

THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF EMPATHY

Workshop at the SLSAeu Conference EMPATHIES: www.empathies2017.com

Workshop for doctoral and postdoctoral researchers, with Dr Carolyn Pedwell (University of Kent) and Prof Chris Weedon (Cardiff University). Convenors: Dr Christopher John Müller (Cardiff University & University of Bristol) and Dr Andrea Zimmermann (Affect Studies Group and Gender Studies, University of Basel)

The ability to express and feel empathy has long been presented as one of the defining traits of what it means to be human. Although this ability is increasingly being recognised in non-human entities, this very act of identification roots the empathetic response further in a “natural” bodily automatism that is involved in mediating social experience and the way we relate to others.

This workshop will complicate the immediacy of the feeling of empathy – our ability to really feel “it”, be moved and reach out to the other – by foregrounding that the expression of empathy also hinges on “specific” cultural knowledge and experience, which shapes our perception of and responses to others. If we accept that empathy is not merely a “universal” human phenomenon, but one that is also *situated*, at work in different ways in different places and situations, then empathy also reveals a fractious potential. Rather than making us merely reach out to others, empathy also immunises an “us” against those for whom no such feelings are felt. Whilst feeling empathy we inevitably also have the impression of “understanding” the other, which embeds the other’s pain in our own experience and system of values, even though these values may not be universally shared. Here the genuine expression of empathy can end up entrenching stereotypes, power-relations and cultural ignorance because the other’s situation seems so immediately understood and obvious. Empathy can also lead to moral catharsis, which vents emotional tensions and doubts to give one the impression of “caring” and “sharing” the other’s pain. As such, it can act as a disincentive to scrutinise one’s own behaviour and might lead to inaction and the sanitation of the violence of social exclusion and structural injustices. The very fact that a wide range of cultural practices – from adverts, political speeches, TV-soap operas, museum exhibitions to music and sentimental literature – routinely seek to elicit empathetic responses, alerts us to the political and mediated nature of this feeling. When we all cry at the same time in a Hollywood movie, is this really an expression of our shared humanity, or are other forces at work here also?

The participants of this workshop will have the opportunity to engage in a day long discussion about the construction and role of empathy in the sphere of cultural politics. Key points of discussion will include cultural translation, empathy and international geo-politics, postcolonialism, critical race studies, feminist and gender studies, national identity, class and memory studies and the connected questions of the politics of representation and technological mediation, especially in the context of digital media, literature and the arts. The overarching aim of the day is to raise awareness of the multiple ways in which empathy intersects with cultural politics, and to help participants gauge how questions of cultural politics intersect with their own work. As such, this workshop will be useful for researchers and practitioners from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds.

The programme (overleaf) is designed to combine a thematic overview of the field with workshops and presentations by participants. **Deadline for Application / Registration: 30th of April, 2017**

To set the ground for the discussions, participants are asked to register for the event by preparing a short (300-400 word) narrative about their own research and how this touches on empathy. These

narratives will be circulated in advance to all participants and will form the basis for introductions and workshops on the day. Some foundational reading has also been recommended.

Please send your application to: MullerCJ@cardiff.ac.uk and andreamaria.zimmermann@unibas.ch

Programme: 20 June, 2017

9:00 – 9:15

Introductions and Welcome

9:15 – 10:00. 'The Empathy Machine: Cultural Politics of Empathy – issues and concepts' (Chris Müller: www.cjmuller.co.uk / <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/people/view/260789-muller-christopher>)

10:00 – 10:30 *Coffee Break*

10:30 – 11:30. **Session 1:** 'Decolonising Empathy: Thinking Affect Transnationally', Carolyn Pedwell (C. Pedwell: <https://www.kent.ac.uk/sspsr/staff/academic/n-r/pedwell-carolyn.html>)

11:30 – 12:30. **Session 2:** 'Empathy and Cultural Memory' (lecture title tbc) Chris Weedon (C. Weedon: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/people/view/135189-weedon-chris>)

12:30 – 13:30 *Lunch*

13:30 – 16:30 Parallel Workshops (with a Coffee Break)

16:30 – 17:30 Roundtable and closing discussion (Chaired by A. Zimmermann)

Recommended Reading (to be made available to participants)

Berlant, Lauren, 'The Subject of True Feeling'

Pedwell, Carolyn, 'Decolonising Empathy'

Weedon, Chris, 'Identity, Origins and Roots'

Further Reading

Ahmed, Sara (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP).

Bennett, Jill (2006) *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford UP).

Berlant, Lauren (ed) (2004) *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (London: Routledge).

Coplan, Amy. and Goldie Peter (eds.) (2011) *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford UP).

Foster, Susan. (2010) *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London and New York: Routledge).

Hall, Stuart (ed) (2006) *Resistance through Rituals*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge).

Pedwell, Carolyn (2014) *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

Scheler, Max (1913) *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*

Spelman, Elizabeth (1997) *Fruits of Sorrow: Framing our Attention to Suffering* (Boston: Beacon Press).