask myself, how can I as an academic have an effect on climate change or the Anthropocene, which are really big phenomena that I have been dealing with by analysing cultural texts. Even though I believe in the power of storytelling, the question of how these stories actually bring forth action remains.

There is also the question of whether it is possible to express solidarity with animals, and how it should be done. It also evokes the question of speaking for someone or something. How could I somehow, through my work, speak for and express solidarity to animals or to nature, and then bring forth some action that could actually help to stop, for example, the climate change?

This all connects to the question of how to tell stories, how to analyse stories that have been told, and how stories can actually have an effect on our material reality. Drawing on Haraway – as well as on akshay's criticism on the concept of solidarity – I would say that instead of solidarity for animals and nature (and other nonhumans for that matter) we need to see human beings as part of complex relations with the nonhumans. Nonhuman struggles are therefore also our struggles, and we need to tell stories of these struggles.

KATARIINA KYRÖLÄ: This is a great question and a very difficult one. akshay and Aino-Kaisa eloquently pointed out some of the fundamental difficulties inherent to the notion of solidarity and the showing of solidarity, especially towards creatures or people who have no voice that we can recognize as a voice, or whose voice might be difficult to recognize, or to bring forth as their own. Actually, I appreciate, akshay, your view that the notion of solidarity and the

notion of an ally are problematic, as if we were not all already implicated in all these power relations.

But how to account for both the privileges and the structures of marginalization that we ourselves are involved in as scholars or students or individuals? For me it has been about finding a precarious balance, and not always entirely successfully, between being a scholar and being a person. I have tried to place myself in my texts and in my scholarship as a white feminist embodied person who has to come to admit to not having already learned something and having to do the work of reading and acknowledging the work of others.

On the one hand, it is about situated knowledge while on the other hand, it cannot be only about introspection, and making it all about me, as the aim is to unravel the structures that also imply me or draw me in.

QUESTIONING THE ANTHROPOCENE

Questions from the audience inspire the panellists to discuss the biggest threats to the future, and the means feminist research might have to fight these threats.

AINO-KAISA KOISTINEN: What can feminism bring to the discussion of the Anthropocene? Of course, there are things, like solutions to pollution, that need to be dealt with in the realm of natural sciences, but Haraway and other feminist scholars have warned about trying to solve the problem of the Anthropocene through science and technology and then just go on like we always have, continuing to live the humanist story.

That is what I think Haraway's (2016, 1–4, 49–51) 'staying with the trouble' is all about: she is trying to say that in order to establish sustainable living conditions for humans and non-humans, we cannot have a quick fix to the Anthropocene and then keep thinking that we as humans are at the top of the hierarchy. This questioning of hierarchies is what feminist theory can bring to the discussion of the Anthropocene.

AKSHAY KHANNA: First, feminist theory and feminist activism have a lot to do with eco-feminism. We need to recognize, with more seriousness than

before, the relationship between consumption and gender. That is coming up in a lot of the research that I am doing in rural India, where there is a market shift in the political economy, and the amount of stuff that people are consuming keeps expanding every day.

My second thought relates to the question of language. In every workshop that we go to, first you are asked about everyone's preferred pronouns, and people will say "okay, he, she or they..." My preferred pronoun is *it*. That creates a lot of anxiety. People have prejudice, because it is like "oh my god I am reducing you to a nonhuman", and I am like that is precisely what we need to do! Rather than talk about animals in human pronouns, we should talk about objects in human pronouns as a way of bringing objects to our level and therefore levelling the field. I think we desperately need to dehumanize ourselves.

KATARIINA KYRÖLÄ: Climate change and the question of the significance of the nonhuman world is of course key to feminism, because why fight for justice

and a feminist future if there is no future. If there is no world which to inhabit, why struggle, why make the effort?

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