

It's time: Generation and temporality in psychoanalytic feminism

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Abstract In this paper I examine some key aspects of defining one's generation: transmitting values to younger generations in a way that makes sense to them; cultivating a psychic flexibility that allows us to welcome the future and be prepared for the unexpected whilst not succumbing to the fear of social, political and economic precarity; thinking of generation as both our collective moment in time and as generative potential; reaffirming the value of communication and sharing experience; and maintaining a dialogue between psychoanalytic feminism and other strands of feminist philosophy.

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At a recent sociology conference in London the keynote speaker urged her audience to revisit Kristeva's 'Women's time' (1981), arguing that it was still very relevant today. In it Kristeva explains that the first generation of feminists was primarily concerned with negotiating the social contract (e.g. basic rights, equality, dignity, freedom), while the second generation focused on the symbolic contract, exploring the dynamics of signification and disrupting linear time. She also announced the advent of a third generation, which was 'not a movement but a signifying space', both a corporeal and a desiring mental space (p. 33). As I was reaching for the text among my books, I remembered reading it in the late eighties, thinking 'what is my generation?'

As I write these words, still wondering if I ever managed to arrive at a satisfactory answer, my female students come to mind. They are mostly non-traditional students from a working-class background. Many of them are second generation immigrants from African countries. Their families fled war,

persecution or abject poverty, and tell stories of loss and trauma. My students want their degree in social sciences to lead to a better life. In their vast majority they do not engage in politics but have experienced economic and social precarity, as well as the consequences of neoliberal austerity in the United Kingdom in the last five years.

Their attitude towards feminism and psychoanalysis is ambivalent. They certainly relate to the empirical gains rather than the theoretical debates. My students are interested in the practical implications of sexual inequality, though not in understanding why the dualism of gender is a central theoretical concern of feminism (Ferrell, 1999, p. 46). They know quite well what 'the contingency of each woman's experience' (Dimen, 2004, p. 44) means in practice, but they are not necessarily enthused by notions of sisterhood and collective action. They are fascinated by the notion of the unconscious and the division of time into interior (unconscious) and exterior (conscious) (Ferrell, 1999, p. 41), but do not welcome the anxiety provoked by probing their phantasies, their cultural assumptions, their consumer desires, and expectations of financial success. With very few exceptions, they do not read literature. *Écriture féminine*, reading the canon critically, subverting signification and disrupting meaning do nothing for them. I try to explain the importance of language and literature for women and feminism. Literature is too middle-class a subject, they say, and no one ever taught them how to appreciate it. The Yellow Wallpaper? The Magic Toyshop? They have no time for that – and what does it have to do with their studies anyway? 'What if you ever wished to tell your own story?', I ask. Reply: 'It's a sad story, who would want to listen?' or 'No one reads anymore, you ought to know that'.

Discussing the future of psychoanalysis and feminism, Juliet Mitchell seems to have accepted that psychoanalytic feminism has lost its momentum. She says that 'we [feminists] will come together again, as an identity, when it's needed for another political thrust' (Mitchell *et al*, 2010, p. 77). On the other hand, Jacqueline Rose insists on the *de facto* value of psychoanalysis for feminism:

[Psychoanalysis] needs to be brought back today into the frame as part of the feminist language for the very reasons we're talking about... There's no discourse in the culture for understanding the unconscious force of [fantasies and sexism], except for psychoanalysis... The unconscious won't go away. And so psychoanalysis won't go away as a way of understanding it.
(pp. 79–80)

But perhaps the value of psychoanalysis is now self-evident only to those who have been immersed in it for a long time. Or perhaps the most challenging task for each generation is how to transmit its values by making them intelligible to younger generations and relevant to *them* and *their* time.

Below I discuss some key aspects of this endeavour. My comments are by no means exhaustive. They draw on my own exploration of psychoanalytic feminism, promising current theoretical formulations, and those aspects of theory and practice that I have found most salient and inspiring in promoting inter-generational dialogue.

Present and Future Politics: Becoming Prepared for the Unexpected

In conversation with Rose and Radford, Mitchell argues that one of the problems today is that there is not enough reflexivity and self-analysis. She also claims that women have neglected precarity, the essential indeterminacy and fluidity of identity (pp. 80–81). But how does one advocate reflexivity and precarity when there is too much of the wrong kind? How do we cultivate fragility when we are already fragile and traumatised, experiencing the weakening of institutions, the demise of certain democratic rights, a break up in the equity between generations and a descent into denialism and fantasy? (Hall *et al*, 2013). With regard to politics, Dean (2013) argues that reflexivity, along with complexity, make the current neoliberal economic-political crisis appear too big and complex to grasp in its entirety. Neoliberal versions of reflexivity do not produce a better knowledge of the self but an operation akin to the drive, a circuit that is never closed, affording a pittance of enjoyment upon which subjects are called to subsist: we get by with what little we know and have; we survive.

Psychoanalysis can challenge neoliberalism both at the level of institutions and the clinic (Layton, 2009, 2010), clearly articulating unconscious structures and bringing them to public debate, drawing attention to the neoliberal precariatized, even terrorised state of mind (Hall *et al*, 2013), and challenging the assumption that nothing can be done differently. These challenges can perhaps pin-point what is blocking the horizon of our experience. At the same time, psychoanalytic feminism should cultivate a positive disposition towards the future, even when it looks bleak, already decided for us and rather disheartening. Le Doeuff (2003) argues that, in order to change women's situation for the better, we need consolation – which I take to mean solace in the present and hope for the future – dialogue, active pedagogy, the creation of poetics and also an ethics (p. 137). From a psychoanalytic feminist perspective, we may add that we need to continue cultivating those practices of *care of the self and the other* that both sustain women and encourage them to think differently.

With regards to the latter, we might want to start paving the way for events, breaks and ruptures that will occur in the future, facilitating the conditions for their advent in the present. In psychoanalytic terms, an event is a break with the

existing order of things that does not lose track of its structural overdetermination (Bosteels, 2003, p. 120). It is a break-through akin to interpretation. For philosophers like Lacan and Foucault, it is also the moment at which we cease to tolerate the conditions of our existence, a moment that exposes us to their cost and raises the possibility of refusing them (Rajchman, 1991, p. 13). In that sense, the pursuit of precarity highlighted by Mitchell as indispensable to feminism can become part of a collective social and political project that starts in the present and looks to the future, one that contains elements of concrete action and a propensity to being surprised in equal measure.

Present and Past: Generation

Our attitude to the past, our own and the past of others, is important. We need to learn what we did not witness and share what we have experienced, especially when the latter is traumatic or unrepresented. The French feminist philosopher, psychoanalyst and artist Bracha Ettinger (1992) argues that sharing the other's trauma is a universal human disposition. Departing from the Lacanian tradition of the infant's separation from the mother and subsequent entry into the Symbolic order via castration, Ettinger proposes an alternative: the notion of the *matrixial border-linking*, which she defines as an inherent ability to link to others, an ability every bit as universal as separation and castration. Matrixial border-linking enables the process of *metramorphosis*, a change that takes place in both me and the other, one that occurs 'between being and absence, memory and oblivion, I and not-I, transgression and fading away' (p. 201).

Baraitser (2013) links the properties of the matrixial to the seeking of connections with one's generation. Discussing the autobiography of the Italian activist Louisa Passerini, she demonstrates that the activist's remembrance of the past was not motivated by a desire to establish her own view of it, but by a desire to find out what she did not herself directly witness. The two senses of generation – connecting with one's specific historical time and producing meaning in the present – proceed together. Today, asking 'what is my generation?' is vital. It seems to me that, in its matrixial incarnation, it is a valid *reflexive* project, one that locates the self by connecting past and present, encompassing knowing and lack of knowledge, sharing grey areas of memory, and opening up various temporalities. As this project departs from Freudian and Lacanian orthodoxy, it also allows us to disentangle femininity from the vocabulary of *aphanisis* and of speaking, as Jacqueline Rose (Mitchell *et al*, 2010) inevitably does, of the 'withering and un-withering' of womanliness (p. 87), which is the obvious effect of being restricted by a certain theoretical discourse.

Such an affirmative approach to the past might also allow women to be more generous towards their own histories, especially to those discontinuities in their *résumés* that are often judged as gaps and failures. My students want to make sense of their own trajectories from past to present, especially the discontinuities in their education: lost time, they muse. Perhaps *time lying in waiting*, I propose. And, adapting Benhabib's questions (1992) for the occasion: aren't women allowed 'to pull the curtain down' for a while, and only let it rise if they can have 'a say in the production of the play itself?' (p. 215). We all need to make room for 'lost' times.

At the same time, we recognise as scholars how important it is to seek inspiration outside the immediate psychoanalytic domain, especially when debates chime with our main concerns. For example, drawing on Arendt, Cavarero (cited in Martin, 2002) proposes the concept of natality as an alternative to the centrality of death in western philosophy. Patriarchy, she argues, is suffused with death, but humans are natal, not mortal. Natality does not try to 'tame' death but enables us to consider why death has been an issue that must be heroically overcome, endured or denied (p. 34). Moreover, natality as part of the politics of becoming reaffirms the close relationship between femininity and generation – in both senses of the word – between mother and daughter, Demeter and Kore. Might not such theoretical formulations become fruitful connections that reaffirm and expand the importance of femininity as introduced by those second wave feminists who shaped the education of my generation?

To Speak, in the First Person

Psychoanalytic feminism has taught us something very important: that no one can speak on behalf of all women, and, occasionally, not even on behalf of one. One can attempt to speak of oneself as part of other women, with humility and a keen awareness of how difficult it is to enunciate a non-narcissistic 'I'. Might we agree that speaking, writing, *communicating*, rather than reading literature alone, should now become a feminist-psychoanalytic priority? The ability to speak in the first person, in notes and fragments if necessary? (Dimen, 2004, p. 45). Might we make this kind of engagement a pedagogic priority? McRobbie (2009) considers the feminist classroom as a 'contact zone', 'a place marked by transparent differences of power' (p. 132). I am not sure that this transparency is evident to all participants, right from the beginning. I am therefore always anxious and excited when first year students come to me with a very predictable demand: teach us what you know. How do I explain to them that I need *their* knowledge as much as they need mine? That I need their experience, their language and the testimony of their generation as much as they

need mine? That I have no superior claim to wisdom or knowledge? Mindful of demolishing their phantasy of containment and authority too soon, but true to the subversive intent of both feminism and psychoanalysis, I joke that I know nothing and I always choose to remain stupid (Nobus and Quinn, 2005). And from there I proceed.

About the Author

Angie Voela is a Senior Lecturer in Psychosocial Studies, University of East London. She has published on gender; feminist and psychoanalytic approaches to identity; space, politics and identity; trauma in art and culture; and myth in contemporary culture. Her recent publications have appeared in such journals as the *European Journal of Women's Studies*; *Subjectivity*; *Somatechnics*; *The Journal for Cultural Research*; and *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*.

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