

## TRY ANYTHING

### Conference Review

“Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope...: A Conference on Political Feeling”

Franke Institute for the Humanities, The University of Chicago

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*Criticism*

A scene in Beatriz Santiago Muñoz’s 2002 video *Fábrica Inútil* (*Useless Factory*) stages what might be called a (p)re-enactment. Workers in a Puerto Rican packaging plant are summoned to a meeting on the shop floor, where they fidget nervously as management issues pink slips and heartfelt regrets—“This is hard on everyone.” There is nothing left to do: orders are down, the other factory’s productivity is up, and the labor department has already scheduled a resumé workshop. Professional and concisely compassionate, the supervisors make the announcement as if reading from a teleprompter. The employees respond with appropriate questions (“Will we reopen in the spring?”) and appropriate sentiments (“And me? I’ve been with the company for eight years!”). Nothing in this emotional exchange seems to surprise the participants. But it is not real either—at least not yet. *Fábrica Inútil* is a faux documentary, the actors employees of Flexible Packaging in Las Piedras who have agreed somewhat reluctantly to improvise this uncomfortable scene for Santiago Muñoz’s camera. This memorial to past layoffs is also a dress rehearsal for what may very well lie ahead, since job instability is par for the course. What is striking about the performance is how unimprovvised it feels: everyone knows the script, as if this were a fire drill or a safety inspection. At the same time, this depressing outtake from the neoliberal workplace also hints at something bleaker. It suggests that, in the face of global capital, traditional modes of left protest have become mere routine. Where past failures are destined to be endlessly (p)re-enacted, the good fight can only be faked.

Other moments in *Fábrica Inútil* are more utopian: in addition to the fake firing, Santiago Muñoz orchestrates a series of scenes that depart from the script of life in the factory. In the opening sequence, for example, workers gather outside to watch the sun rise while the first two work bells ring; for a moment, at least, the factory is useless. In another scene, workers wrestle each other with cheerful WWF bravado, rolling around on the blue foam chips that the company produces. In these scenes, both dramatic and mundanely repetitive, Santiago Muñoz explores the affective conditions of life in the time of global capital. The video considers the political exhaustion of the contemporary moment—dead-end jobs, ineffectual protest—and gestures toward other ways of being. The fact that these alternatives can look merely silly indicates how far we are from collective social transformation, but it also suggests that we might be willing to try anything—however awkward—to make it happen.

Political despair, the detritus of the everyday, new forms of protest, and collective dreaming: such are the concerns of the Public Feelings project, which organized the conference “Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope...: A Conference on Political Feeling” at The University of Chicago in October, 2007 during which *Fábrica Inútil* was screened.<sup>1</sup> The Public Feelings Project is an ongoing collaboration between scholars, artists, and activists that can be understood as part of the recent “turn to affect” in the humanities and the social sciences.<sup>2</sup> With roots in feminism, Marxist cultural theory, ethnic studies, and queer studies, Public Feelings begins with the assumption that paying attention to the tone and texture of social oppression as lived experience is as necessary as more systematic and systemic modes of critique. While emotion can be understood as the least public or political dimension of human experience, critics such as Lauren Berlant, Ann Cvetkovich, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Jose Esteban Muñoz, Sara Ahmed, Kathleen Stewart, Fred Moten, David Eng, and Lisa Duggan have attempted to draw links between individual feelings and social structures such as racism, homophobia, diaspora, immigration, and poverty. These critics suggest that global inequalities play out in the realm of embodied experience, and that we need new methods to capture and analyze the details as well as the big picture. Attention to affective experience,<sup>3</sup> according to the Public Feelings

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<sup>1</sup> The conference organizers maintain a website that includes the conference schedule as well as a range of other materials including articles, syllabi, images, and commentary (<http://politicalfeeling.uchicago.edu/>). Since the field of Public Feelings is new and uncoded, this collection of materials provides a helpful reference: the articles and syllabi together constitute an extended and unofficial bibliography for the field, and the web of names give a sense of who is doing this work and in what institutional locations. Official presenters at the conference included: Lauren Berlant, Ann Cvetkovich, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Tavia Nyong’o, Fred Moten, Lisa Duggan, José Esteban Muñoz, Sianne Ngai, Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, Carel Rowe, Mary Patten, Sam Baker, Neville Hoad, Ann Reynolds, Kathleen Stewart, Debbie Gould, Lily Cho, and Rebecca Zorach. The conference was sponsored by The Franke Institute for the Humanities (University of Chicago), The Center for Gender Studies (Chicago), The Lesbian and Gay Studies Project of the CGS (Chicago), the Department of Visual Arts (Chicago), and Feel Tank Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> For a helpful recent overview of the Public Feelings project, see Ann Cvetkovich, “Public Feelings,” in “After Sex? Writing Since Queer Theory,” a special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly*, eds. Janet Halley and Andrew Parker, 106:3 (July 2007). Also see *Scholar and Feminist Online*, “Public Sentiments,” eds. Ann Cvetkovich and Ann Pellegrini, 2.1 (Summer 2003). For a sample of this recent work, see *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, eds. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Lauren Berlant, ed., *Intimacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press Journals, 2000) and *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); José Esteban Muñoz, *Feeling Brown* (forthcoming, Duke University Press); Sharon Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, eds. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (forthcoming, Harvard University Press); Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> While many scholars associated with the “affective turn” make distinctions between feelings, moods, emotions, and affects, participants of “Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope...” tended to use these terms interchangeably to address the lived experience of social oppression.

Project, might lead to new forms of critique and to new forms of social collectivity: at the October conference, critics explored the political potential of failure that animates Santiago Muñoz's improvisatory aesthetic.

Participants at "Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope..." repeatedly expressed disappointment and even despair about the contemporary political scene. But given the emphasis on anxiety and outrage, the mood at the conference was surprisingly light. The organizers seemed to agree that the project of imagining social change requires a departure from academic business as usual, and this was not your average conference. In addition to the requisite schedules and maps included in the informational packet, participants were issued "stress kittens," squeezable, palm-sized foam cats to be used whenever emotions ran high. The conference schedule itself featured a graphic image of a bill of lading stamped not "Urgent" or "Paid" but "You Hurt My Feelings." At one point during a break, a woman led the room in a group movement and breathing exercise; in an informal survey of several stiff academics, we learned that participants found this activity embarrassing, but "actually very nice."

The conference's structure was equally unorthodox. Instead of the expected round of papers and responses, each of three "feel tanks" (collective working-groups based in Chicago, Austin, TX, and New York City<sup>4</sup>) curated events about their collective and individual work. Presenters drew on a range of genres and discourses one wouldn't necessarily expect at a conference, blending personal memoir with activist histories, performance art, descriptive anthropology, and even spontaneous poetry. "Fellow travelers" or loose collaborators were planted in the audience to ensure that these presentations served as prompts for conversation, not theses to be critiqued.<sup>5</sup> The focus was on dialogue and posing unanswered or even unanswerable questions. The atmosphere, as a result, was warm and slightly risky, a welcome respite from the deadening rhythms of academic life.

Lauren Berlant, who with Feeltank Chicago was responsible for organizing the conference, has been deeply involved in trying to develop methods for investigating the role that emotion plays in the public sphere; her work on affect, intimacy, and national sentimentality has energized recent work in American, queer, and feminist studies, as well as public sphere theory. From *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to compassionate conservatism, Berlant finds sentimental politics shoring up forms of national identity that actually exclude those whose pain is being publicized.<sup>6</sup> During the conference's opening panel, she suggested that emotion is "a sign of authenticity and hysteria" in contemporary American politics. One might think of Bill Clinton's public performances of empathy ("I feel your pain") as a way to secure consent for his dismantling of the welfare system, or of the Bush Administration's mobilization of a politics of

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<sup>4</sup> Feel Tank Chicago: <http://www.feeltankchicago.net/>

<sup>5</sup> We both attended the conference as fellow travelers.

<sup>6</sup> For Berlant's reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see Lauren Berlant, "Poor Eliza," *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998).

fear in order to stomp out critique of its post 9/11 military aggression. But despite her sharp criticism of this “visceral, visual version of the U.S. political sphere,”<sup>7</sup> Berlant has not given up on the political potential of emotion. Instead, she calls on scholars and activists to take up what she terms “the unfinished business of sentimentality”—the possibilities for social transformation promised by the circulation of insurgent or unexpected mass feelings in the public sphere. At “Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope...,” she explained that the ellipsis in the conference’s title was meant to suggest that these possibilities remain to be thought. According to Berlant, though, this critical task requires that we abandon or at least rethink the discourse of trauma so easily co-opted by a conservative ideology that sees itself under attack by what Cornel West has called “the new cultural politics of difference.” She suggests we focus instead on everyday experiences of oppression; at “Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope...” she cited as models Theodor Adorno, Georg Lukacs, Theresa Brennan, and Gayatri Spivak and their attempts to think through the historicity of the present.

The critic who perhaps best answers Berlant’s call for a turn to the everyday is Kathleen Stewart, professor of anthropology at the University of Texas and a member of the Austin Feeltank. Stewart’s 1996 book *A Space by the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America* is an ethnographic account of life in Appalachian West Virginia that traced the effects of living in “an occupied, betrayed, fragmented, and finally deserted place.”<sup>8</sup> In her 2007 book, *Ordinary Affects*, Stewart offers a history of the present that attends to low-level, non-dramatic forms of everyday suffering in the United States and also to the dreaming and inventiveness that accompany such suffering. In her talk at the conference, Stewart returned to this familiar American landscape with its landmarks of Walgreens and Radio Shack and to her accounting of the ways that people try to “wrest a ‘something’ out of an everyday life saturated with dragging, isolating intensities of all kinds.”<sup>9</sup> Stewart described the “alert form of rest” that allows one to attend fully to the “things that happen” (17), and suggested that such a focus might allow us to see the all the non-dramatic, non-tragic ways that people get stuck and get by.

The conference’s turn to the everyday also cited a tradition of activist and critical challenges to the disembodiment and rationality of the public sphere on the part of women, queers, and people of color. In the “separate spheres” model, emotion is often associated with feminized domesticity and minoritized embodiment and divorced from the putatively universal realm of politics.<sup>10</sup> Ann Cvetkovich has been particularly attentive to the

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<sup>7</sup> See Berlant, “The Epistemology of State Emotion,” in *Dissent in Dangerous Times*, ed. Austin Sarat (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Stewart, *A Space by the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 17.

<sup>9</sup> Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 119.

<sup>10</sup> On self-abstraction and the public sphere, as well as the “humiliating positivity of the particular” that minoritized subjects are forced to negotiate, see Michael Warner, “The Mass Public and the Mass Subject,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

feminization of everyday emotions. In her first book, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Sensationalism*, she offered a gendered analysis of Victorian sensationalism, and in her second, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, she analyzed lesbian popular forms such as the zine and riot grrrl culture in order to argue against an understanding of social injury as necessarily monumental or catastrophic. In an extended argument with the field of trauma studies, Cvetkovich argued that social injury often plays out on a much smaller scale, becoming embedded in the temporality of the everyday. Feminist scholars as well as people working in queer and subaltern studies have argued convincingly that our daily lives, as banal as they often seem, are politically charged in ways that are not always easy to describe. The question of what counts as ordinary is where politics actually begins, and this terrain is difficult to access with the terms available in the dominant public sphere. During a panel curated by Feeltank Austin at “Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope...,” Cvetkovich spoke about her ongoing project on depression, which may appear to be the most banal, a-political, and feminized of feelings. With a picture of a dust-bunny on the screen above her head, she described the unorthodox working methods of Feel Tank Austin and the strategies for surviving the daily exigencies of academic life.<sup>11</sup>

“Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope...” follows in a longer tradition of feminist conferences—organizers named Barnard College’s 1982 “Conference on Sexuality” and the more recent “Feminist Futures” event at the University of Iowa in 2002 as significant precursors; it also continues the work of a 2004 conference at the Franke Institute, “Depression: What Is It Good For?” The question of the political utility of bad feelings—particularly of flat or unglamorous feelings like depression—is central to the Public Feelings project. In the work of these scholars, negative affects like moodiness, dissatisfaction, or bitchiness bring into focus forms of social injury and inequality that are trivialized or dismissed by normative accounts of the political. The feminist genealogy for this work is explicit and clear: one might think, for instance, of Betty Friedan’s reframing of American housewives’ sense of existential unease and emptiness not as a form of neurosis but as a product of social inequality as an example of this kind of diagnostic work.

But as Rebecca Zorach noted during the first panel of “Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope...,” Public Feelings is dedicated not only to “taking” but also to “making” the emotional temperature of the body politic. The focus on negative or diffuse feelings in this regard can be very useful. Most accounts of political activism tend to either ignore emotion or to focus disproportionately on emotions that are linked to political agency such as hope or righteous anger. The Public Feelings group has tried to consider how a range of less exemplary feelings might motivate people

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<sup>11</sup> The members of Feel Tank Austin who attended the conference were Cvetkovich, Neville Hoad, Sam Baker, and Kathleen Stewart. For Cvetkovich’s ongoing discussion of the vicissitudes of everyday life, see her blog <http://dustbunnyreport.blogspot.com/>.

to social action. As Zorach noted, though, this move from affect as a diagnostic index to a tool for activist intervention can be precarious. How can we hold on to the complexity of emergent structures of feeling while shaping them into something around which we can organize? Can we be sure that the activist practices that take shape will be effective or even something we want to get behind? In his presentation on the AIDS epidemic in Africa, Neville Hoad framed these concerns as a problem of authorization: how do we authorize social movements that foreground certain public feelings over others, and what might be lost in translation? Such questions—about how bad feelings can make for good politics—formed the backdrop of “Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope...” Conference participants gestured towards potential solutions while acknowledging both the likelihood and the open-endedness of failure.

The relation between emotion and activism was taken up more directly by activists and activist-scholars at the conference. Longtime AIDS activist and sociologist Debbie Gould discussed styles of activism while images of slogans, art objects, and demonstrations played behind her. Introducing Feeltank Chicago, Gould made an argument for the importance of immoderate, irrational protest, citing the history of ACT UP as well as some Feel Tank activities as evidence. Against calls for mature, disciplined interventions into the public sphere, Gould affirmed the importance of intense, unreasonable, and illegible action. Feel Tank Chicago has engaged in some actions that might be described in these terms, most notably their yearly May Day protest march. On International Day of the Politically Depressed, members of the group march in their bathrobes, hand out prescriptions for Prozac, and holds signs with slogans like “Depressed? It Might be Political” and “Don’t Just Medicate, Agitate!” Mary Patten spoke at “Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope...” about “Pathogeographies,” a recent exhibition and series of performances in which participants were invited to create suitcases, real or imaginary, with which to collect, share, redistribute, and divert their emotional/political baggage. Like other actions organized by Feeltank Chicago, Patten argued, “Pathogeographies” sought ways to bring contingency into the political realm and to question the constraints of the electoral public.

Paying attention to emotion and to the problem of burnout in political organizing, professional life, and in service more generally was also a key concern. Cvetkovich had considered the question of burnout in a chapter of *Archive of Feeling* in which she conducted an oral history with women involved in ACT UP in New York City. In her presentation on “Solidarity and Its Fracturing in ACT UP,” Gould discussed the affective dynamics that led to the weakening of the movement in Chicago. On the one hand, she described the fractures along lines of race, class, and gender that thwarted desires for recognition within the movement. On the other hand, she described the shame and guilt-tripping that amplified these conflicts, and underlined the risks of intimacy in coalitional movements. Gould’s

nuanced affective history of ACT UP Chicago provides a helpful guide to thinking through both the possibilities and the deep challenges to solidarity in political movements.<sup>12</sup>

More broadly, the Public Feelings movement has tried to take on the question of political motivation at a moment when exhaustion and despair set the tone on the Left. A panel called “Beyond Hopelessness” organized by the New York feltank on the first day of the conference was devoted to thinking through the interplay of political hope and political despair. In an exciting pas de deux that was typical of the remarkable collaborations Public Feelings facilitates, Lisa Duggan and José Muñoz discussed the ups and downs of political hope. Duggan, who in *The Twilight of Equality* explored the cultural and sexual agendas of neoliberalism and who is currently finishing a book about gay marriage called *The End of Marriage*, offered a critical analysis of hope. Remarking that she associates hope with the complacency of normative versions of happiness, Duggan invoked a tone associated with queer historical subjectivity, stating flatly: “I find a lot of pleasure in bitterness.” Muñoz plumbed the depths of bitterness in his work on disidentification, but has turned more recently to make a nuanced argument on behalf of political hope. Drawing primarily on the work of Ernst Bloch as well as the notion of escapology as developed by Daphne Brooks, Muñoz argued for the value of concrete or educated hope; he made a call for revolutionary feeling as the necessary precondition for a departure from the now—a moment when we might all “go off-script together.” While acknowledging the importance of revolutionary hope, Duggan responded by standing by the importance of negative feelings as a form of social critique or as the basis for new kind of sociality.

Fred Moten followed on this discussion, taking up Muñoz’s discussion of hope in a presentation called “Black Optimism.” Moten discussed the hope that inheres in black cultural production in his 2003 book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*; that book begins: “The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.”<sup>13</sup> In his presentation at the conference, Moten called for a greater attention in the Public Feelings group to the contributions of African-American studies and ethnic studies to the critical project of articulating the relations between structures of power and the texture of everyday life. His focus was on the question of temporality, a topic that that has been crucial to many scholars working in the new field of affect studies. The question of whether hope is properly located in the future or in a desire to change the past occupied many scholars at the conference. Moten played a 1967 recording of a civil rights song performed by a group of children aged 3-6 who took

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<sup>12</sup> See Gould, *Feelings and Activism: Shifting Political Horizons in the Fight against AIDS* (forthcoming, University of Chicago Press). See also Helena Flam and Debra King, *Emotions and Social Movements* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.

part in the Mississippi Child Development Program.<sup>14</sup> Addressed to Paul Johnson, then governor of Mississippi, the song asserts “You know you can’t jail us all/ Segregation bound to fall.” Moten read this performance as a complex inscription of “the voices of the future in the past.” More than a document of the historical struggle against segregation, the recording calls up the unfinished business of desegregation and the need to continue the struggle against the carceral state. While the time of politics and activism has generally been understood as structured by crisis, Moten and other Public Feelings scholars have investigated the political potential of other kinds of temporality: unlikely temporal modes such as melancholic longing, prolepsis, and latency have all been mined by critics hoping to suggest new forms of activism and coalition.<sup>15</sup>

Though it was attended by a range of academics and activists, the conference was mostly populated by professors and graduate students, and particularly by scholars working in the fields of cultural studies. Given the demographics, it is perhaps not surprising that pedagogy is a highly valued form of praxis in the Public Feelings project. The final session at the conference was an open-ended discussion called “Pedagogies of Feeling” that focused on new forms of analysis, attention, and solidarity in the classroom. Moderated by Berlant and Cvetkovich, this session invited participants to exchange teaching strategies and syllabi, and to share thoughts on the place of affect in their pedagogy. There seemed to be consensus that affect, not simply another field of knowledge with which students should gain competency, radically changes, interferes with, and deliteralizes our objects of study. Berlant claimed that her pedagogy is largely Spivakian, “helping people to unlearn things.” Kathleen Stewart’s comments on teaching were echoed by many in the room, as she articulated a general dissatisfaction with structural analysis and critique. Stewart suggested that we need to resist the large conceptual categories and strategies of demystification that are the stock in trade of cultural studies. These strategies come too easily to us and to our students, weakening our capacities for close observation. Stewart proposed instead that we move away from argument and abstraction in order to pay attention to objects and dimensions of experience too elusive to be captured through familiar analytic categories.

The move away from critique may be unusual for the professoriate, but one might argue that close attention to the specificity of affective dynamics is less surprising. One of the conference’s goals was to “take the temperature of the body politic”; there can be little doubt that Public Feelings brings together a gifted set of physicians. These are critics who are very good at paying attention to the complex structures of aesthetic objects, cultural formations, and to the close analysis of tone and mood. But the question remains how such careful analysis can ignite social

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<sup>14</sup> “Da da da da,” *Head Start with the Child Development Group of Mississippi*, ed. Polly Greenberg (Folkways Records, 1967).

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, the recent issue of *GLQ: Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*, “Queer Temporalities” 13.2-3 (2007).

transformation. At a time when the facts of global economic inequality are so glaring, some will take issue with the unorthodox methods and fine distinctions of the Public Feelings project. Are bad feelings up to the task of changing a bad world?

Such questions tap into longstanding debates the proper domain, aims, and style of political activism. On the one hand, the attention paid by the Public Feelings scholars to the rhythms and injustices of everyday life calls up the conflict described by Nancy Fraser between the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition: a theory of affect may be more useful in thinking through the everyday injustices associated with failures of recognition. On the other hand, the approach of Public Feelings speaks to the conflict between classic Marxist political efforts and a Foucaultian micropolitics of multiple local struggles and resistance to small-scale mechanisms of power. Pursuing a politics of affect can mean caring about struggles that do not necessarily target specific legal or economic rights. During the conference, Berlant invoked the work of the human geographer Nigel Thrift, who has argued for the importance that changes in emotional culture can make to the political landscape.<sup>16</sup>

Any attention to the politics of feeling in the present, however, begs the question of the scale and location of our efforts. The question of scale was raised at the conference by Ruth Wilson Gilmore in her discussion of “infrastructures of feeling” in relation to Hurricane Katrina and the spatial and racial politics of U.S. incarceration. While it would be damaging to ignore the importance of emotions in structuring responses to an event like Hurricane Katrina, one might ask how far an analysis of feeling will get us in addressing the kinds of questions that are implied by infrastructure: land ownership, zoning laws, engineering contracts, etc. In the face of the enormity of such structures and the suffering that they have caused, it cannot be clear what role feeling ought to play in our political imagining. Such questions motivated a lot of the discussion at “Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope...” as participants wondered, Are we actually addressing the structures underlying social inequality, or are we merely moving along the tracks that have been laid down for us? Are we finally getting traction in the public sphere or merely participating in its diminishment? During the conference, Berlant worried that the attention to affect among scholars on the left might be an effect of the privatizing force of neoliberalism. Santiago Muñoz’s (p)re-enactments may be, after all, just another way of playing in the ruins of global capital.

While efforts to transform the texture of everyday life will always be shadowed by anxiety about results, the ability of the Public Feelings project to make visible forms of social injustice that are generally uncredited or ignored is clearly valuable. In an issue of *The Scholar and Feminist Online* edited by Feeltank Austin member Ann Cvetkovich, Sharon Holland has suggested the importance of such an approach, making an eloquent argument on behalf of

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<sup>16</sup> Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

emotion as a crucial part of the struggle for equality. Holland argues for attention to “the emotions that engender calls for legal justice or legal reform” in an analysis of everyday racism and the place of civil rights discourse in queer studies. She asks pointedly, “What is the point of jurisprudence that does not recognize the devastating subtlety of emotion(s)?”<sup>17</sup> The need to identify potentially disruptive or transformative structures of feeling is heightened in the contemporary moment of deadlock in U.S. political life and the feelings of despair that it incites. Whether moaning in our bathrobes at the corporate art in Chicago’s Millennium Park or staging other acts of immoderate, irrational, or immature protest is the best way to take on contemporary political problems is not clear. But as Lauren Berlant puts it in a 1994 essay, perhaps we need to “take the risk of political embarrassment, of embracing undercooked transitional thought about the possibilities and politics of futurity itself.”<sup>18</sup> Given the devastations of the contemporary moment, Berlant suggests, hope and anger and solidarity are not enough. Failure counts—it has to. *Public Feelings* has turned its attention to the confusion and paralysis of the current moment, suggesting that these feelings deserve to be analyzed—and, more unreasonably, to be used.

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<sup>17</sup> Sharon Holland, “The Question of Normal” in “Public Sentiments,” a special issue of *The Scholar & Feminist Online* 1.2 (Summer 2003). <http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/ps/holland.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Lauren Berlant, “‘68, or Something.” *Critical Inquiry* 21(1), 1994: 128.