Affective Worldmaking in Times of Crisis: An Interview

Silvia Schultermandl and Ann Cvetkovich

In a presentation on Jan 14, 2021, as part of the international symposium "Affective Worldmaking: Narrative Counterpublics of Gender and Sexuality," Ann Cvetkovich gave a public lecture on "Public Feelings in a Time of Pandemic." Her talk drew on writing that she has been doing over the course of the pandemic in monthly meetings with the Austin (Texas)-based Public Feelings group. These short pieces constitute efforts to make sense of what is going on—or just document how it feels—with attention to topics such as COVID silver linings (and other pandemic keywords); Zoom-based art and performance; protest under conditions of social distancing; dialectics of hope and despair; black feminist resources for survival and other forms of collective care and mutual aid; and the relation between the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the COVID-19 pandemic. Through an exploration of the current state of theories of affect and sensation, she explored the differences and connections between how the pandemic feels in Canada/US and how it feels in Austria/Europe.

In the following interview, Silvia Schultermandl invites Ann Cvetkovich to discuss theoretical and methodological connections between her recent work on public feelings and the symposium's focus on affective worldmaking.

Silvia: The edited volume in which this interview appears theorizes narratives of gender and sexuality. We use affective worldmaking as a methodology through which to explore the potential of various kinds of

narrative (present in different media like literature, film, performance, social media) to generate feelings of identity and belonging. Based on your own work, how, would you say, might a focus on gender and sexuality allow for a particular kind of worldmaking?

Ann: I have been so embedded in intersectional forms of thinking that it becomes difficult to think gender and sexuality independently from questions of race and histories of migration, diaspora, capitalism, and colonialism. But an attunement to categories of gender and sexuality prompted my interest in affective worldmaking in the first place, through attention to relationality, intimacy, and the local. Considerations of gender and sexuality, and feminism and queer theory in general, are not the only reasons one would come to that category, but they definitely encourage us to think about worlds—including the question of what constitutes a "world" in worldmaking—through local and ordinary spaces such as those fostered by relations of caretaking and attachment. My focus on how a world can be constructed in very intimate and local ways, when a group of people attempts to make something together, has benefitted tremendously from feminist and queer studies. Critical understandings of the family as a unit of bonding and a place where nation and history converge, to create sites of positive (joy) and negative affects (violence and terror), have been good questions with which to work.

Moreover, questions about affective worldmaking revolve in large part around a structuring question to which affect theory returns: How am I feeling and what can we do with that unit of "data" (which also changes that which counts as "data")? It is useful to answer these questions through recourse to gendered categories of analysis and feminist work on the relationship between the personal and the political. For me, saying something meaningful, with regard to an analysis of geopolitical conditions, by looking at affective experience is a key conceptual move that I think is also at the heart of affective worldmaking.

Silvia: On occasion, you have spoken of your own rituals (mentioning writing, drawing, crafting), especially those within the Feel Tank or your

collaborative work with artists. In your book *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), you describe these practices as *utopia of ordinary habit*, practices that allow us to cope with negative affects (such as depression, or the pandemic feelings we mentioned in our symposium: anger, fear, anxiety). Do you think of these practices as strategies of affective worldmaking?

Ann: This summarizes nicely the work I have done around what you are calling affective worldmaking, and I am pleased to see you connect it to my notion of the utopia of ordinary habit. I have an abiding interest in forms of collectivity and forms of community. Over the course of my career, there have been many different keywords to describe these phenomena: subcultures; publics and counterpublics; more recently, a turn to the notion of the commons; and worldmaking, whose lineage I track in the work of my fellow travelers Katie Stewart, Lauren Berlant, and José Muñoz. In affect studies, we are seeking vocabulary to describe the affective relationships which emerge from gatherings of people. For me, an important question in relation to the modes of alternative worldbuilding is the nature of the social. I am indebted to the work of my fellow queer theorists who focus on the anti-social or what Lauren Berlant has been calling the "inconvenience of others"—these reminders of how difficult it can be when we get together as a group. For instance, queer theory has applied a critical lens to the category of the family, in particular, its heteronormative iterations but also its homonormative formations.

Silvia: For our project, affective worldmaking not only has a narrative/discursive dimension but also includes a shared practice, a collective action, characterized by everyday rituals. How important are questions of narrative for your work?

Ann: Categories of narrative or the literary and textual have often not been general enough for me, and I find myself cutting across a range of media in order to think about the cultural formations that bring people together. What are the ordinary activities, whether it is feminist forms

of crafting, making music together, or dancing together? What different modes of being in a space together are ways of making a community? The linkage between affect and sensation and renewed interest in the sensory dimensions of affective experience also demand that we do not think too narrowly about the category of narrative. In turn, questions about the literary public spheres through which a book might bring us together into a room are important. This is also true for digital spaces where people are trading texts via social media and thereby creating community. In this way, questions about affective worldmaking are also related to questions about narrative and storytelling.

Silvia: In your answers, you have been paying homage to some of your fellow travelers. I wonder if you could briefly explain the significance of the Chicago Feel Tank and the Public Feelings Project in Austin.

Ann: Feel Tank is the group based in Chicago that has included Lauren Berlant, Debbie Gould, Rebecca Zorach, Mary Patten, and Gregg Bordowitz, among others. They came up with the concept of political depression, which in turn catalyzed my work under that rubric. Public Feelings is the name for a group predominantly based in Austin, Texas, whose throughline has been my collaboration with my longtime friend and colleague Katie Stewart. There are a lot of cross-fertilizations between the two groups, such as Katie and Lauren's co-authored book *The Hundreds* (2019).

The Public Feelings project grew out of an effort to think through the 20th anniversary of the infamous 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality, an event that was very generative for many of us interested in conflicts within feminism around sexuality. At the turn of the millennium, we wanted to think about a possible future for that work and came up with a number of working groups, one of which was organized around the concept of Public Feelings. Although the first meeting took place before the events of September 11, 2001, the subsequent work under that rubric was catalyzed by an effort to think about the political scene in its aftermath and at the dawning of the 21st century. From there, it has had a life of its own.

All in all, Public Feelings represents a commitment to worldmaking in the form of small cells—I like to use that term from radical politics. Small groups of people who, by virtue of coming together, can think together, be together, and feel together, in order to generate new ideas, and by virtue of that, craft affective worlds and visions of the future. In Austin, Public Feelings began as a reading group, which is a time-honored tradition for generating new and subaltern forms of thinking in academia and in art communities. But eventually, we morphed into a writing group and concocted the format of the writing salon, where we would bring 500 words of writing and share it with each other. It was a very simple format that proved very inspiring and generative; it is an example of the utopia of everyday habit, a very simple practice that can provide people with a reason to come together and generate a kind of vitality or ongoing life. This habit has managed to thrive during conditions of the pandemic, and a small group of us, mostly based in Austin, has managed to meet once a month via Zoom across this past year. That work has fed into talks and events, such as the one I did with your group.

Silvia: During our symposium, you noted a curious 20-year interval of crises: the Reagan years and the advent of neoliberalism; then, 20 years later, 9/11 and the subsequent nationalism, militarism, and surveillance culture; and another 20 years later, the COVID pandemic. I wonder if the caretaking during these distinct crises is different. What do you make of these intervals?

Ann: The 20-year interval was a wonderful insight that emerged from our conversation during the symposium. I am struck by a couple of things: 20 years could be taken as a generational marker, and this connects to questions of care and how we transmit knowledge across generations. Caretaking can include providing resources in the form of experiences and histories —or narratives—from previous generations of struggle.

This notion of 20-year intervals might also index a longer arc of post-WWII capitalism and social movements. For instance, I consider

myself to be shaped by the dreams of liberation that emerged with the social and cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which were enabled by a renewed economic vitality that often came at the expense of those in the global South. I think it is important to have histories of alternative cultures, which can take the form of affectively charged oral histories transmitted from one generation to the next. What do we as feminists of a particular generation have to say to those of the next generation? Of late, Black feminisms that have existed inside and outside of academia have found their way into the Black Lives Matter movement and shaped the work of contemporary scholars such as Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe, whose concepts of the "afterlife" or "wake" of slavery have in turn been widely circulated for understanding loss, grief, and mourning. I am thinking here, too, of the transmission across generations of the work of James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Octavia Butler, among many others, as resources for survival.

Silvia: In a previous project with the Berlin-based artist Karin Michalski, you created *The Alphabet of Feeling Bad*. How does this notion of taking inventory of public feelings work in terms of its own embedded potential for affective worldmaking? Does it have to do with the creation of lists and structure, or do you consider it more of a praxis of regaining agency through creativity in the face of depression?

Ann: This might be where we come back around to the category of narrative, or at least the word. *The Alphabet of Feeling Bad* project is a form of abecedary which tries to give us expanded vocabularies of affect. The project wants to make room for negative feelings: you get to feel bad, and you still get to be in community with others. This counters the exclusion people often experience when they feel that they don't belong because of their anti-social or non-normative feelings. We also wanted to resist clinical definitions of feeling bad; I am ambivalent about the ubiquity of diagnostic categories like anxiety and depression because I believe that we need a richer vocabulary for how we feel or why we feel bad.

One of the structuring elements for the project is to give people tools for the question "How do you feel"? People sharing how they feel and then building something collective from there can be a form of affective worldmaking. Returning to the power of words, a very generative moment in workshops can take the form of inviting people to make sense of feelings such as being tired or apprehensive. The process of naming is connected to forms of storytelling through which we allow for a more inclusive worldmaking, where feeling bad also comes with the capacity to claim a sense of belonging. Sometimes I begin my classes by inviting everyone to contribute one word to describe how they feel that day, and we create a list of words that describe how the group feels. Each of these words could be a prompt for people to begin telling their stories—a modest practice of collective sharing but nevertheless an important tool for affective worldmaking. The aim is to make asking, and answering, the question "How do you feel?" a meaningful intervention in terms of building both relationships and worlds.

Silvia: Perhaps as a follow-up: can we think of this as emerging counter-archives that record and index instances of feeling bad that otherwise do not find a place in more mainstream worldmaking practices, especially in narratives about the COVID pandemic, the AIDS crisis, or depression in relation to a variety of political events? What would you say is the connection between counter-archive and counterpublics and their transformative potential?

Ann: Bringing in ideas about the archive in the documentation of people's feelings raises a set of methodological questions. This practice often runs counter to more normative or conventional ways of asking people how they feel, particularly survey forms of data. It is interesting to think about ways to make these narratives add up to a form of collective knowledge. I have been fascinated by the form of the pandemic diary—which will no doubt contribute to a compelling archive of this time. I have been involved in the NYC COVID-19 Oral History, Narrative and Memory Archive project at Columbia University in New York, which is collecting contributions from approximately 2000 par-

ticipants, including interviews and open-ended written questionnaires. The project calls attention to a conundrum: how to create the data sets in a way that also disrupts the process of data collection in order to insist that the documentation of affect is a valuable counter-archive.

Silvia: A concept you have mentioned in several of your recent talks is "COVID silver linings." Connecting to what you said about the emergence of new forms of documenting the present moment and what it feels like, I wonder what a potential counter-archive might look like when we zoom in on this idea of COVID silver linings. As difficult as it might be to acknowledge that there are COVID silver linings, doesn't this also invite us to think about people's positionalities and unevenly distributed access to power and privilege?

Ann: This concept of COVID silver linings has been an ongoing project for me. I first wrote about it in April 2020 during the early weeks of the pandemic, and it read differently in January during your symposium, and it seems different again in April 2021 when we are doing this interview. These shifts are no doubt part of the fluidity and unpredictability of affect in this time of pandemic. The term has been a useful way to hold open questions about the dialectics of hope and despair and of positive and negative affects that have always been at the heart of the public feelings project, as I have understood it. At the same time, I am somewhat ambivalent about the vernacular use of the term COVID silver linings, in so far as it suggests the impulse to move too quickly towards something positive, to putting a happy face on something that is so terrible. Nevertheless, it also registers an inability to know what the pandemic might mean with respect to individual experience, which is, of course, relational and exists across a range of scales and locations.

At this point, one of the open questions for me is: Will one of the COVID silver linings have been the opportunity for a new level of activism around anti-Black racism and understandings of white supremacy, a term which is now circulating in ways that it was not a year ago? For example, is it a COVID silver lining that the term "systemic racism" is rolling off the tongues of ordinary citizens, police

officers, and politicians in unprecedented ways? These developments connect to Arundhati Roy's notion of the pandemic as a portal and the questions it raises about whether the pandemic might ultimately take us somewhere else—to a different future. I see this evidenced in the fact that a lot of people are talking about not wanting to go "back to normal"—a version of COVID silver linings that we might want to work with, albeit critically. I used the term COVID silver linings to describe working from home for privileged, middle-class people who have that option. As an extension of that experience, people are now thinking about ways in which the workplace as we know it will be fundamentally transformed. For those of us who work in the university, this is a very open-ended question as we go forward, including speculation about the possible advantages and drawbacks of teaching online or remotely and the kinds of worldmaking we might engage in by doing so.

Silvia: A particular form of affective worldmaking during the pandemic is connected to care. Do times of crisis always demand specific practices of self-care?

Ann: Care has emerged as a central category during the pandemic, and it has been important to tease apart distinctions between collective care and self-care. Even before the pandemic, I was interested in how activists, especially those working to dismantle racism, were drawing new concepts and strategies of self-care from Audre Lorde's statement that "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." Although there have been critiques of "self-care" and concern that the spirit of Lorde's thinking be honored through understandings of self-care as collectively oriented, I think it's a welcome development to think about care as affective worldmaking and about how we can build collectivities through mutual care.