

The Affective Aesthetics of Transnational Feminism

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ABSTRACT: This review essay offers a consideration of affect and aesthetics in transnational feminism writing. We first discuss the general marginalization of aesthetics in selected canonical texts of transnational feminist theory, seen mostly as the exclusion of texts that do not adhere to the established tenets of academic writing, as well as the lack of interest in the closer examination of the features of transnational feminist aesthetic and its political dimensions. In proposing a more comprehensive alternative, we draw on the current “re-turn towards aesthetics” and especially on Rita Felski’s work in this context. This approach works against a “hermeneutics of suspicion” in literary analyses and re-directs scholarly attention from the hidden messages and political contexts of a literary work to its aesthetic qualities and distinctly literary properties. While proponents of these movements are not necessarily interested in the political potential of their theories, scholars in transnational feminism like Samantha Pinto have shown the congruency of aesthetic and political interests in the study of literary texts. Extending Felski’s and Pinto’s respective projects into an approach to literary aesthetics more oriented toward transnational feminism on the one hand and less exclusively interested in formalist experimentation on the other, we propose the concept of affective aesthetics. It productively complicates recent theories of literary aesthetics and makes them applicable to a diverse range of texts. We exemplarily consider the affective dimensions of aesthetic strategies in works by Christina Sharpe, Sara Ahmed, bell hooks, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who promote the idea of feminism as an everyday practice through aesthetically rendered texts that foster a personal and intimate link between the writer, text, and the reader. The affective dimensions of transnational feminist writing prove to be an effective political strategy. We indicate how this approach might contribute to a reading of genre-defying non-experimental texts in order to exhaust their full political potential—in form, context, and affective strategy—for a transnational feminist agenda.

KEYWORDS: feminist theory; affect; Rita Felski; Samantha Pinto; Audre Lorde; Gloria Anzaldúa; bell hooks; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Introduction

In this review essay, we set out to explore the ways in which transnational feminism has accounted for the aesthetic and affective dimensions of texts, be they literature, theory, or political writing. Taking our cues from early transnational feminists like Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa and their productive blurring of generic and discursive boundaries, we probe what transnational feminism in general, and transnational feminist theory in particular, can gain from the renewed attention to aesthetics and especially to the affective potential of

(literary) texts.¹ Therefore, in the first part of our essay, we analyze selected canonical texts in transnational feminism and examine how they have negotiated (or ignored) questions of the aesthetic so far. In the second part, we offer a review of Rita Felski's recent work in the context of the current "re-turn towards aesthetics" in the humanities. This turn can be both dangerous and useful for transnational feminism: It can be dangerous because it runs the risk of depoliticizing texts and narratives by privileging questions of aesthetics and literary form; and it can be useful because it may offer ways to develop a transnational feminist theory of affect and aesthetics. The various counter-reactions to a "hermeneutics of suspicion" in literary analyses—ranging from notions of post-critique to surface reading to reparative and descriptive reading practices—seek to re-direct scholarly attention from the hidden messages and political contexts of a literary work to its aesthetic qualities and distinctly literary properties.² Proponents of this new aestheticism are, generally speaking, invested in recuperating the symbolic and cultural capital of literary studies proper and of literature in a narrow sense. While these scholars are not necessarily interested in the political potential of their theories for social movements and feminist thinking, Samantha Pinto locates her study on experimental literary texts and their specific aesthetics squarely within a transnational feminist discourse. We thus turn to her work in the third part of our essay, in order to pinpoint the congruency of aesthetic and political interests in the study of literary texts which

¹ Vice versa, it would be a worthwhile endeavor to explore how women-of-color/multicultural/transnational feminisms may contribute to recent theories of the aesthetic; this, however, lies beyond the scope of this essay.

² The discourse of new aestheticism is shaped by a variety of different academic political projects. Relevant for our project here are discussions situated at the intersection of literary studies and cultural studies and at the intersection of queer feminism and affect theory. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski's edited collection *Critique and Postcritique* (2017) falls in line with the first, as does Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's special issue of *Representations* entitled *The Way We Read Now* (2009). For Anker and Felski's "postcritical reading" and Best and Marcus' "surface reading," the objects of study are exclusively literary texts and reading is to be understood predominantly as an attempt to honor the aesthetic properties of literary texts. By contrast, projects situated at the intersection of queer feminism and affect theory formulate reading practices as expressions of the affective relationships between the critic and her objects of studies; there the focus of investigation lies more prominently on affect than on aesthetics. Both Robyn Wiegman's notion of a "reparative turn" and Heather K. Love's "descriptive reading" highlight the affective-interpellatory capacity of all objects of study, literary texts included. Both trends share a commitment to restoring the affective agency inherent in objects of studies by referencing, among others, Bruno Latour's work on Actor Network Theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's recuperation of aesthetic immersion, or Erving Goffman's theory of social interaction.

resonate with transnational feminist theory. At the core of Pinto's analysis are texts which, not unlike Anzaldúa's and Lorde's, call attention to social exclusion through innovative literary form. Extending Felski's and Pinto's respective projects to work on literary aesthetics more oriented toward transnational feminism on the one hand and less exclusively interested in formalist experimentation on the other, we propose, in the fourth and concluding part of the essay, the idea of affective aesthetics as a concept which brings into sharper focus the affective dimension of aesthetic strategies.³ Sketching an analysis of recent feminist writings from Christina Sharpe to Sara Ahmed and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, we seek to uncover these strategies in openly political and ideologically invested theoretical musings instead of searching for the supposedly hidden meanings and ideologies in literature that foregrounds its complex aesthetics. Thus, we acknowledge that transnational feminism should pay more attention to aesthetics and that it can productively complicate and creatively "ab-use"⁴ recent theories of literary aesthetics for its own political purposes and in order to apply them to a diverse range of texts at the crossroads of literary production, political discourse, and theoretical musings.

Transnational Feminism and Literary Form

Transnational feminism has (at least indirectly) been thriving on aesthetic innovation and formal experimentation as affective strategies, which invite readers to critically reflect on their positionalities and politics. Many of the seminal authors in transnational feminism based in the US, e.g. Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde, have first been categorized as literary authors and/or activists and have only much later and/or partially been recognized as

³ While the term *affective aesthetics* has been used in different fields and with different connotations, we employ this terminology here to emphasize that we are interested specifically in the affective dimension of aesthetics.

⁴ This notion of "ab-use" goes back to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012), a project which she labels "sabotaging Schiller" (2) from her perspective as a "postcolonial and metropolitan migrant" (3). She specifies that the term ab-use indexes the subversive, from below, agency her project claims, but also its "double bind" in the sense that the Latin prefix can mean "'motion away' and 'agency, point of origin,' 'supporting,' as well as 'the duties of slaves'" (3-4). Spivak's notion of ab-use appropriately captures the complexity transnational feminist theory accords bifurcated and hybridized subjects.

theorists. While transnational feminism⁵ at large has paid attention to aesthetics and form, transnational feminist *theory* has neglected to fully account for literature's aesthetic dimension in two senses: first, in that it tends to exclude texts that do not formally adhere to the generic features of theoretical academic writing and second, in that it is only marginally invested in in-depth reflections of aesthetics, i.e., a rigorous pursuit of the questions what a transnational feminist aesthetic might look like and what it might offer to the broader political project. In her essay "Transnational Feminism" in the *Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature* (2017), Crystal Parikh offers a paradigmatic example in this regard. She emphasizes the political and ideological contexts that shaped transnational feminist literature. Parikh's definition of transnational feminist literature as an expression of "the personal and the political, the local and the global, and the individual and the structural, without resorting to culturalist presumptions, caricatures, and stereotypes about what these conditions and worlds actually are and how they come into contact with others" presents a concise overview of the political stakes transnational feminism negotiates (226). Her specification that transnational feminism "calls for aesthetic strategies alert to the national, racial, and ethnic borders between women, as well as disciplinary, occupational, and representational ones, and writing that queries our deeply entrenched boundaries, such as those between the public and the private, theory and praxis, individualism and collaboration, in the institutional and activist spheres of knowledge production, and the processes of research and the knowledge objects in which these processes result" (226) affirms the importance of aesthetics but does not consider the issue further.

This marginalization of aesthetics within transnational feminism is part of a bigger problem surrounding the study of ethnic American literatures, which for a long time have been read for the cultural specificities they depict. Immanentist readings abounded which contributed to a persistent dichotomization between aesthetics and politics. In "Cultural Diversity and

⁵ We use "transnational feminism" as an umbrella term to describe a political project that encompasses scholarship, activism, and artistic expression. The term "transnational feminist theory" signifies the discursive formation in which some texts specifically become intelligible and recognized as theory, and "transnational feminist writing" summarily refers to texts that can be linked to the political agenda of transnational feminism regardless of their generic categorization.

the Problem of Aesthetics,” Emory Elliott contends that during the epistemological shift brought on by multiculturalism, literary studies focused predominantly on the material realities depicted in literary texts (13–14). For this endeavor, the existing critical tradition in aesthetics and form yielded little productive ground, and hence ethnic American literary studies emerged as a critical field without developing a strong tradition in aesthetics. Still, this marginalization is particularly surprising because both literature and theories discussed under the label of transnational feminism share a commitment to providing room for individual identities and experiences, a plurality of voices and perspectives, and a sensitivity to cultural difference and its formal expressions. Transnational feminist critics, authors, and activists have called attention to the gross misreadings of ethnic American literatures as quasi-ethnographic sources “providing ‘windows’ into the presumed alterity” of non-white authors (Amireh and Majaj 2). This agenda has emerged from a long-standing (and still ongoing) struggle to expose power relations, politics of recognition, and privileged narratives and voices. For instance, in the context of US-based feminism, the landmark publication *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) has drawn attention to the exclusivity of hegemonic white feminist discourse and offered a much-needed intervention to position radical women of color at the center of transnational feminist thought. The works of Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa—two prominent critics included in the anthology—demonstrate the problematic dynamics of articulating a transnational feminist project in aesthetic and affective terms and from subject positions hardly recognized/recognizable within a feminist theory dominated by white scholars who have emerged from the so-called second wave.

Part of the challenge for both Lorde and Anzaldúa in this context is to subvert dominant identity categories of womanhood, nationality, etc. and to question the authority of the hegemonic theoretical discourse while also opening up frameworks for solidarity across differences. In her “Open Letter to Mary Daly,” for example, Lorde explicitly criticizes the white feminist, while also extending an “invitation”—rather than an open demand—to Daly to rethink her categories (90). Similarly, Anzaldúa ends her preface to *Borderlands* with a potentially reconciliatory gesture: “Today we ask to be met halfway. This book is our invitation to

you—from the new *mestizas*” (n. pag.).⁶ Instead of “begging for entrance” into the established academic feminist discourse, Anzaldúa’s invitation appeals to an implied readership of white fellow critics and feminists but, at the same time, challenges their established genres, categories, and theoretical distinctions. Her book and by extension her political project never cohere into a single genre: *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1984) includes, for example, autobiographical moments, theoretical meditations, and poems. It constantly shifts between linguistic codes and registers and, overall, embraces an aesthetics that reflects the complexities, contradictions, and conflicts of borderland identities. The inadequacy of the master’s discourse/language to describe simultaneously co-existent subject positions is also evidenced in Lorde’s characteristic public self-identification as a “black, lesbian, feminist, mother, poet warrior” (Veaux xiv). Like Anzaldúa, she pursues a feminist project across different genres ranging from essays, speeches, diaries, and poems to her genre-bending “autobiographical” work *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), which is labelled on the cover as a “biomythography.”⁷ Lorde’s and Anzaldúa’s respective subject positions and political agendas materialize in unconventional aesthetic forms which employ emotional experience as authorizing gesture, as means to create solidarity across differences, and as ways of knowing beyond traditional Western epistemologies. Feelings are relevant to the production and reception of their texts, as Anzaldúa holds, for example by insisting that “writing is a sensuous act” (*Borderlands* n. pag.). Lorde also locates a liberatory potential within each and every reader: “The white father tells us I think therefore I am. The Black mother within all of us says I feel therefore I can be free” (*Sister Outsider* 38). Their strategies of affective interpellation and the aesthetic experiences prompted by their writings exemplify a gesture of solidarity that seeks to work productively with and across often divisively used categories of difference. In doing so, they also point towards a subversion or at least problematization of

⁶ Anzaldúa’s use of the “we” foregrounds a collective identity and designates her writing as a communal act.

⁷ The very term biomythography highlights the gender-bending aesthetics of Lorde’s autobiography. In the larger context of genre categories in auto/biography studies, it also challenges the white, masculine, Enlightened authorial subjectivity from which the genre of autobiography was predominantly derived in literary studies at the time when Lorde and Anzaldúa published theirs. For details, see Leigh Gilmore’s *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation* (1994).

national identities and towards a transnational feminist theory. Still, projects like Lorde's and Anzaldúa's which foreground aesthetics and affective experience at the core of their feminist agenda tend to register with scholars more often as literary experiments and/or political activism than as theoretical contributions *sui generis*.⁸

Aesthetics and the Limits of Postcritique

In order to account for the affective and aesthetic dimensions interlinked with the political projects of literary texts, transnational feminist theory needs to further appropriate and update the instruments of literary analysis and criticism in line with its non-essentialist position and its dedication to cultural sensibility. Aesthetics, understood as general aesthetic judgment and as specific analysis of literary form, can then become an invaluable tool for investigating and developing transnational feminist practices.

In *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski diagnoses that the field of aesthetics has been unduly pushed to the margins of current cultural studies approaches—and hence “is currently facing a legitimation crisis” (5).⁹ She argues that because critique privileges context over form, and reflection over immersion, it is inapt to register the political commentary embedded in liter-

⁸ Concepts such as “the borderlands” and “the Mestiza” have nonetheless made their way into theoretical discourses, particularly in cultural studies. For example, in the introduction to *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty conceptualizes “notions of collective selves and consciousness” by way of Anzaldúa’s “mestiza consciousness” and the “consciousness of the borderlands” (36–37). The concept of “the borderlands” underpins Caren Kaplan’s, Robert Carr’s, and Inderpal Grewal’s essays in *Scattered Hegemonies*. The very title of Andrea Lunsford and Lahoucine Ouzgane’s essay collection, which focuses on borderland pedagogy and rhetorical practices, *Crossing Borderlands: Composition and Postcolonial Studies*, signals the centrality of Anzaldúa’s work to its inquiries.

⁹ We use Felski as linchpin of the broader discourse around the alleged limits of critique. Felski’s efforts to renegotiate the standing of literary studies within the humanities builds on a number of scholarly interventions that preceded her formulation of a postcritique moment in her own work and her curatorial efforts to strengthen the foothold of aesthetics in the journal *New Literary History*, for which she has been serving as editor since 2009. Critics whose work greatly shaped Felski’s rejection of the hermeneutics of suspicion include Paul de Man and Bruno Latour as well as—to a lesser degree—Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Furthermore, insights on recent epistemological shifts in literary studies proposed by scholars in the fields of new formalism, pragmatism, and ethics find expression in Felski’s criticism of critique. The presence of these intersecting critical traditions in her own work and her general interest in feminism provide us with an array of connecting points to transnational feminism at large and to our interest in the intersections between affect, aesthetics, and transnational feminist thinking.

ature's aesthetic dimensions. Felski does not contend that a "proper" reading of a literary text disregards entirely its social or political underpinnings; rather, she sees the aesthetic and the social/political as inextricably entwined. Thus, instead of teasing out the text's socio-political foundation, readers might benefit from having their perception or understanding altered in the act of reading. Felski locates the limits of critique in its inability to register the affect work of literary texts. Its critical idioms of suspicion (Ricoeur) and paranoia (Sedgwick) manifest in what Felski calls a "critical mood" (*The Limits of Critique* 6) characterized through inquisitive and analytical verbs such as "interrogate, unmask, expose, subvert, unravel, demystify, destabilize, take issue, and take umbrage" (5). As an alternative to the critical mood of critique, Felski delineates the notion of "postcritical reading," which hinges on the premises of actor-network theory, post-historicist criticism, and affective hermeneutics (*The Limits of Critique* 182) and "is a matter of attaching, collating, negotiating, assembling—of forging links between things that were previously unconnected" (173), as opposed to deconstructing, dissecting, and denouncing. Such a "positive" approach to reading gestures towards a reconciliation between aesthetics and politics, form and context, thinking and feeling.

Felski builds her argument around the transformative potential of literature's affective work by rejecting critique that treats the text exclusively as an object of (suspicious) scrutiny. For her, the limits of critique lie in its tone-deafness to its own employ of affect as a mode of describing the reader-text relationship. Unlike reader-response theory, which treats readers as devoid of conviction or passion, Felski turns to the reader's affective, subjective experience of the text, be it in the form of critique's "spirit of disenchantment" (*The Limits of Critique* 2) or of her own theorization of affectively connotated aesthetic experiences.¹⁰ By throwing into relief the affective qualities of critique, she debunks the general assumption that critique is primarily free of emotions and thus the more "serious or proper" pursuit in literary studies (*The Limits of Critique* 7). Critique, then, is in essence characterized by "an

¹⁰ In *Uses of Literature* (2008), Felski defines recognition, enchantment, knowledge and shock as four potential aesthetic experiences of literary texts and bases them on readers' ability to connect to literary texts and the fictional worlds they depict.

attitude of vigilance, detachment, and wariness (suspicion) with identifiable conventions of commentary (hermeneutics)—allowing us to see that critique is as much a matter of affect and rhetoric as of philosophy or politics” (*The Limits of Critique* 3). To remedy this situation, Felski emphasizes the power of affect: “The import of a text is not exhausted by what it reveals or conceals about the social conditions that surround it. Rather, it is also a matter of what it sets alight in the reader—what kind of emotions it elicits, what changes of perception it prompts, what bonds and attachments it calls into being” (*The Limits of Critique* 179).

The affective potential of literary texts depends on the acknowledgment of their inherent agency. Instead of defining the dynamics between reader and text through reader-response-theory's concept of actualization, Felski accords literary texts the role of active agents in the building of networks and alliances, which actor-network-theory sees as “art's distinctive qualities [that] do not rule out social connections but are the very reason that such connections are forged and sustained” (*The Limits of Critique* 165). Following Bruno Latour's idea that as actants, reader and text are equally invested with agency, she views literature not only as material open to theory but as theory itself: “To define literature as ideology is to have decided ahead of time that literary works can be objects of knowledge but never sources of knowledge. It is to rule out of court the eventuality that a literary text could know as much, or more, than a theory” (*Uses of Literature* 7). Felski's postcritical reading is therefore potentially able to register the affective dimensions of transnational feminist literature and the ways in which it engenders a difference in the reader, a response or reaction. By proposing that “[r]ather than looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives—we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible” (*The Limits of Critique* 12), Felski acknowledges literature's potential to transform readers' politics and positionalities.

This notion of readerly affect and literature's potential to ‘make a difference’ can be aligned with transnational feminist ideas about raising political consciousness, promoting dialogue, and forging alliances. Accounting for immersion and aesthetic experience can even add a new direction to transnational feminism, where aesthetics has been sidelined by methodologies and perspectives derived from post-colonial theory, new historicism, or dias-

pora studies. However, while we share the general assessment regarding the peripheral state of aesthetics in politically motivated literary theories and reading practices, we take issue with some of the possible consequences of Felski's approach: first, her critique runs the risk of depoliticizing its literary objects—at least inadvertently—by theorizing the text's affective politics mostly in terms of aesthetic experience of individual readers and not in terms of aesthetic interpellation at large; and second, it risks a re-solidification of genre boundaries and hierarchies between literary texts and theoretical, political, or activist writings by postulating literature's a priori exceptional status. Transnational feminism, we believe, would be ill-advised to take these risks that cut to the core of its theoretical premises (fluidity of identities and genres, anti-essentialist notions, etc.). It could, however, benefit from an in-depth reflection of the aesthetic and affective strategies that develop and carry the transnational political momentum across the discourses of feminist literature, feminist theory, and feminist activism. Heeding this call for renewed attention to the aesthetic, transnational feminist theory may expand its canon, strengthen connections between seemingly separate discourses/genres to promote its agenda, and develop methodologies that allow for an analysis of the affective work of (literary) texts.

Transnational Feminist Aesthetics and Experimental Literary Form

The study of aesthetics is indeed largely missing from recent publications in transnational feminist theory. By-now seminal texts including the edited collections *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (1994) by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan and *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State* (1999) by Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Minoo Moallem, as well as Chandra Talpade Mohanty's monograph *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003), do not accord aesthetics much importance in the de-essentialization of gender, race, and nationhood. In the introduction to *Scattered Hegemonies*, for instance, Grewal and Kaplan define transnational feminist practices as comparative work free of "the relativistic linking of 'differences' undertaken by proponents of 'global feminism'" (17). Put another way, transnational feminism must engage in the comparison of multiple and overlapping oppressions without promoting a theory of "hegemonic oppression under a unified

category of gender” (17–18). Projects, like Grewal and Kaplan’s, draw largely from the fields of political science, anthropology, economics and cultural studies and discuss literary texts as expressions of global power inequalities—if they address literature at all.¹¹ Debunking the labels used to designate the alterity of “Third World women” and the discursive construction of their lacking agency compared to that of “First World women,” this body of work investigates the mechanisms and contexts which enable the proliferation of essentialist categorization along the lines of race, gender, and nationhood. More recent publications such as Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar’s edited collection *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* (2010) and Leela Fernandes’s study *Transnational Feminism in the United States: Knowledge, Ethics, and Power* (2013) continue to ignore literary texts specifically as well as the aesthetics of transnational feminism at large.¹²

Samantha Pinto’s *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic* (2013) is one of the few theoretical approaches that has tried to tackle the issue of aesthetics within the context of transnational feminism. In her study, Pinto explores a selection of works by black women writers from various parts of the world (Jackie Kay, Elizabeth Alexander, Deborah Richards, Ama Ata Aidoo, Adrienne Kennedy, Zora Neale Hurston, Erna Brodber, Bessie Head, Zoë Wicomb, Pauline Melville, Harryette Mullen, and M. NourbeSe

¹¹ Grewal and Kaplan address the issue of the aesthetic in the framework of postmodernism, though their focus is not on the aesthetic movement of postmodernism, but on the political, historical and cultural implications of Western postmodernity. In this sense, they explore the possibility for social change in “analyses and expressions of postmodernity that locate and link diverse social theories and political practices” (4) to mount resistance to modern neo-capitalist structures around the globe. While literary texts range among the expressions of transnational feminist politics their collection investigates, the focus is not on the affective economies their formal and aesthetic properties may engender.

¹² Contextually oriented is also the study *Transnational Feminism in the United States*, in which Leela Fernandes investigates the knowledge production, representation and the ethical dimension of transnational feminism and beyond. Fernandes takes up a critical stance in interrogating the concept of transnational feminism in the United States academia, which, she claims, remains entangled in stereotypical representations of women from “the rest of the world.” Over seven chapters, Fernandes tackles a number of concerns, from human rights, regimes of difference, representations, visibility and knowledge, to women studies in the US academia. She strives to bridge the chasm between theory and practice and argues that “knowledge itself represents a form of practice” and that “discursive practices that circulate within the academy have real implications and effects” (23), which means that academic space is not separated from societal issues and can intervene in dismantling hegemonic political practices. This is also largely true for Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar’s edited collection *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*.

Philip) and brings them together through their experimental writing and innovation in literary form, bridging the traditional gap between politics and aesthetics. As the title indicates, Pinto is interested in the concepts of mobility and diaspora in the Black Atlantic literary imaginary and their expression through aesthetics that destabilize existing understandings of racial and gender difference. Her close readings of literature ranging from poetry, drama, and (auto)biography, to short and long fiction, investigate the ways in which “race, gender, and other social constructions of difference wound up being represented through literary form” (202). The aesthetic methodology that Pinto develops in her readings seeks not only to disrupt the Eurocentric representations of black women diaspora but to show how aesthetic form has the capacity to disorder “stories of difference” in classrooms and scholarly writing (208). Such an undertaking strongly resonates with central objectives of transnational feminist theory and practice: it engenders a sensitivity to different voices and perspectives, it unsettles hierarchies, and it forges solidarities across difference.

Difficult Diasporas extricates transnational feminism from an exclusively political context and fuses it with literary theory and aesthetics. Pinto leaves no doubt about her appreciation of the political dimension of aesthetics. Right at the outset of her study, she specifies that aesthetics is “not just a form but *the* form of politics” through which “gender and race operate” (3, original emphasis). Hence, she promotes political consciousness not only through a contextual but also through a textual analysis of literary works, as “representation is found not always in the obvious mimetic places but in the forms, genres, structures, and rhetorical patterns that express a relationship to various structures of meaning and reading that do not necessarily seem in direct relation to recognizable discourses of race, gender, and/or location” (8). Pinto’s innovation lies not in the renewed realignment of politics and aesthetics but in the methodological weight that she puts on the texts as aesthetic products and only subsequently on the context in which they are embedded. In her analyses, literary texts are not only sources for contextual reading but active agents that engage with their readers and critics in an effort to change the conceptual framework of our understanding of gender and race. She believes that “[l]iterary and cultural production are [...] intimately and pervasively present in how we construct analytics of race, gender, and location, in that they invoke and

provoke contradictory desires to have the known world reflected but also to create new and varied connections” (4–5). Throughout her study, Pinto systematically brings together different writers, genres, and narratives to reveal their similarities without falling prey to generalizations concerning the authors’ cultural locales, etc. For example, in the third chapter she discusses works by African American playwright Adrienne Kennedy and Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo to examine diasporic histories through alternative stagings of racial and gendered bodies and to undermine the ostensive gendered solidarity. The aesthetic practices featured in the selected works shape “how we receive and imagine meaning in the world, and, put simply, different forms can create different knowledges, innovations in the order of even progressive thought” (207).

The “difficult” in the title of Pinto’s study bespeaks the kind of engagement these innovative works demand of the reader—reading that is difficult “affectively and politically, that can push us into questioning what we think of as politically progressive under the name of race and gender studies” (4). Difficulty is a constituent of the aesthetic-political work of innovative literary form in capturing the effect of diaspora on black women’s subjectivities and identities. In her theorization of difficulty Pinto takes cues from African American poet Erica Hunt’s experimental poetics which “suggests that difficult subjects (black women as authors/agents/disciplinary formations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) require difficult objects (innovative literary texts) to ‘represent’ and certainly to upend” existing social orders (3). The bipartisan aesthetic methodology that encompasses the affective and political component inherent to the literary form allows Pinto to foreground affect not merely as aesthetic experience but as affective interpellation and political strategy within the text. The (innovative) literary form itself becomes the focal point for exploring and rethinking identity politics, urging us to revise the conventional reading and teaching strategies and to approach literary texts “not just as evidence of the historical and philosophical apparatuses around it but as sites of theorizing, sites of method itself” (207).

Despite their fundamental political and methodological differences, both Pinto and Felski recognize the affective dimensions of literary texts and their significance as aesthetic products in and of themselves. They point out that focusing exclusively on the context rather

than the text leads to exclusionary and skewed conclusions in literary criticism. Nonetheless, Felski foregrounds affect that derives from the reader's experience of the text, while Pinto focuses on certain aesthetic mechanisms that she uncovers in innovative works by black women writers and their immediate political implications. We believe that transnational feminism would not only benefit from a stronger focus on aesthetics in literary (and other) texts but that it could especially use, ab-use, and develop the various notions of affect articulated in these approaches to further its political project.

Affective Aesthetics and Transnational Feminist Theory

To develop this theoretical perspective, we draw on another recent "turn" in the humanities and social sciences—namely the "turn to affect"—as a kind of corrective and methodological link between aesthetics and politics. This "affective turn" has taken on various forms and crossed disciplinary boundaries.¹³ According to Patricia Clough, it "expresses a new configuration of bodies, technology, and matter instigating a shift in thought in critical theory [...] [and it] throws thought back to the disavowals constitutive of Western industrial capitalist societies, bringing forth ghosted bodies and the traumatized remains of erased histories" (2–3). This new discourse on emotions, affect, and feeling¹⁴ has been fundamentally shaped by feminist scholars like Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, or Ann Cvetkovich. Concepts such as "public feeling"¹⁵ or "intimate public spheres" (Lauren Berlant) respectively have brought to the fore the political aspects of affects and emotions and their significance for collective identities and activism. Unsettling the presumed binary between private and public, this

¹³ See, for example, *Emotions and Social Change: Historical and Sociological Perspectives* (Brooks/Lemings, 2014), *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy* (Pedwell, 2014), *Politics and the Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies* (Hoggett/Thompson, 2012), *The Affect Theory Reader* (Gregg/Seigworth, 2010), *Emotions: A Cultural Studies Reader* (Harding, 2009), or *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Clough/Halley, 2007).

¹⁴ Following Deborah Gould, affects are "nonconscious and unnamed, but nevertheless registered, experiences of bodily energy and intensity that arise in response to stimuli impinging on the body" (26). Emotions can be defined, according to Brian Massumi, as "the expression of affect in gesture and language, its conventional or coded expression" (232). *Feelings* is understood here as the overarching concept that encompasses affect and emotion.

¹⁵ The term *public feeling* has been coined by a group of activists, artists, and scholars, who co-founded the Feel Tank Chicago (Lauren Berlant, Vanalyne Green, Deborah Gould, Mary Patten, Rebecca Zorach, et al.).

scholarship re-codes "affect" from a narrow definition as presumably private, individualized state or experience to a broader phenomenon that is structural, systemic, and inherently political. It is in this context that we situate our notion of affective aesthetics.

Affective aesthetics heeds the call of scholars like Felski or Pinto to pay increasing attention to the aesthetic quality of literary texts. However, it does so with a strong emphasis on the politics of and inscribed in these aesthetics and it does neither necessarily reproduce the exceptional or at least exemplary status of literary texts in a narrow sense, especially in their experimental forms, nor affirm the nimbus of theoretical writing proper. While the re-turn towards aesthetics has raised crucial questions of the de- and re-politicization of cultural productions and the seeming dichotomy between aesthetics and politics, from a transnational feminist perspective, this binary opposition can easily be deconstructed and hardly holds up upon closer inspection. Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar's *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* (2010), for example, sets out to overcome the traditional dichotomies of "individually / collaboratively produced knowledges, academia / activism, and theory / method" (2) in transnational feminism.¹⁶ In line with such criticism, critical practices attending to affective aesthetics question boundaries between genres, formats, and discourses, tease out the theoretical potential of literary texts and, in turn, pay attention to the aesthetics of writings and speech acts usually categorized and analyzed as primarily political or theoretical. The notion of affective aesthetics also accords new meaning to texts whose affective dimension does not unfold through complex literary devices and formal experimentation, like the works Pinto considers, but through a seemingly plain literary style. Our own critical practice engages affective aesthetics as political strategy and marks the affective dimension in transnational feminist writing of different genres as a link between politics and aesthetics.¹⁷

¹⁶ Although they suggest "that interweaving theories and practices of knowledge production through collaborative dialogues provides a way to radically rethink existing approaches to subalternity, voice, authorship, and representation" (2), they do not foreground the possibilities that aestheticism can bring to this process. Their theory is exclusively context-oriented, eschewing a more aesthetic examination of literary production.

¹⁷ It is in this sense that our notion of affective aesthetics differs from existing projects investigating

The idea of feminism as an everyday practice (potentially) available to everyone is a thought aesthetically rendered in genre-defying theory texts that employ the personal as vehicle to establish a connection between the (transnational) feminist critic and her community of readers. Recent programmatic examples include Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) and Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* (2017). Both texts introduce the personal and anecdotal as a starting point for theorizations of intersectional feminism. Their anecdotes about lived experiences affectively interpellate readers in that they illustrate, in emotionally-charged ways, the injustices against which they work. Sharpe's delineation of a succession of personal losses and the overarching theme of mourning, and also the polysemy of the term wake (vigil, alertness, the wake of the ship) all suggest emotional and existential scenarios that resonate with present and historical struggles for Black survival. While Sharpe uses anecdotes to enrich her theoretical musings and to provide entry points into her highly aestheticized critical intervention, she certainly does not ascribe to a plain style and experiments with form to a certain degree. Her text thus irritates the boundaries between seemingly objectifiable-theoretical scholarship and subjective-personal experience. Ahmed shares with Sharpe a sense that the "personal is theoretical" (10) but is more invested in reaching out to her readers in order to make her ideas applicable to their political activism and emotional experiences. This is evident throughout *Living a Feminist Life*, with regard to its language, style, and register; and the applicability of her ideas is proclaimed by the book's appendix which includes a toolkit and a manifesto. The attempt to reach a broad audience also becomes clear in her choice of medium: she wrote the book parallel to her blog on the same issues. Ahmed's text foregrounds the ambivalent feelings surrounding a person's role as feminist killjoy, the constant fight over everyday choices and the realization that feminist praxis may make others feel uncomfortable. She uses mundane and intimate

the affective nature inherent in aesthetic-political performances, commodities, and texts. In particular, we are not interested in the affective underpinnings of aesthetic categories in the ways that Sianne Ngai has theorized with regard to modernist and postmodernist aesthetics and late-capitalist commodity culture in *Ugly Feelings* (2005) and *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012). While we are indebted to the insights into the nexus of feelings and aesthetics such projects offer, we place our own focus of interest more directly on the aesthetic-political than on the formulation of aesthetic categories in the sense of value judgement.

situations like the ruined family dinner when the feminist killjoy refuses to laugh over an insensitive joke to make her point: "When you expose a problem you pose a problem" (37). This quote is also an example of the aphorisms she uses to break down complex power dynamics into take-home messages.

This strategy of affective interpellation is not new in feminist writing. bell hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), for example, is a project which set out to bring feminist theory, which often suffers from being too hermetically academic, closer to lay readers: "I just felt that somehow the movement had failed if we could not communicate feminist politics to everyone" (ix). She also notes that the idea pushed her to write "an easy to read book that would explain feminist thinking and encourage folks to embrace feminist politics" (xi). Her aesthetic strategies therefore hinge on the deliberate use of "simple" writing, accessible language, clarity and conciseness to bring feminism to as wide a readership as possible. She directly addresses the reader from the start to establish a relationship of intimacy. Drawing on her own activities in feminist groups, the entire text is written in the form of a dialogue offering different viewpoints and encouraging active reflection and participation: the reader is asked to take sides and to consider the situations they encounter. In addition to its rhetorical appeal, the text also addresses emotionalized topics including reproductive rights, women at work, parenting, and marriage to affectively involve its readers. hooks uses everyday situations and practical advice to build theoretical concepts, which Ahmed would call "sweaty concepts" (cf. 12–13).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's recent essay *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017) similarly hides its complexity behind a plain style, political rhetoric, and sentimental tropes. It is a paradigmatic example of the workings of affective aesthetics in transnational feminist writing. Adichie's work in general crosses boundaries and openly promotes a political agenda. As Ernest Emenyonu holds, "for Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, storytelling in whatever genre, is not just art; it is art with a purpose, art with social responsibility. In her works indeed, art and ideology inform, complement and affirm each other" (12). Her essay *Dear Ijeawele* can be read as part literary production, political intervention, and theoretical musing. It affectively interpellates its readers on various levels through its

use of literary devices as well as political rhetoric, which create intimacy, engage in constellations of transnational public feelings, and showcase the inextricable connection between aesthetics and politics.

Adichie's *Dear Ijeawele* is not a difficult text in Pinto's sense. Nevertheless, its use of accessible and jargon-free language generates affective attachments through literary form to propose a reconsideration of how to raise young girls (and boys) in accordance with dominant gender concepts. The epistolary character of her manifesto—prefaced with the indication that the subsequent fifteen suggestions are to be understood as her letter to a friend—establishes intimate links to readers both on the level of content and on the level of aesthetic experience. It simulates a personal, intimate conversation on the affectively-charged occasion of the birth of Adichie's friend's baby girl Chizalum. Adichie thus locates her feminist political project within the realm of child-rearing responsibilities and reproductive labor.¹⁸ Her text employs a rhetoric of what Lee Edelman has termed "reproductive futurism" (2) to affectively attach readers to the feminist political cause via a common concern for the well-being of "our" children. Bolstering heteronormativity, reproductive futurism, as Edelman has argued, mobilizes a collective identification with a common moral responsibility towards future generations, thus "rendering unthinkable [...] the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (2). Similarly, Adichie's attention to the topic of child-rearing instrumentalizes the affective attachment to children's well-being for a greater political investment in present feminist activism. Unlike Edelman's universal critique of heteronormativity, which focuses on white, middle-class narratives of futurism, Adichie, on the surface, is concerned with one specific—and specifically racialized and gendered—baby and her mother. As readers, however, we are prompted to recognize a more general concern for feminist parenting and to feel responsible not only for that particular child but also the well-being and future of feminism. The direct address of the letter may allow for readers

¹⁸ Read through the lens of auto/biography studies, Adichie's texts utilizes personal anecdotes to create urgency and poignancy for transnational feminism at large. This is also true for her essay *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), another example from Adichie's oeuvre where plain style is part and parcel of her affective aesthetics.

from different positionalities to identify with the agenda of the text and to cultivate a sensibility which is both feminist and transnational.

Aesthetically, the epistolary quality of Adichie's text intensifies this level of intimacy. It creates the impression that the real-life reader serves as a stand-in for the fictional reader.¹⁹ This generates the aesthetic effect that Adichie addresses her audience directly, a very powerful strategy to confront them with her feminist politics. This exchange transposes the conversation about feminist politics from the private intimate to the intimate public, to use Berlant's terminology. Through a linguistic register that conjures up a conversation between mothers and an overall gentle, benevolent, optimistic, and personal tone, Adichie's text can succeed in the affective interpellation of its readers.²⁰ The affective aesthetics of her text, including its adoption of epistolary features, its casual register, and its emotionalized discussion of intimate topics, not only asserts the value of feminist parenting per se but links complex social justice issues to prevalent gender ideals. The fifteen suggestions her text presents are insightful, practicable, and accessible, so that readers may come away with the feeling that feminist social change is not only possible but easy.

Adichie's text is not a literary text in the narrow sense—it is a political manifesto or how-to manual—but it employs literary devices to affectively interpellate its readers and to promote its political agenda. The choice to “keep it simple” results nonetheless in a highly aestheticized product that is clearly political and uses literary devices and affective strategies to engage with the difficulties of transnational feminism. While many proponents of the re-turn towards aesthetics, like Rita Felski, search for the aesthetic qualities in literature and endow them with renewed significance, texts like Adichie's call for attention to the aesthetic quality

¹⁹ In her groundbreaking study *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982), Janet Gurkin Altman distinguishes between the external and the internal reader of the epistolary novel's letters and points out that the two converge precisely because of the letter format (cf. 88).

²⁰ The text's epistolary properties also resonate with the multimedia dissemination of Adichie's work overall. For instance, her reading and performance in front of a live audience of her TEDx talk version of *We Should All Be Feminists* generates a similar intimacy as does the direct address to readers in *Dear Ijeawele*. In the published version of *We Should All Be Feminists*, the stylistic features of the text—clearly written to be spoken in a semi-public setting—also affectively interpellates readers into Adichie's transnational feminist agenda. Received across different media, Adichie's work must therefore be considered in line with a larger phenomenon of public intimacy surrounding scholars, artists, and activists.

of texts (in a broad sense) in order to understand the affective workings and political effects. Avoiding the pitfalls of universalization and depoliticization that would impede or betray a transnational feminist agenda, affective aesthetics may help to further subvert the generic markers which so often seem to cement the boundaries between activism, scholarship, and artistic expression. As Adichie's plain style shows, affective aesthetics are wed neither to experimental literary form nor to the reading experience.

Transnational feminism has a lot to gain from reading texts, literary and otherwise, as aesthetic products with affective (and thus political) potential. It can tap into the political potential of writings in different genres and forms to advance its agendas and utilize affective strategies to mobilize audiences across academic, artistic, and activist circles *and* across national boundaries. Our cursory glance at texts by Adichie, Sharpe, Ahmed and hooks foregrounds a particular kind of affective interpellation, namely one that touches on feelings surrounding existential situations—birth, death, life, loss. These tropes are part of an aesthetics that builds on affective structures which translate well across cultural difference, even though the issues at hand are firmly rooted in concrete social conditions that cannot be generalized. Sharpe's attention to a specific US/Black experience, for example, or Adichie's evocation of one particular Nigerian child insist on this specificity. At the same time, the affective aesthetics they employ may register with readers in different national, social, and cultural settings and situations. The accessibility of these texts may be enhanced by a seemingly plain style, a personalized approach, and sentimental tropes but this should not gloss over the fact that they deal with complex issues. And, they do so via an aesthetic that may not be experimental in form or literary in a narrow sense but one that is no less intellectually saturated, affectively effective, and politically powerful. A turn to the affective aesthetics of (transnational) feminist texts therefore yields new insights into critical interventions in politics, culture, and academia.

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