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Public Feelings

The editors' invitation to write about how our work on "nonsexual" domains relates to our interest in sexuality very much spoke to me because of my engagement with the topic of "public feelings" with a group of scholars both nationally and at the University of Texas (UT). Aiming to explore the role of feelings in public life, the project emerged from collective meetings on the future of gender and sexuality and the question of how to give feminism greater impact in the public sphere. A core group of about half a dozen people have organized sessions at conferences such as MLA, ASA, and the Cultural Studies Association and local events at their home bases; at the University of Texas, I have also coordinated a research seminar that has met semiregularly since 2002. But the Public Feelings group has also very significantly worked for the most part informally—in some measure, of course, due to lack of funding or institutional support but also out of a desire to figure out new ways to make academic work and to create conjunctions between academia, activism, and art. Our meetings, whether public or among ourselves, are as likely to start with a mood as an idea; at one of our national gatherings, for example, many of us

admitted to feeling exhausted and overwhelmed by our professional obligations, and we considered what kinds of projects might emerge out of those conditions and how to produce scholarship not timed to the rhythms and genres of conferences, edited collections, and books. In a public event at UT shortly after the United States invaded Iraq, the dominant response was one of incredulity, a seemingly low-grade or normalized version of the epistemic shock that is said to accompany trauma. More recently, at another public UT event, this time to discuss reactions to Hurricane Katrina's devastations, many participants described a sense of divided attention, the movement back and forth between the everyday business of the semester's beginning and the urgency of the disaster, a split focus that constitutes the lived experience of class and race divisions.

Begun in 2001, our investigation has coincided with and operated in the shadow of September 11 and its ongoing consequences—war in Iraq, a sentimental takeover of 9/11 to underwrite militarism, Bush's reelection, and the list goes on. Rather than analyzing the geopolitical underpinnings of these developments, we've been more interested in their emotional dynamics. What makes it possible for people to vote for Bush or to assent to war, and how do these political decisions operate within the context of daily lives that are pervaded by a combination of anxiety and numbness? How can we, as intellectuals and activists, acknowledge our own political disappointments and failures in a way that can be enabling? Where might hope be possible? Those questions stem from our experience of what one of our cells, Feel Tank Chicago, has called "political depression," the sense that customary forms of political response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change the world or to make us feel better. The concept of political depression is not, however, meant to be wholly depressing; indeed, Feel Tank has operated with the camp humor one might expect from a group of seasoned queer activists, organizing an International Day of the Politically Depressed in which participants were invited to show up in their bathrobes to indicate their fatigue with traditional forms of protest and distributing T-shirts and refrigerator magnets carrying the slogan "Depressed? It Might Be Political!"¹ The goal is to depathologize negative affects so that they can be seen as a possible resource for political action rather than as its antithesis. This is not, however, to suggest that depression is thereby converted into a positive experience; it retains its associations with inertia and despair, if not apathy and indifference, but these affects become sites of publicity and community formation.

Along with being a stealth feminist project, that is, one designed to incorporate the insights of feminism into a broad-based effort to reimagine political life and collectivity, Public Feelings is also implicitly queer but not always announced as such. Many of our members are veteran AIDS activists and come to the project with various forms of political depression in the face of an ongoing and too frequently normalized health crisis of global proportions, but they also have a keen interest in new forms of collectivity. Indeed, it's impossible to imagine the Public Feelings project without the inspiration of queer work. Our interest in everyday life, in how global politics and history manifest themselves at the level of lived affective experience, is bolstered by the role that queer theory has played in calling attention to the integral role of sexuality within public life. Moreover, our interest in negative affects draws inspiration from the depathologizing work of queer studies, which has made it possible to document and revalue non-normative ways of living. Queer theory contributes to the more expansive definition of political life that Public Feelings also seeks to foster—that political identities are implicit within structures of feeling, sensibilities, everyday forms of cultural expression and affiliation that may not take the form of recognizable organizations or institutions.

Given these ambitious goals, it's not surprising that queer activists would feel politically depressed when confronted with a mainstream gay and lesbian political agenda that consists of gay marriage and civil rights. Was this the visibility and recognition that we fought for? If so, "writing since queer theory" sometimes seems like a necessary, if remedial, backtracking to reassert forms of queer affiliation and identity that provide alternatives to the privatized family and couple. Public Feelings member Lisa Duggan's critique of gay marriage has provided a particularly vivid example of how putatively private or personal matters are in fact central to political life; she argues that the call for legalized gay marriage simply reproduces neoliberal efforts to make access to rights contingent on a privatized family form and that it contributes to the shrinking of the public sphere.² A recent cluster of essays in *GLQ* discusses the importance of continuing to remember queer AIDS activism and its cultural records as a repository of grief and optimism that remain ongoing. For example, Alex Juhasz, writing about her recent video documentary *Activist Remains*, which revisits tapes of her dead friend James Lamb, argues for the productive possibilities of nostalgia, and Lucas Hilderbrand writes about the forms of "retroactivism" that can be inspired by the documents of AIDS activism.³ Just as queer AIDS activism has done,

Public Feelings holds out for a queer agenda that moves beyond gay rights and is attentive to the linkages between sexual politics and other issues such as war, migration, and racism.

Affect and Sexuality

I would not want to suggest that work on “affect” comes after queer theory or is separate from sexuality, since in my own work the two have always been closely intertwined. Indeed, affect and sexuality are not merely analogous categories but coextensive ones with shared histories, raising questions, for example, about how affective categories ranging from desire to shame and loss get sexualized. Work on affect bears a particularly close relation to work on sexuality and queer theory because affect has benefited from the same historicization that is central to Foucauldian and other social constructionist approaches to sexuality; Foucault’s critique of the repressive hypothesis applies as much to affect as sexuality, warranting a skeptical approach to claims for interiority or emotional expression as the truth of the self. My own early work on sensationalism and the politics of affect was deeply influenced by this model and was also significantly inspired by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s formative work in *Between Men*, in which the category of “homosocial desire,” so central to systems of social power, linked sexual and nonsexual domains.⁴ I was glad to be able to use theories of sexuality as a way to legitimate work on affect; although affect sometimes seemed even less tangible or defensible than sexuality as an object of study, I also took encouragement from both the struggles and the successes of efforts to make sexuality a field of inquiry.

As scholarship on affect flourishes, I no longer think of it as a minor spin-off from work on sexuality; instead, it extends the reach of studies of sexuality and enhances its status as a broadly intersectional category. Consider, for example, how Judith Butler takes up the categories of loss and melancholy first developed in the context of her work on gender in her recent writings on human rights, 9/11, and other topics of broad general interest.⁵ Eve Sedgwick makes an explicit turn to affect in her investigations of shame, and the tellingly titled *Touching Feeling* is simultaneously continuous with her earlier writing and marked by her call for queer scholarship that moves beyond a critique of the repressive hypothesis.⁶ Sedgwick favors the rich nuances and idiosyncrasies of what she calls reparative reading over programmatic or ideological readings that seek to line up cultural texts as progressive or reactionary. Reparative reading is affectively driven,

motivated by pleasure and curiosity, and directed toward the textures and tastes, the sensuous feel, of one's objects of study.

Not only does this suggestion seem especially important for work on affect that must necessarily attend to specificity; it also explains why queer theory might appear to lose some of its polemical focus in favor of a proliferation of projects. While critique may remain necessary, it is no longer sufficient. It has been extremely important for queer studies to move across historical and geographic boundaries, away from the recent history of gay and lesbian identities and communities in the Western metropolis. In such contexts, what counts as (homo)sexuality is unpredictable and requires new vocabularies; affect may be present when overt forms of sexuality are not. Affect not only expands the field of sexuality studies but also transforms its methods. In her work in medieval studies, for example, Carolyn Dinshaw suggests that historical inquiry can be motivated by an affective relation between past and present rather than a causal one.⁷ Recognizing affect and desire as the motive for intellectual projects has of course long been central to queer studies—evident in the legitimation of camp as a form of queer culture and the value frequently given to the unexpected object, including the popular or the disdained. The turn to negative affects such as shame, loss, melancholy, trauma, and hate within queer studies also reflects this tendency.

The embrace of affect within queer studies has also enabled new forms of personal voice in academic work, including criticism based in memoir, public intellectual work that seeks a general audience, or overt declarations of love and other investments in our intellectual projects. For example, I have been combining memoir and critical essay to critique medicalized notions of depression and to document the pressures of surviving academia. This is the riskiest project I've yet undertaken, even as I am inspired by other academic and specifically queer experiments in writing and take heart from the claim that the queer memoir operates as a form of collective witness.⁸ I write in the spirit of AIDS activists who have rejected the victimization that so often accompanies illness and have instead claimed agency for the sick person, as well as challenging medical notions of sickness and disease; I am also questioning professional norms that demand success, productivity, and a seamless public persona. I find myself working in this idiom in part as another experiment in form and as an ongoing engagement with questions of confession, self-display, and coming out, first inspired by feminism's sense of the personal as political and bolstered by queer theory's work in making new knowledges possible.

Public Feelings as Trauma Studies

I struggle against the fear that such a project is too local or too personal and seek ways to use public feelings to connect queer studies to a range of other projects with geopolitical urgency. The term *public feelings* has helped me to move beyond my earlier work in trauma studies and to situate that field more broadly. In *An Archive of Feelings*, I wanted to create a context within which it would be possible to talk about queer and lesbian sites of trauma and affect in relation to slavery and diaspora, human rights, and the aftermath of war and political violence.⁹ Too often within those frameworks, my queer examples have seemed minor or irrelevant even to me, and I have felt the pull of other topics that seem more broadly based. For example, inspired by my oral history work with AIDS activists, I have been involved in conducting and analyzing interviews for Columbia University's September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project. I was motivated at first by my sense that the mourning of 9/11 might benefit from the model provided by AIDS activism, such as Douglas Crimp's call for forms of militancy that include mourning.¹⁰ Although the desire for scapegoats and simple solutions that drives the Bush regime seems to dominate the national memory of 9/11, alternative forms of public discourse that can combine anger, sadness, apathy, ambivalence, and confusion are readily available within queer studies.

My work with the category of public feelings builds on my efforts in *An Archive of Feelings* to create an approach to trauma that focuses on the everyday and the insidious rather than the catastrophic and that depathologizes trauma and situates it in a social and cultural frame rather than a medical one. The distinction between everyday and catastrophic trauma is also tied to the distinction between public and private, since often what counts as national or public trauma is that which is more visible and catastrophic, that which is newsworthy and sensational, as opposed to the small dramas that interest me because they draw attention to how structural forms of violence are so frequently lived, how their invisibility or normalization is another part of their oppressiveness. Situating trauma within the larger context of public feelings offers a more flexible approach to the unpredictable linkages among violence, affective experience, and social and political change.

Another motive for my move from trauma to public feelings is to explore the affective legacy of racialized histories of genocide, slavery, colonization, and migration. While this could be construed as a trauma project, I have

increasingly found it more useful to think of it as a public feelings project, since this shift allows for languages of affect to be generated organically from within particular histories and discourages the imposition of categories developed in other contexts. While the categories used to describe genocides such as the Holocaust can be productively backdated or transported to other contexts, it's important to note that most of the writing commonly associated with trauma theory has little to say about slavery and colonialism. I'm also interested in new vocabularies for thinking about how historical trauma finds its way into daily life. If you're looking for trauma, you might miss what are often more everyday forms of distress and affect. There is, for example, an extremely powerful body of work on African American and African diaspora culture and slavery that could be included in the canon of trauma theory.¹¹ Often, however, this scholarship is less visible within trauma studies because it doesn't explicitly use the term *trauma* even as it seeks to record the affective aftermath of racisms grounded in historical events such as slavery. In other areas of American studies, scholars have been working with the category of melancholy as it relates to racialization and also to processes of assimilation and migration.¹² Although all of this scholarship could be used to expand the field of trauma studies, particularly so as to provide a fuller account of racial trauma, it also points the way toward the wide-ranging significance of affect that the Public Feelings project seeks to explore.

One premise of both trauma studies and the Public Feelings project is that we have yet to attend to the past adequately and that one measure of that neglect arises at the affective level. Affect is often managed in the public sphere through official discourses of recognition or commemoration that don't fully address everyday affects or through legal measures (ranging from the abolition of slavery and segregation to affirmative action) that don't fully provide emotional justice. The goal is something more than statues and monuments, something that involves ways of living, structures of feeling. The Public Feelings project carves out space for strategies beyond those that have been critiqued on affective grounds as sentimental. It aims to critique liberal forms of affect and, moreover, to think about liberalism and neoliberalism in affective terms—to take on the vocabularies of tolerance, diversity, and multiculturalism as connected to certain affects or structures of feeling that are inadequate to, or that too conveniently package and manage, the messy legacies of history.

Utopian Locations

In exploring racialized public feelings, I have also drawn on my other work on queer subcultural forms. At this level of daily experience and the cultural forms to which it gives rise, affective life is often central and also more complexly visible than in sensationalized media. One finds also a range of both experimental and popular media and forms that suggest models for an alternative affective public sphere. Among these, the many modes of autobiography—memoir, zines, punk rock, solo performance, autodocumentary in film and video—are very prominent as mechanisms for bringing into public view individual experiences that should be understood as collective, however idiosyncratic and queer. Although this is not the only repository of models for public feelings, it is definitely a rich one and one that I have sought to publicize in my own way so that it can have an impact outside its immediate spheres, and because it is important not to underestimate the power of those public spheres that may remain quite local or subcultural.

It's odd to me that after so many years of queer theory, I would still find myself torn between what I think of as universalizing and minoritizing projects, but this distinction remains resonant for me. Thus, in addition to making queer interventions into projects that aren't overtly about sexuality, I also want to continue to document the queer subcultures that remain unrepresented by mainstream media. For example, I have been writing about my experiences working over the past decade at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, as well as continuing to document the work of lesbian artists doing experimental work across a range of genres that includes performance, writing, music, and visual arts. Writing about the music festival, the haven of lesbian separatism and women-only space, might seem like an anachronism, a return to the period before queer culture, yet it is a significantly queer project for me since the festival, particularly the workers' community, has survived as a locus for alternative cultures and visionary thinking. I focus on how forms of manual labor associated with the working class, especially working-class masculinities, can be the site of community building and creativity, remaking Marxist notions of alienated labor. And I consider the continuity between labor and performance, as evident in the many impromptu kinds of performance that occur in the festival community beyond the more formal staged events. The festival enacts utopian possibility, and for those workers, performers, and audience

members who establish a sustained relation to it, it can be transformative far beyond its temporary duration.

My interest in utopian feelings finds company in the projects of Judith Halberstam on subcultures and queer temporalities, of José Muñoz on ethnicity as affect, and of Jill Dolan on performative utopias.¹³ Dolan, for example, writes about how performance makes it possible to experience what utopia feels like because it creates a sense of community, however ephemeral, within the fragile but still visceral spaces of the live encounter. These scholars and others document queer arts and subcultures that continue to survive and in turn enable survival in a harsh political climate. Their sensibility overlaps with that of Avery Gordon, who, guided by the writings of Toni Cade Bambara, articulates a utopia that exists in the here and now rather than the fantastic visions of science fiction and new worlds, a utopia that includes hardship and violence and that offers strategies for survival.¹⁴ Thus, if I began with depression and close on utopia, I have not necessarily shifted topics or even affective registers—the point would be to offer a vision of hope and possibility that doesn't foreclose despair and exhaustion. It's a profoundly queer sensibility and one that I hope can enable us to tackle the work that needs to be done and to create the pleasures that will sustain us.

Notes

- 1 For more on Feel Tank Chicago, see the Web site at www.feeltankchicago.net. Feel Tank members have included Lauren Berlant, Debbie Gould, Vanalyne Greene, Mary Patten, and Rebecca Zorach. The group helped organize a conference at the University of Chicago called "Depression: What Is It Good For?" in March 2004. See also Lauren Berlant, "Critical Inquiry, Affirmative Culture," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 445–51.
- 2 See Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).
- 3 See Alexandra Juhasz, "Video Remains: Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism," *GLQ* 12.2 (2006): 319–28; and Lucas Hilderbrand, "Retroactivism," *GLQ* 12.2 (2006): 303–17.
- 4 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
- 5 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).
- 6 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
- 7 Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999). See also Chris Nealon, *Foundlings: Les-*

- bian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).
- 8 Holly Hughes and David Roman, *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance* (New York: Grove Press, 1998).
 - 9 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
 - 10 Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).
 - 11 The list of authors and works would include, just for starters, the following: Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28.1 (1989): 1–34; Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 299–306; Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987): 65–81; Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Sharon Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); and Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
 - 12 Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 343–71; and José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
 - 13 Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); José Esteban Muñoz, *Feeling Brown* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming); and Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).
 - 14 Avery F. Gordon, "Something More Powerful Than Skepticism," in *Keeping Good Time: Reflections on Knowledge, Power, and People* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2004), 187–205.