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Using Shared Experiences to Think Across Different Forms of Stigmatization: An Interview

With her book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), Heather Love created a connection between affect politics and temporalities that became especially important for the analysis of queer politics.

The following interview takes a closer look at her current research projects and on how politics of affect and emotion have an impact on her work as a queer scholar and teacher – not only as tools for analysis but also as a social practice that seeks connections between individual and social experiences and suggests possible political alliances through reconsidering stigma.

Teaching as an affective practice

HL: Well, you were asking about 'how does affect make a difference'. Even though I think there are bigger questions about politics and affect that we could think about, it is also important to consider questions of everyday life and how affect changes the academy. I've been moving between different worlds for a long time, and I have the training to hold my own in a lot of different situations. I'm okay with giving a paper about the 'lesbian fan club' in a conservative environment, but I really only have the confidence to do that *now* because I have my fancy institution behind me. But for so many people they walk into that room and are like, 'no way'. I don't know whether to call that affect exactly. Maybe you can point to something like, 'oh, that person said something really racist in their talk,' or they were all men speaking at that conference. But sometimes it's not quite as explicit as that, right? I feel that's what affect studies has given me license to do, which is to try to develop a vocabulary or a way of talking about those more elusive or hard to describe kinds of atmospheres that change who wants to take part in a conversation and who doesn't.

And actually changing the atmosphere in this sphere that you're in or that's around you isn't all that hard. I mean you can do that, right? Like for example at this quite conservative conference that I went to last week, I didn't do very much. During one really bad talk, not bad but oppressive to me and very 'old-school', I passed a note to a guy that I met, sort of a friend – I don't think he thought my note was very funny, actually.

KM: What did you say to him?

HL: I said: 'I just wanna warn you that I am at suicide-risk right now.' (*Laughing*) And he didn't really react because maybe we are not good enough friends for me to say that to him. Anyway I felt comfortable enough to try.

The main place where I think about these issues is the classroom because basically my job in the classroom is to try to create a kind of ideal space not in the sense of 'perfect' but 'ideal' in the sense of a model, a place where you can actually try something out. So I teach a seminar on friendship where I have the students direct each class. Each week they decide how the class is going to run – not just what we are going to talk about but where we are gonna sit and what's gonna happen and it's really quite open what they can do. I like to ask the students to take responsibility for that. But I think what is closer to my own investments, my anxieties and weaknesses is probably my grad teaching because that's a very intense situation. What happens to students in grad school really affects what they think the profession is and how to behave in it. And so I feel a lot of responsibility for trying to have ethical practices in graduate seminars, which are known to be spaces of a lot of aggression, anxiety and competitiveness. How do I make it into an intellectual satisfying experience, but also try to create a different kind of atmosphere that will bring out the best in people? I feel that that's part of my ongoing practice.

KM: What are the specifics of these teaching situations?

HL: Just some basic things: I realized it's not about me. I mean, these are very smart students, I feel I need to serve them, so why am I sitting in the front of the classroom? There is that feeling of like, oh, I need to be really good, right? But actually that can turn into a defensive, aggressive kind of orientation very easily. And then the other thing is just to try to be explicit about what's going on. To sort of call things out. That's probably the other main tool that I have: to address what's happening in real time. That's hard because you have to be delicate to say, you realize something, like somebody's getting their feelings hurt, or there is tension between a couple of students, or everyone in the classroom doesn't like this one person (actually, you often can't say all these things explicitly, but you try to address them somehow, through practice).

I also talk more than other teachers about the material conditions of teaching. Because one classic thing that people fight about in graduate seminars is the utility for activism of the theory we are reading. Or, people are like, 'I am more political than you are,' 'I am smarter than you are,' etc. These are the kinds of capital that's often fought over in the classroom.

And around activism or politics I just try to be more realistic or pragmatic – this is a practice that comes out of my own sense of not wanting to claim too much political impact for my own scholarship. So when people are trashing something we're reading, 'where does this lead politically,' and so on, I always say: 'Okay, guys, I see your critique and I understand what you mean, but we do have to take account of our surroundings now, which is, today we're sitting in a totally beautiful, quiet, isolated seminar room here at the University of Pennsylvania, and you are in professional school to become professors. I am not saying that you're necessarily going to do that, but my job is to try to get you a job, and so the kind of politics of the street that we're arguing for here, we need to think about that in relation to what's actual happening in the room. What sort of frame is around this seminar? So, that's not exactly affect, but it's helpful to shift the perspective, or just to say, 'where are we, what are we doing, what are our aims, what is this about,' and to deflate some of the rhetorical energy of these fights.

I do think my work is political, and I hope to help produce concepts that can be useful to activism, but I also see that it's very different from doing direct action or risking my security and well-being in the world in ways that many activists do. In a daily way, I am protected where I am. I think having more humility about our claims about how political we are would help us to cultivate different kinds of practice and better relations with people who are actually better placed in practice in a sense. But I think the good thing is that there's space in classrooms for having these kinds of discussions.

Thinking about how intimate experience and social structure relate

KM: Since when are you working with affect politics, or 'affect'?

HL: I guess since I started grad school in 1996, which is around the time that I became aware that it existed. One of my professors was Jonathan Flatley, who wrote a book called *Affective Mapping* (2009) that I really admire – so I worked with him a lot and got into queer studies because of him as well. And I got into temporality as well – it is interesting why queer studies has been focusing on temporality and affect so much. And when I first started thinking about that I was like, 'oh, it's interesting, it's like queerness can be just being different in any of these different registers, right?' And I thought, okay, temporality and affect are good examples of the fact that when people talk about queerness they are not necessarily talking about sexuality, they are talking about feelings or time. I thought, okay, there might be a lot of other things that work this way, but now I am not so sure if that's true. There is something particular about temporality and affect – the field has been so focused on those topics, in

works like Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* (2003), or Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval* (1999), or Chris Nealon's *Foundlings* (2001). Those books really helped me to understand what I was interested in.

But if you really want to know when it started, I might have to go further back. I was always somebody that everybody said was too sensitive, and I always thought I was kind of psychic because I could tell what other people were thinking, like almost too, like it was a fault. So, when affect studies came on I was like, 'this is great! Here is something I know how to do.' (*Laughing*)

KM: What is it that you can describe with affect studies? What does it open up for you?

HL: I think that's a good way of phrasing it. It opened up new topics for me because I was trained in high theory like French feminist theory, philosophy, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis. I was always interested in psychic experiences. But I found that moving into a different framework, being able to talk about psychic experience from the perspective of affect studies, in a way that was less structural and more descriptive, opened up vocabularies that were useful to me, both for reading literature and for describing what it feels like to be, say, gender deviant. I wanted a way to just talk about the question, what it feels like to be a problem, which I get from W.E.B. Du Bois *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). I am interested in kinds of stigma, social exclusion, and what effects these experiences have on individuals. I found psychoanalysis ultimately to be a kind of limiting vocabulary for me, whereas affect studies, because it is descriptive, it's additive – you can just keep thinking about more and more kinds of experiences or feelings, and there's not really a limit to the different feelings that you can try to account for this way. I found affect studies useful in terms of opening up new areas of experience. So thinking about homophobia and its effects, through experience, through the lens of affect, allowed me to talk about shame and the different forms it can take. Like Raymond Williams in *Structures of Feeling* (1977) says that affect is social and that it's structured and that we can learn a lot about a social formation from thinking about feelings. It's a methodology that allows you to think about the way that intimate experience and social structure relate. It's also been very useful for me in terms of giving me new ways of talking and writing. This is there in the everyday, ordinary language aspect of affect studies, at least as I know it, for instance, Ann [Cvetkovich] on *Feeling Bad* (2003). Sometimes it's good to be able to use everyday language. And again, in relation to my ambivalence about the academy, I think, sometimes things could be simpler and more accessible, without losing complexity. Affect opens routes of connection between people who are interested in what's

going on in the academy, but who aren't academics or who aren't using that exact language. This is probably why I usually talk more about feelings or emotion, not affect, but I call it affect studies, because everybody does.

KM: I remember seeing you and Ann Cvetkovich together at a lecture in Basel, and you were saying, 'I use affect' and Ann said, 'I use feeling', and some of us in the audience were asking ourselves, 'But where is the difference?' (*Laughing*)

HL: I generally like the work on emotion, that's more what I do. Many people are invested in the idea of affect as non-psychological, non-narrative, and outside of the frame of the individual subject. Some people see this as politically vital because it opens up other kinds of connection. If you don't believe in the subject, right, then you already have intersubjectivity as the ground. And affect is clearly a force that is not just contained in our bodies, it's sort of flying around in the room and it's in the atmosphere and so on. That seems like a good idea, but in general, I've kind of always come down on the side of, it's okay to talk about identity. I am interested in how people actually think about their experiences and their feelings, and it may be true that you need a subject to talk about feelings. I think the question of whether affect or emotion is a better way of describing this is probably unanswerable. It's not that people shouldn't spend time thinking about it, but it's not what I am interested in (*laughing*).

KM: Throughout the last months, I got a little suspicious with my own interest in this whole topic of politics of affect and emotions, wondering if it is not only about privileges again. I see the danger of not being precise enough, if one uses this phrase, 'I feel bad,' because it could easily be a very individualized statement, if it doesn't come with a differentiated look on the specific circumstances that cause this feeling bad, like experiences of racism, sexual violence, homo- and transphobia, class distinction, or, a combination of it. I think it is always necessary to look at it from a wider perspective and with one's own social involvements in mind.

HL: I like to pay that much attention to things that, again, might not seem like horrible injustices, although some of the things that I experienced maybe would count as that. Saying that some experiences that people have seem minor, they can still have super powerful effects. I think it's important to stand by that, because when you are going through a bad depression, it's as bad as anything. I mean it can be really bad. So, if somebody can use *Feeling Backward* (Love 2009) in that space – that makes me happy. People identify with these experiences in their raw form but also, there are different connections that emerge as you think about them, analyze them, or make art about them, or whatever helps you to connect

your own personal experience with broader structures. I think that's honest in the sense of asking, how do we have access to these bigger structures, or how are we able to think critically and understand how they work? But the question is, would you like to change directions or do you keep doing what you do, but feel tormented by it?

KM: I've been working with these topics quite a bit, doing workshops and seminars. And I also try to give people a different space to talk and use different materials to enable this kind of situation. And I think that the students and workshop participants feel inspired and also moved by it. But I wonder where is it leading to? What is the direction? What could be the concept now? Probably one has to change the perspective again, because I'm afraid that 'the revolution is not really taking place.' (*Laughing*)

HL: I am, you can probably tell, deeply ambivalent about my place in the academy – where is it leading, other than that I get to be a smart-interesting-nice-ethical-politically aware professor (*laughing*). That's definitely not bringing the revolution. It is more about getting people excited, and hopeful, and thinking differently about the world. And actually, you do create a good experience for people, right? And you get that feeling of community and possibility, and you have created a small world that is, I think, better than many other worlds out there.

Seriously, I am very attentive to class issues. I had a big class leap in being a professor. This is like a miracle for me. I think I am a good mentor to students who are from a non-professional or non-elite background. But again, that brings up the old upward mobility issue – it doesn't change the structure so much as it pushes people who are talented up in the system, and gives them a nice life. I'm really grateful, and I want people to have interesting lives, interesting jobs, freedom from violence, like all of these things that are really powerful for me. It's been interesting in Berlin this summer because I have met several people who are teaching on the side. I don't know that many people who are professors here, I seem to know more artists and activists. So many of my friends in the States have exactly the same job as me, and we see each other at the same conferences, and it just starts to be my world. Even though I am critical of it, you know, if that's what I see that's what I see. It's been nice talking to people here because I can feel a lot of despair about that kind of closed world. So it's interesting for me to see it's not like that everywhere. There are other people with my same interests choosing different kinds of paths.

Describing social interaction and stigma on the basis of observational studies

KM: What is your current project about?

HL: The project that I am working on now is still in affect studies, but it's very cold. There are almost no feelings in it. I am working on the history of psychology and the human sciences in the 1960s and looking at projects in which researchers tried to fully describe little moments of everyday life. One of the studies is called *The Natural History of an Interview* (McQuown 1971) in which a team of twelve researchers analyzed ten minutes of film, which pictures a mom talking to Gregory Bateson on a couch. This entire team – that includes a psychoanalyst, a linguist, anthropologist, people who work in communication studies, people who work on gesture – all these people spent almost fifteen years trying to describe what happened in these ten minutes from every different possible angle. And they used a lot of different tools to describe it, including a musical score, in which every frame was represented on eight levels. Let's say, this is what's happening on the level of gesture, and here's what's happening on the level of language and here's what's happening psychically. And, in a sense I think this is a kind of affect studies, or what I think is good about the field: You can see how every slice of time has almost an infinite number of things going on in it. If you could slow it down, we could really just think about what's there, and I feel that's like what I try to do in my scholarship, and that's how I try to teach. But these researchers were influenced by behaviorism, which is a pretty discredited science, but the thing that I like about behaviorism is that it sees the individual as a black box – you don't know what's going on inside the person. So, like Burrhus Frederic Skinner, a famous behavioral psychologist, says, we don't know anything about the world under the skin, but you can only judge people based on their behavior or their actions, including language, and you just look at them and try to figure out what they're doing, and what they're doing is what they are. It's extreme, but it's interesting to me, having approached things from the opposite angle – that's to say, only concerned with the people's insides. It is kind of a weird project – I am looking at all of these crazy labs for studying human behavior. It's taking up what I've been interested in in affect studies for a long time, that's to say a descriptive element which is not about trying to uncover the contents of your unconscious – how you did that because your mother was mean to you, or whatever – but actually just about what you are doing in the moment, and trying to describe that, take account of it. What's really exciting to me about these projects is that, apart from studying behavior, people are also looking at social interaction, social exclusion, and stigma from this distant perspective where they're just describing what's happening and what's visible in a scene. You can get so much of what's wrong with the world simply by looking closely at how

interactions happen. So, in following the work of these social scientists, I am trying to get at the same material or dynamics that I might look at through affect studies, but from a more distant, external perspective.

KM: Is this kind of distant perspective really possible? Because I think that the way you observe a situation is already ...

HL: ... is already affective. It's already biased and it's already from one perspective. You're right (*laughing*). You know, this is why things like behaviorism or description are discredited; they are discounted because we don't believe in objectivity – I certainly don't. But I find it really interesting and exciting that these researchers put themselves at the service of these scenes and did their best to try to actually be observers, right? I can relate to that practice from my teaching – I think what I am doing in the classroom is just being a very careful observer. In my teaching practice, I scan the room constantly and read those signs to figure out what comes next. If you are a good enough observer, I think that can do the work of empathy. I feel more comfortable with that description, because for me empathy is linked to a hypervigilance that I see as linked to growing up in a violent situation. In that situation you *have* to be sensitive, because something bad might happen at any time. So, being that way is special but 'fucked up', however, with observation, I think you can think of that not as a gift but rather as something that you can train people – anyone – to do. Observation is a method – the reason these researchers got really good at observing is they spent all this time on it, and worked out systems for it. That's what a lot of sociologists and anthropologists, or people who do home studies in social work do. In social work, researchers go into a fucked up situation but by looking carefully they try to see what's happening in this house. It might be similar to how I was acting as a kid, but it's interesting to me that it can be a learned practice, a set of techniques. I think that I am as interested in scientific practice now as much or more than the lives of psychic teenagers has to do with me coming to terms with the fact that I am a scholar or a researcher, a professor and a professional. I am trying to think about what are the ethics of being a scholar or researcher (rather than, say, a queer outsider).

I am working on sexuality as part of the project. There is another observational study that I work on about men having sex in public bathrooms, called "Tearoom Trade," that was right around 1970, where this guy Laud Humphreys – who later came out as gay – went into public bathrooms and watched what people were doing: anonymously, he didn't care why they were there, if they were gay or straight, or who they were. He was using impersonal methods on purpose – to describe impersonal sex. He drew these diagrams of what the men in the

tearooms were doing, and he came to the conclusion that the space of the bathroom is more important than people's individual desires in determining what kind of interactions people have. The layout of the stalls is more important than who they are, where they come from, or what their secret personal history is, their family history, or whatever. And when he interviewed them, he says that thing that's striking is, they don't really have sentimental attachments to the men in the bathrooms, but they have sentimental attachments to the place. It's like, 'oh, that one bathroom was so amazing.' The point is that they get this weird distant treatment, they don't have names, they are like X's and O's on this diagram. But as a result Humphreys doesn't treat these men as case histories – as closet cases or sex addicts or whatever. They are just players in a game. He thinks about human behavior and sees it from the outside – in a way that pushes back on some approaches in affect studies. But I still think about it as affect.

KM: And this is a book you are talking about?

HL: Yes, it's a book and it's about to be finished. It's called *Practices of Description: Reading the Social in the Post-War Period*, and I am finishing up a draft this summer. I'm interested in the idea of reading in a broad way – like how do we read the world. But it's very cheeky of me, being in literary studies, to compare the way literary critics read (books) and the way sociologists read (social scenes) because people often hate social science in my field (*laughing*). But I'm trying to say that the sort of subtlety and the attention that these researchers are paying to the world, even though they were observing human behavior, is a kind of model for any kind of reading or interpretation that I wanna do.

Political alliances around the experiences of stigma

KM: Working with affect – did it bring new alliances for you also in your political analysis?

HL: I would say the key term for me probably is less affect than stigma. Stigma is the main thing that I am interested in. And again, I think what you were concerned about regarding affect – that it could be too much focused on the individual or not taking into account the big picture of relative privilege – I think, the same thing can definitely be said for stigma, because it's about the differences that turn people into objects of scorn, or exclude them from certain spaces. It still is a kind of individual framework. People might be stigmatized in certain ways and privileged in others, but it doesn't mean that their stigma does not "count" – I think we need a pretty broad way for talking about injustice. I find stigma to be an expansive and useful term and one that helps me to make sense of my interest in the effects of social

hierarchy and social exclusion across a bunch of frameworks. I am interested in pursuing the idea of expanded alliances through stigma, which I see as an affective category. It's all kinds of social relations, stigma isn't just a thing in the body or in the person. It is the relationship between people, maybe two people classically, but it can also be bigger than that. But it's basically about a relation, right? I am interested in the feelings that drive stigmatization, like why do people respond so badly to things that they don't understand or that are different, and I am also interested in its effects, pursuing that question of what it feels like to be a problem. I see stigma as an affective dynamic, a scene or situation where you can see many different forms of injustice or exclusion or inferiorisation at work. I use the concept of stigma to think about the relationship between forms of discrimination around disability and queerness for instance. How does stigma work differently or similarly in these different situations? And what can we learn by thinking through them together? I think we can move toward a politics of alliance around stigma. How do we account for the stare that lasts too long or certain kinds of tones of voice, and so on? I've survived that but I feel like it helps me to understand other forms of inferiorisation or interrogation of people in public and in private, and to think about how we might use those shared experiences to try to think across forms of difference. That's my hope for politics, right? That kind of coalitional politics.

KM: What was the initiative for your work with disability studies?

HL: It was maybe six or seven years ago – I have this other book project on Erving Goffman's book *Stigma* from 1963, and I decided that I was gonna work on his source materials. He reads all these really interesting memoirs and literary texts, which includes several fascinating disability memoirs; I am also interested in the way that his work is taken up in disability studies because he is kind of a hero for the field. An excerpt from *Stigma* was in *The Disability Studies Reader*, which is the main anthology in that field. But then people also really hate it because he was writing it in 1963, so he is not PC; he is using this much older language, and he is extremely blunt. It's called *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. He is basically saying, 'if you don't fit in, your identity is spoiled, and people see you as less than human.' It's a quite depressing book in a lot of ways. And so people are very ambivalent about it. But I find that very interesting, I really connect to it. There's also a great book by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson called *Staring* (2009). She does the work of comparison between, say, how people who are disabled get stared at in the street and how women get stared at in the street. How do we think about these two things together? It is an analysis of concrete scenes and practices of staring. I think part of the challenge is what you were alerting me to earlier: Okay, so I went through these certain kinds of experiences,

but in general I am privileged. But I don't think that means we can't think about these different kinds of injury in relation to each other: We just need to remember that they are not the same thing, right? Being able to compare is the crucial move in any kind of coalitional politics. But part of comparing is knowing where the differences are, and figuring out how to talk about that.

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