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THE COST OF GETTING BETTER

Suicide, Sensation, Switchpoints

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There are many things lost in the naming of a death as a “gay youth suicide.” In what follows, I offer a preliminary analysis of the prolific media attention to gay youth suicides that began in the United States in the fall of 2010. I am interested in how this attention recalls affective attachments to neoliberalism that index a privileged geopolitics of finance capitalism. I have been struck by how the discourses surrounding gay youth suicide partake in a spurious binarization of what I foreground as an interdependent relationship between bodily capacity and bodily debility. These discourses reproduce neoliberalism’s heightened demands for bodily capacity, even as this same neoliberalism marks out populations for what Lauren Berlant has described as “slow death”—the debilitating ongoingness of structural inequality and suffering.¹ In the United States, where personal debt incurred through medical expenses is the number one reason for filing for bankruptcy, the centrality of what is termed the medical-industrial complex to the profitability of slow death cannot be overstated.² My intervention here is an attempt to go beyond a critique of the queer neoliberalism embedded in the tententious mythologizing that “it gets better” by confronting not only the debilitating aspects of neoliberalism but, more trenchantly, the economics of debility. If the knitting together of finance capitalism and the medical-industrial complex means that debility pays, and pays well, then the question becomes, how can an affective politics move beyond the conventional narratives of resistance to neoliberalism?

The Cost of Getting Better

To begin, I pose two queries: one, what is contained in the category of sexuality? Two, what kinds of normative temporal assumptions are produced through the “event” of suicide? As a faculty member of Rutgers University in New Jersey, where a student, Tyler Clementi, committed suicide after videos of him having sex with a man were circulated by his roommate and another student, I want to provide better context for the local circumstances of his death. All three students (Clementi, Dharun Ravi, and Molly Wei) were living on Busch campus in Piscataway, New Jersey, already codified as the campus for science/premed “geeks” (some might say sissies). Busch is also racially demarcated as the “Asian” campus, an identity rarely disaggregated from geek at US colleges. Clementi’s suicide has predictably occasioned a vicious anti-Asian backlash replete with overdetermined notions of “Asian homophobia” and predictable calls to “go back to where you came from,” as seen in numerous online articles. Commenting on the biases of the criminal justice system against people of nonnormative race, ethnicity, and citizenship, a press release from a Rutgers organization called Queering the Air notes that Garden State Equality (a New Jersey LGBT advocacy group) and Campus Pride (a national group for LGBT students) have demanded the most severe consequences for Ravi and Wei, prosecution for hate crimes, maximum jail time, expulsion without disciplinary hearing, and that “18,000 people endorse an online group seeking even more serious charges — manslaughter.”³

It seems imperative that the implications of two “model minority” students from a wealthy New Jersey suburb who targeted an effete, young, queer white man be considered beyond convenient narratives of the so-called inherent homophobia within racialized immigrant communities. Is it possible to see all three students involved as more alike—all geeks, in fact—than different? Instead of rehashing that old “gaybashers are closet cases” canard, perhaps there is a reason to destabilize the alignments of “aliqueness” and “difference” away from a singular, predictable axis through “sexuality.” A letter recently circulated by Queering the Air claims that Clementi’s death is the second suicide by an LGBTQ student since March and that four of the last seven suicides at Rutgers were related to sexuality.⁴ What, then, is meant here by “related to sexuality”? I am prompted by Amit Rai’s reformulation of sexuality as “ecologies of sensation”—as affect instead of identity—that transcends the designations of straight and gay and can further help disaggregate these binary positions from their racialized histories.⁵

Missing from the debate about Clementi’s suicide is a discussion about the proclivities of young people to see the “choice” of Internet surveillance as a mandatory regulatory part not only of their subject formations but of their bodily

habits and affective tendencies. For these youth, so-called cyberstalking is an integral part of what it means to become a neoliberal (sexual) subject. Think of the ubiquity of sexting, applications like Grindr, Manhunt, DIY porn, and cellphone mass circulation of images—technologies that create simultaneous sensations of exposure (the whole world is watching) and alienation (no one understands). These cyborgian practices constitute new relations between public and private that we have yet to really acknowledge, much less comprehend. “Invasion of privacy” remains uncharted territory for jurisprudence in relation to the Internet. But more significantly, to reiterate Rai, the use of these technologies impels new affective tendencies of bodies, new forms of attention, distraction, practice, and repetition. The presumed differences between “gay” and “straight” could be thought more generously through the quotidian and banal activities of sexual self-elaboration through Internet technologies—emergent habituations, corporeal comportment, and an array of diverse switchpoints of bodily capacity.

If signification and representation (what things mean) are no longer the only primary realm of the political, then bodily processes (how things feel) must be irreducibly central to any notion of the political. Clementi’s participation in the testimonial spaces of the chat room to detail his roommate’s invasion of his “privacy” and Clementi’s use of Facebook for the explanatory “suicide note” reflect precisely the shared continuities with his perpetrators through ecologies of sensation. Accusations of “homophobia,” “gay bullying,” and even “cyberbullying” fail to do justice to the complex uptake of digital technologies in this story.

The apparently sudden spate of queer suicides is also obviously at odds with the claims of purported progress by the gay and lesbian rights movement. As noted by Tavia Nyong’o, Dan Savage’s sanctimonious statement “it gets better” is a mandate to fold oneself into urban, neoliberal gay enclaves: a call to upward mobility that discordantly echoes the now-discredited “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” immigrant motto.⁶ (The symbolism of Clementi’s transit from central New Jersey to the George Washington Bridge that connects northern New Jersey to upper Manhattan is painfully apparent.) Part of the outrage generated by these deaths is based precisely in a belief that things are indeed supposed to be better, especially for a particular class of white gay men. As I argue in my op-ed in the *Guardian*, this amounts to a reinstatement of white racial privilege that was lost with being gay.⁷ Savage has also mastered, if we follow Sarah Lochlain Jain on the “politics of sympathy,” the technique of converting Clementi’s injury into cultural capital, not only through affectations of blame, guilt, and suffering but also through those of triumph, transgression, and success.⁸

Affective Politics: States of Capacity and Debility

The subject of redress and grievance thus functions here as a recapacitation of a debilitated body. To make my second and related point, then, I want to shift the registers of this conversation about “queer suicide” from pathologization versus normativization of sexual identity to questions of bodily capacity, debility, disability, precarity, and populations. This is not to dismiss these queer suicides but to ask what kinds of “slow deaths” have been ongoing that a suicide might represent an escape from. It is also to “slow” the act of suicide down—to offer a concomitant yet different temporality of relating to living and dying. Berlant moves us away from trauma or catastrophe, proposing that “slow death occupies the temporalities of the endemic” (756). Slow death occurs not within the timescale of the suicide or the epidemic but within “a zone of temporality . . . of ongoingness, getting by, and living on, where the structural inequalities are dispersed, the pacing of their experience intermittent, often in phenomena not prone to capture by a consciousness organized by archives of memorable impact” (759). In this nonlinear temporality, for it starts and stops, redoubles and leaps ahead, Berlant is not “defining a group of individuals merely afflicted with the same ailment, [rather] slow death describes populations marked out for wearing out” (760–61n20). That is, slow death is not about an orientation toward the death drive, nor is it morbid; rather, it is about the maintenance of living, the “ordinary work of living on” (761).

In the context of slow death, I ponder three things. First, what does it mean to proclaim “it gets better,” or “you get stronger”? Second, why is suicide constituted as the ultimate loss of life? Third, how can we connect these suicides to the theorization of debility and capacity? David Mitchell’s moving invocation of disability “not as exception, but the basis upon which a decent and just social order is founded,” hinges on a society that acknowledges, accepts, and even anticipates disability.⁹ This anticipatory disability is the dominant temporal frame of both disability rights activism (you are able-bodied only until you are disabled) as well as disability studies. As the queer disability theorist Robert McRuer writes, “It’s clear that we are haunted by the disability to come.”¹⁰ Disability is posited as the most common identity category because we will all belong to it someday, as McRuer’s comment implies. Yet, as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue, disability is “reified as the true site of insufficiency.”¹¹ But Berlant’s formulation of slow death implies that we might not (only) be haunted by the disability to come but also disavow the debility already here.

Berlant argues that “health itself can then be seen as a side effect of successful normativity” (765). Therefore, to honor the complexity of these suicides,

they must be placed within the broader context of neoliberal demands for bodily capacity as well as the profitability of debility, both functioning as central routes through which finance capital seeks to sustain itself. In my current book project, “Affective Politics: States of Capacity and Debility,” I examine these heightened demands for bodily capacity and exceptionalized debility. Capacity and debility are seeming opposites generated by increasingly demanding neoliberal formulations of health, agency, and choice—what I call a “liberal eugenics of lifestyle programming”—that produce, along with biotechnologies and bioinformatics, population aggregates. Those “folded” into life are seen as more capacious or on the side of capacity, while those targeted for premature or slow death are figured as debility. Such an analysis re-poses the questions: which bodies are made to pay for “progress”? Which debilitated bodies can be reinvigorated for neoliberalism, and which cannot? In this regard, Savage’s project refigures queers, along with other bodies heretofore construed as excessive/erroneous, as being on the side of capacity, ensuring that queerness operates as a machine of regenerative productivity. Even though post-structuralist queer theory critically deploys registers of negativity (and increasingly negative affect) in reading practices primarily deconstructive in their orientation, such a figuration of queer theory has emerged from a homeostatic framework: queer theory is already also a machine of capacity in and after the cybernetic turn. Bioinformatics frames—in which bodies figure not as identities or subjects but as data—entail that there is no such thing as non-productive excess but only emergent forms of new information.¹² This revaluing of excess/debility is potent because, simply put, debility—slow death—is profitable for capitalism. In neoliberal, biomedical, and biotechnological terms, the body is always debilitated in relation to its ever-expanding potentiality.

What I am proposing, then, is also an intervention into the binaried production of disabled versus nondisabled bodies that drives both disability studies and disability rights activism. Even as the demands of ableism weigh heavy and have been challenged by disability scholars and activists, attachments to the difference of disabled bodies may reify an exceptionalism that only certain privileged disabled bodies can occupy. While the disability rights movement largely understands disability as a form of nonnormativity that deserves to be depathologized, disability justice activists seek to move beyond access issues foregrounded by the Americans with Disabilities Act as well as global human rights frames that standardize definitions of disability and the terms of their legal redress across national locations. They instead avow that in working-poor and working-class communities of color, disabilities and debilities are actually “the norm.” Thus a political agenda that disavows pathology is less relevant than a critique of the reembedded forms

of liberal eugenics propagated by what they call the medical-industrial complex and its attendant forms of administrative surveillance. Such work suggests that an increasingly demanding ableism (and I would add, an increasingly demanding disable-ism—normative forms of disability as exceptionalism) is producing nonnormativity not only through the sexual and racial pathologization of certain “unproductive bodies” but more expansively through the ability or inability of all bodies to register through affective capacity.

What disability justice activists imply is that slow death is constitutive to debility, and disability must be rethought in terms of precarious populations.

The distinctions of normative and nonnormative, disabled and nondisabled do not hold up as easily. Instead there are variegated aggregates of capacity and debility. If debility is understood by disability justice activists to be *endemic to* disenfranchised communities, it is doubly so because the forms of financialization that accompany neoliberal economics and the privatization of services also produce debt as debility. This relationship between debt and debility can be described as a kind of “financial expropriation”: “the profit made by financial institutions out of the personal income of workers is a form of financial expropriation, seen as additional profit generated in the realm of circulation.”¹³ Given the relationship of bankruptcy to medical care expenses in the United States, debt becomes another register to measure the capacity for recovery, not only physical but also financial. Debility is profitable to capitalism, but so is the demand to “recover” from or overcome it.

From Epistemological Corrective to Ontological Irreducibility

I am proposing, then, a methodology that inhabits the intersections of disability studies, the affective turn, and theories of posthumanism—all fields of inquiry that put duress on the privileging of (able-bodied) subject formation as a primary site of bodily interpellation. The affective turn, as I interpret it, signals intellectual contestation over sites of struggle, whose targets are now the following: social constructionism (reinvigorated interrogation of biological matter that challenges both biological determinism and also performativity), epistemology (ontology and ontogenesis), psychoanalysis (trauma rethought as the intensification of the body’s relation to itself), humanism (the capacities of nonhuman animals as well as inorganic matter, matters), and agency (the centrality of cognition and perception as challenged by theories of sensation). The modulation and surveillance of affect operates as a form of sociality that regulates good and bad subjects, possible and impossible bodily capacities. Here affect entails not only a dissolution of the sub-

ject but, more significantly, a dissolution of the stable contours of the organic body, as forces of energy are transmitted, shared, circulated. The body, as Brian Massumi argues, “passes from one state of capacitation to a diminished or augmented state of capacitation,” always bound up in the lived past of the body but always in passage to a changed future.¹⁴

This understanding of capacity and debility entails theorizing not only specific disciplinary sites but also broader techniques of social control, marking a shift in terms from regulating normativity (the internalization of self/other subject formation) to what Michel Foucault calls regularizing bodies or what has been designated “the age of biological control.”¹⁵ In the oscillation between disciplinary societies and control societies, following Foucault’s “security regimes” and Gilles Deleuze’s “control society,” the tensions have been mapped out thusly: as a shift from normal/abnormal to variegation, modulation, and tweaking; from discrete sites of punishment (the prison, the mental hospital, the school) to preemptive regimes of securitization; from inclusion/exclusion to the question of differential inclusion; from self/other, subject/object construction to micro-states of subindividual differentiation; from difference between to difference within; from the policing of profile to patrolling of affect; from will to capacity; from agency to affect; from subject to body.¹⁶ And finally, and I believe most importantly, there is a shift underway, from Althusserian interpellation to an array of diverse switchpoints of the activation of the body.

What does it mean to rethink disability in terms of control societies? The particular binary categorization of dis/abled subjectivity is one that has many parallels to other kinds of binary categorizations propagated—in fact, demanded—by neoliberal constructions of failed and capacitated bodies. Therefore we cannot see this binary production as specific only to the distinction of disabled versus nondisabled subjects; all bodies are being evaluated in relation to their success or failure in terms of health, wealth, progressive productivity, upward mobility, enhanced capacity. And there is no such thing as an “adequately abled” body anymore. However, it is precisely because there are gradations of capacity and debility in control societies—rather than the self/other production of being/not being—that the distinction between disabled and nondisabled becomes fuzzier.

As an example, Nikolas Rose maintains that depression will become the number one disability in the United States and the U.K. within the next ten years. This expansion of depressed peoples will not occur simply through a widespread increase of depression but through the gradation of populations. In other words, it will occur not through the hailing and interpellation of depressed subjects—and a

distinction between who is depressed and who is not—but through the evaluation and accommodation of degrees: to what degree is one depressed?¹⁷ One is already instructed by television advertisements for psychotropic drugs such as “Abilify,” claiming that “two out of three people on anti-depressants still have symptoms” and offering a top-off medication to add to a daily med regime. Through this form of medical administration, bodies are (1) drawn into a modulation of subindividual capacities (this would be the diverse switchpoints); (2) surveilled not on identity positions alone but through affective tendencies, informational body-as-data, and statistical probabilities—through populations, risk, and prognosis; (3) further stratified across registers of the medical-industrial complex: medical debt, health insurance, state benefits, among other feedback loops into the profitability of debility.

How the disaggregation of depressed subjects into various states, intensities, and tendencies will change the dimensionality of disability remains an open prospect, but at the very least it forces recognition of the insufficiency of disability as a category. The disability at stake is an affective tendency of sorts as well as a mental state, and as such challenges the basis on which disability rights frames have routed their representational (visibility) politics. A field that has been dominated by the visibility of physical disabilities is acknowledging the scope and range of cognitive and mental disabilities. This recognition, in turn, has challenged the status of rational, agential, survivor-oriented politics based on the privileging of the linguistic capacity to make rights claims. Why? Because the inability to “communicate” functions as *the* single determinant of mental or cognitive impairment (thereby regulating the human/animal distinction), thus destabilizing the centrality of the human capacity for thought and cognition.

In an effort to open up capacity as a source of generative affective politics rather than only a closure around neoliberal demands, I briefly return to Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” perhaps unfashionably so.¹⁸ In the context of disability studies, this question becomes not only a mandate for epistemological correctives but a query about ontological and bodily capacity, as granting “voice” to the subaltern comes into tension with the need, in the case of the human/animal distinction, to destabilize the privileging of communication/representation/language altogether. The ability to understand language is also where human/nonhuman animal distinctions, as well as human/technology distinctions, have long been drawn, and here disability studies, posthumanism, and animal studies may perhaps articulate a common interest in a nonanthropomorphic, interspecies vision of affective politics. Posthumanism questions the boundaries between human and nonhuman, matter and discourse, technology and body, and interro-

gates the practices through which these boundaries are constituted, stabilized, and destabilized. (The burgeoning field of animal studies is thus also a part of the endeavor to situate human capacities within a range of capacities of species as opposed to reifying their singularity.) If, according to posthumanist thinkers such as Manuel DeLanda and Karen Barad, language has been granted too much power, a nonanthropomorphic conception of the human is necessary to resituate language as one of many captures of the intensities of bodily capacities, an event of bodily assemblages rather than a performative act of signification.¹⁹

Our current politics are continually reproducing the exceptionalism of human bodies and the aggrieved agential subject, politics typically enacted through “wounded attachments.”²⁰ Without minimizing the tragedy of Clementi’s and other recent deaths, dialogue about ecologies of sensation and slow death might open us up to a range of connections. For instance, how do queer girls commit suicide? What of the slow deaths of teenage girls through anorexia, bulimia, and numerous sexual assaults they endure as punishment for the transgressing of proper femininity and alas, even for conforming to it? What is the political and cultural fallout of recentering the white gay male as ur-queer subject? How would our political landscape transform if it actively decentered the sustained reproduction and proliferation of the grieving subject, opening instead toward an affective politics, attentive to ecologies of sensation and switchpoints of bodily capacities, to habituations and unhabituations, to tendencies, multiple temporalities, and becomings?

Notes

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20. See Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," *Political Theory* 21 (1993): 390–410.