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Aesthetics in Identity Politics: Cumulative Aesthetics, Emplotment, and Empathy

Abstract: Contemporary identity politics, politics based on affiliation with a particular societal group in contradistinction from one or more others, typically becomes galvanized in response to a sense that those so affiliated have been marginalized or harmed. Art and aesthetic gestures utilized in contexts of identity politics serve a number of roles, among them drawing attention to the marginalization or harm to specific groups, consolidating those who share a particular political identity, and promoting empathy for members of such groups. Another aesthetic strategy frequently utilized in efforts to promote social justice toward particular groups is the use of cumulative aesthetics, in which the amassing of instances is used to achieve an impact.

Because so often aimed at rectifying arrangements that are perceived as unjust, groups that advocate on behalf of those who share their political identity tend to be energized in reaction to circumstances. There is a danger of their becoming too simplistic in their own perceptions, dividing the world into friends and enemies. The “Me Too” movement in the United States is taken as an example of a well-intended campaign that can encourage oversimplified analyses that potentially damage its effectiveness in achieving its own ends. This is particularly ironic because simplistic binaries are often at work in what causes marginalization or harm to such groups in the first place.

Aesthetics can be utilized to inflame binary oppositions. It can also complicate perspectives in ways that lead to a lessening of reactive political responses and greater rapport across the boundaries separating one group from another. This can happen, for example, when art heightens perception but resists the danger of reinforcing preestablished binaries. Such art has the potential to assist efforts toward social justice by enabling greater sensitivity toward members of groups one does not consider one’s “own”. The Zhuangzi is taken as an example of a work that might do this, despite the apolitical concerns of its author.

Keywords: cumulative aesthetics; empathy; emplotment; identity politics; “Me Too” movement; Zhuangzi.

I’ll begin by stating some things I am presupposing about the role of art and aesthetics in identity politics (politics based on affiliation with particular societal groups in contradistinction from one or more others). First, I take it for granted that

art is more effective when it communicates in an understated way and less effective when it presents a message blatantly. Artworks require interpretation, and through engaging in interpretive activities, audience members gain a sense of participation in the artistic phenomenon. Artworks that are relatively subtle also enable the mind of the audience member to extrapolate further in the direction of what is suggested, potentially giving the person a sense of ownership and investment in thinking of the sort that is being encouraged by the artwork. Artworks whose meaning seems to reduce to a straightforward message, by contrast, tend to prompt acceptance or rejection, either of which is based on preconceived ideas. These considerations lead me to believe that art that is to serve socially transformative goals, particularly in connection with identity politics, will be more effective if it provokes reflection and suggests its aims obliquely.

An example of a work that is indirect in ways I find admirable is Carrie Mae Weems's, *Then What?: Photographs and Folklore*. The work involves photographs of African Americans in domestic situations and informal gatherings, some with captions that might be considered to be the words of the subjects or words being spoken to them. For example, one image shows a young man at a kitchen table smoking, apparently having a drink, and gazing at a tape recorder. The accompanying text says, "Jim, if you choose to accept, the mission is to land on your own two feet." The intimate contexts of the photographs encourage the observer to feel welcomed into private spaces and to feel empathetic connection with those depicted. The title "Then what?" provokes consideration of outlooks toward the future. Observers are invited to imaginatively envision the future from the points of view of those presented in the photos. For example, what does it mean for Jim to be faced with the decision of whether to accept the mission of landing on his own two feet? "Your mission if you choose to accept it" is a cliché from the television series *Mission Impossible*. The caption suggests that the young man's prospects are dismal, virtually an impossible mission, and that his achievement of the goal would be a feat (a suggestion furthered, perhaps, by the homonymic term in the title). Given that, what would accepting the mission involve? How does the young man see his future? As viewers of Weems's photographs, we can linger in the viewpoints we associate with the subjects. If they elicit empathetic connections with African Americans on the part of viewers across racial groups in American society, they can further the aims of those working for justice on behalf of African Americans, yet without explicit reference to identity politics.

Of course, many artworks are explicitly aimed at furthering a cause in relation to identity politics. Contemporary movements based on identity politics typically become galvanized in response to a sense that those affiliated with a particular group have been marginalized or harmed. In this connection, art and aesthetic gestures can serve a number of constructive roles. One of these is for art to draw attention to the marginalization and/or harm to specific groups. Many of Kehinde Wiley's works exemplify this role. Wiley produces portraits of African Americans, typically in traditional formats, such as paintings modeled on classical paintings or stained-glass

windows with the subjects presented in poses reminiscent of saints. Wiley's works are striking precisely because they both exalt their subjects and, by doing so, remind the viewer of the rarity with which African Americans have been presented in traditional art, particularly in starring roles.

A related role is played by works that promote empathy for members of a particular group among those outside the group as well as those in it. The previously described work by Carrie Mae Weems falls into this category. So does Cauleen Smith's video *Elsewhere*. In it, an African American woman has stepped into a flourishing garden, and the sweater she is wearing is unraveled by a lover (who is not seen), stitch by tantalizing stitch. The video is titillating, but not in a voyeuristic manner. It encourages the viewer to take on the perspective of the video's protagonist. The video promotes empathy for her, I assume for any audience member, helping to break down any inhibitions to empathy on the part of those who do not share her racial identity. As such artworks make evident, art and aesthetic gestures can be useful in connection with identity politics by raising consciousness and altering standing perceptions

Artworks can also serve primarily to consolidate a sense of connection among those who are members of a politically marked group. Cases in point are Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas's "Haida mangas", graphic novels that incorporate stories and images from the Haida tradition in the format of Japanese manga. The primary audience for these works are members of Yahgulanaas's own tradition. Yet when enjoyed by those outside their primary audience, these mangas might also encourage a sense of connection with the Haida among non-Haida individuals as well.

Another strategy is to amass numerous cases in point. Typically, groups that advocate on behalf of those who share a particular political identity do so because they are convinced that those so-identified have suffered under arrangements they take to be unjust and seek to rectify. In order to draw attention to objectionable features of the status quo, it is often important to emphasize the routine character of the injustice being perpetrated. Amassing instances in such cases is a useful and necessary strategy. This strategy was utilized effectively in the Names Quilt Project, in which memorial quilt patches honoring victims of the AIDS epidemic were contributed by surviving loved ones and incorporated into a growing quilt. The quilt soon become too large to be exhibited in ordinary viewing spaces. It was displayed on the National Mall in Washington D.C. in 1987 with a powerful visual impact. The quilt has continued growing and is currently estimated to weigh fifty-four tons.

The aesthetic strategy employed in the Names Quilt Project falls into the category what I term "cumulative aesthetics."¹ By "cumulative aesthetics", I mean the aesthetic practice of amassing many instances of a particular image, token, or gesture to achieve the impression of a powerful tendency, commitment, or emotion. This practice has many manifestations. The cumulative effect of numerous *milagros* or other tokens placed at a shrine, for example, amplifies the prayerful gesture implied by each of them. The cumulative effect of the terra cotta attendants stationed in Qin Shi

¹ The phenomenon of cumulative aesthetics was first pointed out to me by artist Sarah Canright in 2008.

Huangdi's tomb is to convey the vast power of the emperor. The cumulative effect of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's works of piles of wrapped candies, diminished as numerous individuals who see them accept the explicit invitation to take one, offers a powerful reflection of the (on-going) dissipation of the life-force yet lingering impact of his lover, whose death these works commemorate. Tracy Ermin's notorious work *Everyone I have Ever Slept with 1963–1995* (included in Saatchi's *Sensation* exhibition at the Royal Academy of London) might also be cited here. The work consisted of a blue tent, with the names of everyone Ermin had slept with in appliqué, among them relatives with whom she shared a bed as a child, her twin brother, and two fetuses she aborted. The tent might be seen as drawing attention to the vulnerable body, which itself is a site impacted by cumulative experiences of sharing a bed.

To cite another artistic example more closely related to identity politics, though in a historical context, the film *Gandhi* utilizes cumulative aesthetics in the scene in which Gandhi marches to the sea to protest the salt tax. We are shown groups of people from villages along the route successively joining the swelling the wave of humanity. The visual impact, combined with music that repeats an insistent melody in a manner reminiscent of a mantra, prompts the impression that world history is on the march, destined to reach the end of British rule of India.

I emphasize the general practice of cumulative aesthetics here because it is a common political strategy within efforts aiming at social justice toward particular groups, though it is not often considered in terms of aesthetics. I have in mind the phenomenon of political demonstrations. Demonstrations utilize cumulative aesthetics, for they assemble large numbers of individuals and aim to create the impression of an overwhelming force that will only subside when political transformation occurs.

The strategy of cumulative aesthetics is also visible in social media utilized for political ends. A recent case in which cumulative gestures have been used in the service of identity politics is the case of the #MeToo movement in the United States. The movement developed in the wake of public accusations of sexual misconduct on the part of powerful Hollywood film director Harvey Weinstein in October 2017. Following up on the use of "Me Too" as a rallying cry in 2016 by social activist Tarana Burke, who sought to promote solidarity among victims of sexual abuse, particularly those in underprivileged groups, actress Alyssa Milano encouraged all victims of sexual harassment and assault to tweet about it in order to publicize the extent of the problem. The response on Twitter was tremendous. By the end of the day after Milano posted the initiating tweet, "MeToo" had been tweeted over half a million times. The response and the subsequent efforts to address sexual harassment and assault, many well publicized, are designated as the #MeToo movement.

The #MeToo movement is effectively a technologically enabled demonstration, and it makes its impact through cumulative aesthetics. Using social media, the movement is able to swell its ranks to dramatically large numbers, facilitated by the fact that those joining the effort need not appear simultaneously in a specific location. The #MeToo movement also makes use of aesthetics in another way as well. It asks

prospective participants to consider whether they can apprehend any of their previous experiences in terms of a particular plot type. Those who sincerely tweet “Me too” are each identifying some prior experience as fitting the profile of the sexual harassment narrative, and in this they are engaging in the aesthetic act of emplotment.

Emplotment, defined by Paul Ricoeur as “the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession,” situates events into a narrative sequence that suggests an explanation.² Emplotment commonly makes use of standard story types, though it allows for innovation. The #MeToo movement has achieved much by building on the social recognition in American society that sexual harassment is a crime and the evolving social awareness of what sexual harassment amounts to. Among its accomplishments is an aesthetic one – that of enshrining a relatively new story type as among the stock scenarios to which one can appeal in one’s emplotment of personal experiences.

The “#MeToo” movement has capitalized on what social media are good at – enabling large numbers of people to communicate quickly and to coordinate gestures at an impressive scale. It has served the valuable function of facilitating recognition of commonalities across many individuals’ experiences, expanding awareness of the scope of a serious problem and the large number who are motivated to take collective action. The accumulation of gestures and the potential enlistment of those making them into a political force has also encouraged a sense of hope that things could change.

The “#MeToo” movement also illustrates, however, certain limitations that afflict this particular aesthetic strategy. The very catchphrase “Me Too” is serviceable only to the extent that cases are identified as similar. It is not good at enabling identification of particularities that differentiate cases. Instead, they are tallied as all being the same kind of thing. And this may be a problem.

Some have charged that the #MeToo movement has led to the conflation of a whole continuum of objectionable behaviors, ranging from insufficient consideration or fumbled flirtation to sexual violence. This is an argument made in the open letter to *Le Monde* signed by Catherine Deneuve and about one hundred other prominent French women. The letter begins, “Rape is a crime. But trying to pick up someone, however persistently or clumsily, is not – nor is gallantry an attack of machismo.” The letter goes on to contend that the #MeToo movement has resulted in an atmosphere in which the accused are presumed guilty: “In fact, #MeToo has led to a campaign, in the press and on social media, of public accusations and indictments against individuals who, without being given a chance to respond or defend themselves, are put in the exact same category as sex offenders.”³ On the other side of the Atlantic, Katie Roiphe, similarly, worries about the attitude of certain among those that she calls the “Twitter feminists”:

² Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, in 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 65.

³ Chiche, Sarah, et al., “Nous défendons une liberté d’importuner, indispensable à la liberté sexuelle,” *Le Monde*, January 9, 2018, English edition: “Full Translation of French Anti-#MeToo Manifesto Signed by Catherine Deneuve,” trans. Wordcrunch.com, January 10, 2018, acc. February 25, 2019. doi: <https://www.worldcrunch.com/opinion-analysis/full-translation-of-french-anti-metoo-manifesto-signed-by-catherine-deneuve/>.

It would be one thing if collapsing the continuum of bad behaviors happened only in moments of overshoot recognized by everyone. But [...] the need to differentiate between smaller offenses and assault is not interesting to a certain breed of Twitter feminists; it makes them impatient, suspicious. The deeper attitude toward due process is: don't bother me with trifles!⁴

The danger into which these critics believe the #MeToo movement has fallen is a potential problem whenever a story type becomes a cultural paradigm. Paradigms can be unreflectively applied, and even significantly different kinds of cases can be conflated as all being instances of “the same old story.” It is too easy to attribute a stock plot scenario to a given case, without acknowledgement of potentially important contextual details and the complexities of interpersonal communication. Communication styles are certainly relevant to assessing the credibility of charges of sexual harassment. Conveying to a flirtatious individual that sexual or romantic advances are “unwanted” may take other forms than a blunt verbal statement, but when more subtly conveyed, there is room for error about whether the message was successfully communicated. Yet surely this is relevant for determining whether the person behaved inappropriately.

Another problem when a huge number of cases are considered “the same old story” is that those involved in these cases tend to be relegated to the status of stock characters. This becomes especially pernicious when these stock characters are then considered in melodramatic categories, with some being entirely sympathetic and others entirely unsympathetic. If participants become caught up in the enthusiasm of sharing what they take to be “the same” experience and then see this as a basis for alliance, they can fall into simplistic binaries that reduce to “us vs. them.” This situation is particularly ironic when employed by those who want to empower groups that have been marginalized, such as women in the workplace, for simplistic binaries of this sort often contributed to such marginalization in the first place.

The “#MeToo” Twitter phenomenon depended for its force on amassing an astoundingly large tally. It brought the extent of the problem of sexual harassment to the attention of American society and the world at large. If the aim of social movements is to bring justice to those who have been marginalized, identifying the scope of the problem is an important step. Justice nevertheless depends on regarding to situations with attention to specifics and treating those involved as full persons, not simply as stock characters. Expanding empathy beyond the boundaries that divide socially identified subpopulations within a society is essential if entrenched patterns that marginalize some are to be eliminated. But for this purpose, cumulative aesthetics is not enough.

⁴ Katie Roiphe, “The Other Whisper Network: How Twitter Feminism Is Bad for Women,” *Harper's* 336:2014 (March 2018), 27. Acc. May 22, 2020.

Other aesthetic strategies can supplement those employing cumulative techniques in the service of social justice. I have mentioned some of these earlier. I will conclude by adding another to the inventory, one that may well be overlooked. This is a strategy exemplified in the writings of the ancient Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi, who lived in the fourth century B.C.E. Zhuangzi steadily draws attention to the movements of the Dao, the natural world in its dynamic unfolding, filled with “things” (including human beings) that are temporary configurations of interconnected energies. For this reason, he is usually considered a Daoist, but Zhuangzi shuns such categorizations as distorting, and the limitations of categories is a consistent theme in the vignettes and stories he presents. His aim is to encourage heightened perception that is not filtered through preconceived ideas. In the service of this effort, he often positions characters who might be socially dismissed or marginalized in roles that resist stereotypes. This is the strategy to which I wish to draw attention.

Probably the most noteworthy example of the strategy just described is Zhuangzi’s account of a lord, who visits the kitchen and is captivated by skillful movements of his cook as he cuts an ox carcass into pieces of meat. Zhuangzi narrates: “He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Ching-shou music.” The lord is amazed, remarking, “Ah, this is marvelous! [...] Imagine skill reaching such heights!”⁵ This scene is startling. The idea that a lord would casually visit the kitchen and converse with his servants, let alone find them awe-inspiring, would have been far-fetched in ancient China. The lord’s servants would typically come to him, attending to his every need, preferably before he was even aware of what he needed. Zhuangzi compares the cook’s activities to dances performed in ceremonial ritual contexts, and this is also remarkable. Such dances were among the practices extolled by the Confucians (who were philosophical opponents of the Daoists). Rites and ceremonies typically reflected the ideal of coordination among hierarchical components of society, each meticulous in performing its proper role. And yet in the case at hand, the lord is not exemplifying this ideal. He is not acting much like a lord.

The strangeness develops further. The cook explains his method, describing how his skill developed to the point that he is completely attuned to the job, how he operates when confronting a difficult point, and how he attends to the natural structure of the ox and uses it to minimize the interventions he must make to accomplish what he intends. The lord is taking instruction from his cook, a third amazing feature of this story. And the lord hasn’t just learned about how the cook works in the kitchen. He sees Cook Ding’s lesson as offering the key to the good life. The vignette concludes with the lord remarking, “Excellent! [...] I have heard the words of Cook Ding and learned how to care for life.”⁶

The story of Cook Ding challenges the social stratification that is inherent in the hierarchical order that the Confucians defended. Zhuangzi tells a somewhat

⁵ Chuang Tzu, *Basic Writings*, trans. by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 46.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

similar story of a marquis asking a woodworker how he is able to make bell stands so amazing that they seem to be the work of spirits. Zhuangzi repeatedly writes of characters who would be socially marginalized having insights that those in high positions typically lack. Even Confucius is depicted as seeking insight from a hunchback catching cicadas with a sticky pole and as considering making a disabled man his teacher. This latter case appears all the more impressive when we recall that in ancient China, amputations were common punishments for serious crimes. Zhuangzi's account hints that Confucius would seek instruction from a felon!

Zhuangzi's characters include members of groups frequently treated with condescension, whom he portrays as sages with notable spiritual and practical accomplishments. His goal is not political. He seems primarily concerned with undermining adherence to categories, particularly binary ones. Nevertheless, where categorizations of people are at stake, there is some overlap between his aims and those of many concerned with contemporary identity politics. One might even see some similarity between Zhuangzi's surprising depictions of individuals with low social status as sages and Kehinde Wiley's choice to paint as heroic people he has found in the streets. A crucial difference, however, is that Zhuangzi is not focused on inclusiveness or justice toward members of a particular identity group, as is Kehinde. Instead, Zhuangzi is drawing attention to the irrelevance of social status for discernment of reality and awareness of what living well involves.

Zhuangzi's apolitical motives notwithstanding, his writings serve to remind us that we all share a common reality and can best learn how to flourish by attending to each other's perspectives. My suggestion here is that those concerned with aesthetics within identity politics should recognize the value not only of strategies straightforwardly aimed at changing mainstream perceptions of members of socially underprivileged groups, but also strategies that assume parity among persons in exploring the ways we can attune our energies and productively share our experience. Such strategies may not be the most obvious approaches to use. Nevertheless, they can support the goals of movements seeking justice for those within particular identity blocks, for they encourage mutual empathy and help to break down the socially divisive binaries that have caused so much harm and make identity politics so necessary.

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