

Turning toward Pedagogy in a Crisis

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Abstract This essay considers the complex emotions of COVID-19 and the different horizons of expectation that are a by-product of US structural inequality. It also considers the experience of teaching in a pandemic, the labor of teaching, and the politics of survivor's guilt.

Keywords emotion, class, pedagogy, survivor's guilt

As I write this, I can hear the sound of concrete being tossed into a construction dumpster. Living in a gentrifying neighborhood means living with the sound of constant development. I have to tune it out. I am intensely aware of the privilege of this, the choice and ability to tune out a dull, constant sound, my attempt to prevent it from acting on me, the privilege to temporarily forget what it means. This privilege does not bring guilt, this tuning out or turning away, not nearly as much as it should; the sound of development is also the sound of removal, a forcing out. I know that as I am turning away from the sound of displacement, others are tuning out sirens in COVID-19 hot spots, and there are others that do not have the choice to tune anything out. In choosing to turn away, with or without guilt, we might convince ourselves that we can, in fact, prevent something from acting on us. In so doing, we have inhibited our capacity to apprehend the ways something *is* acting on us, no matter our ability to turn away. This misapprehension—the belief that we can turn away and survive untouched—precludes us from seeing ourselves as part of a collective, a belongingness forged out of enduring and surviving. This is a critical loss, this thwarted belongingness. *They* survived COVID-19. *They* survived HIV. *They* survived a trans childhood. What happens when we are convinced that something is not really happening to us? We might not know how to feel.

Scholars in gender and sexuality studies have turned to emotion to stress how affect directs us toward and away from objects, to document how public cultures are forged from collective, nonnormative feelings, and to theorize our attachments to particular lives and values. Affect is tied to precarity, insecurity,

and contingency in ways that directly impact our feelings, but our individual expectations can shape our experience of insecurity and, by extension, our identification or disidentification with a socioeconomic class. More directly, you might not feel insecure if you never expected to be where you are today, and you might not feel like a member of the gentrifying class if you still spend most days surprised that you own a home. You can “make it” in the eyes of your people, but others might remind you that you deserve more. Like other sensibilities, socioeconomic class creates a set of normative feelings and a horizon of expectations that structure our sense of entitlement and, more generally, our sense of “making it” or “surviving.”

Class-escape stories are central to navigating the complex affects of so-called social mobility and our responses to collective trauma. The queerly classed, like the queerly gendered, might find familiar feelings in a text, as I did when I first read Allan Bérubé’s (1996) powerful consideration of how class shapes not only our desires but also our sense of home in “Intellectual Desire.” Bérubé writes: “Class escape stories tell what happens when you get out of the class you grew up in and enter one of higher status. They reveal unresolved conflicts about what you have lost and gained. They expose the anguish of leaving a home you can’t return to while not belonging where you’ve ended up” (140). In “Queers Read What Now?” Martin Joseph Ponce (2018: 317) writes, “Gay and lesbian readers frequently attest to the pivotal role that reading for representations of same-sex desire has played in facilitating sexual self-understanding and alleviating a sense of isolation.” However, Ponce continues, queer and trans people of color “often remark on the absence or scarcity of representation, thus implying that the canonical traditions remain inadequate, if not hostile, to their needs” (320). For white scholars, racial privilege creates a similar horizon of expectation such that one might consider themselves “represented” even if the existing archive is far from representative.

I offer these speculations to make some intimate links between precarity and positionality, and to explore the impact of normative feelings in a time of crisis. We might be most familiar with the subject that turns away to neglect, or to avoid, the kind of person that uses the classic us/them dualism in an attempt to minimize violence against and/or the death of others (as an example, and one that deserves much more than this parenthetical, the “only them” rhetoric of early HIV public health—only gay men, only IV drug users, only people of color, only sex workers). We might be familiar, in other words, with those who turn away because they think they have something to gain or nothing to lose. I turn instead to different subjects, those who might identify and disidentify with both surviving and suffering. We might simplify this as being in limbo, unable to see the self as surviving or suffering, and at times haunted (presumably inadvertently, but certainly not always) by the many very certain subjects that walk among us,

whose knowingness about the self does not produce doubt in others' self-perception (well, certainly sometimes it does) so much as it causes a deepening feeling of indeterminacy for those not-so-sure subjects, those who cannot say for sure what they are or are not enduring. (Another example that deserves more than a note in passing: the tyranny of "trans enough" politics, which suspends many trans folks in a similar space.)

When in limbo it might feel like surviving and suffering are always on the horizon, but also, being in limbo—characterized here as having a mixed-class sensibility, a trans identity that gets more-or-less trans depending on the decade, or being a homeowner with a traumatic relationship to home—might make it impossible to know where we stand as subjects of a collective feeling and history. Held outside because there is a "real" subject that rightfully belongs there, we might not even be able to see the self as experiencing something (a pandemic, trans violence, traumas of our past, exploitation) merely because we have, or we imagine that we have, fared better or differently. This is often the case, but in a global pandemic we might be more likely to experience this, more likely to turn away from the impacts on the self, and not only in the spirit of self-care, but out of an ethical obligation—particularly, if it is not really happening to us, not in the way we imagine or know it is happening to others (if it is not yet as bad as it could be). This survivor's guilt speaks directly to horizons of expectation; we presume we will survive, so it feels unethical to consider how we might suffer. To further complicate the affect of indeterminacy, some of us have a real problem with the real.

This might be a feeling familiar to those who cannot say if they are surviving or suffering academic labor—perhaps most notably, the middling sort. Such indeterminacy is predictably shaped by expectation and entitlement. For those of us who never expected to be here in the university (like those who never expected to be homeowners, who might surely appear grossly apologetic about their position in the system of gentrification), a steadfast sense of amazement about the privilege to do academic work in queer and trans studies (not to mention, to be working and relatively safe now in that labor) can undermine the capacity to take in collective affects and politics around labor issues. Even further, survivor's guilt can ensure a steady stream of gratitude from above, but also persistent apologies for and public grievances over differences in structural support, which can sometimes make the work less bearable, however vital these interventions are. Work that feels "good enough" and often deeply meaningful can transform into exploited labor in these encounters. If the only appropriate response to praise with apology is to reassure those with survivor's guilt that you do, in fact, have an excellent job, these encounters create new forms of affective labor, structured by the needs of those with security. It is very likely, under all these conditions, that one might not really know how to feel about labor, or whether to turn toward it, or turn away from it.

Such feelings are heightened now, since COVID-19 contingency plans and the move to online teaching came with ethical calls to fail fabulously at online teaching, to set the bar low—something we might intentionally or unintentionally do. Public feelings about productivity in the wake of COVID-19 have predominantly included calls to be of use or to redefine use. We are also reminded to take the labor of online teaching seriously, to downplay any ease we might find, and to recognize research and practice in online pedagogy. COVID-19 contingency has also raised key questions about accessibility policies that exclude students with disabilities. The debate over whether we should show our students our “true selves” in a time of crisis applies a range of speculative theories about fostering resiliency, creating a fascinating archive of what we think our students need.

Demands to turn away seem to forget the reality of contingent labor and our students. Most of us want to be of use to our students. For historically minoritized teachers, who might also expect teaching and service to feel reparative, the question of what students need and being of use cannot be neatly separated from our histories, our desires, or our sense of value. The opening questions in this inquiry, however, raise different questions about teaching. What would it mean to teach students about topics as though they are happening to all of us? How can we hold onto an ethics of intersectional analysis without perpetuating a diminished capacity to understand the broader loss or impact of historical violence? In *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*, Sarah Schulman (2013: 14) makes connections between “literal gentrification” and “a diminished consciousness” to create a broader framework for understanding “the unexplored consequences of AIDS.” What are the consequences of a lost imagination? This is the question that invites us to turn toward, to see ourselves as subjects of events, as people who have also lost something, even when, or especially when, we cannot yet articulate or imagine that loss.

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