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How to Make a Queer Scene, or Notes toward a Practice of Affective Curation

LET ME BEGIN WITH TWO STORIES. In spring of 2013 I organized a semester-long, undergraduate film series at George Washington University titled "Acting Up: Queer Film and Video in the Time of AIDS." At semester's end, after participants had watched nine films about the AIDS epidemic—among them classic AIDS documentaries, activist videos, and mainstream Hollywood productions—I chose to conclude the series with the 1991 documentary *Silverlake Life: The View from Here. Silverlake Life* documents a year in the lives of Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman, a gay couple living in Los Angeles in the late 1980s who share an HIV diagnosis. At the time I made the selection, I did not realize that *Silverlake Life* documents one of the most devastating lived experiences of the AIDS epidemic ever filmed: during the course of taping, Tom, the initial documentarian, becomes gravely ill and dies on camera while lying in bed after a week-long convalescence. Reviewing this scene before our official screening, I found myself overwhelmed by intense feelings of anxiety. On the one hand, I felt a deep responsibility to expose my students to the aesthetic and political work of this daring documentary, and on the other, to protect them from witnessing forms of suffering that might traumatize them more than illuminate the social history of AIDS. When we convened to discuss the film, many students expressed how devastated they were by what they had seen. Rather than shutting down conversation, however, the depth and intensity of their viewing

experience galvanized an extraordinary conversation about the ethics of documenting the lives (and deaths) of people with AIDS. What they witnessed expanded the very possibilities of what they could feel about issues of collective concern such as the AIDS epidemic, while also transforming their ability to reconsider productive encounters with pain, suffering, and trauma. In my fear of negatively impacting students, I had forgotten both their capacity to respond with generosity and openness to traumatic images as well as my own careful curation of nine previous films and the attendant conversations held around them, which had laid a groundwork of shared affective openness to difficult content.

One year later, as a newly minted assistant professor of English at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, I taught a large lecture course on American fantasy. In the fourth week of class, I screened *The Wizard of Oz* as part of a unit on the Hollywood musical, and I devoted a lecture to a gay and lesbian interpretation of this classic film. I highlighted the movie's camp aesthetics, its gender play and drag elements, and its derailing of traditional heterosexual romance plots. As a gay man well versed in queer media scholarship, I took it for granted that this was a pleasurable but patently obvious interpretation of a film that I assumed most people recognized for its exuberant and visually spectacular gayness. Yet as I spoke, I sensed a visceral tension build in the room. Half the students seemed mesmerized by the possibility of a queer aesthetic underlying the movie, while the other half frowned at me in silent fury, outraged by my daring to desecrate the presumed innocence of a childhood escape. The seething resentment of this latter group was confirmed for me when, weeks later, my teaching assistants disclosed that numerous students had expressed feelings of anger and frustration that my interpretation had "ruined" their pleasure in a beloved film of their youth. This circumstance prompted me to confront my students the following week: microphone in hand, I strolled the room and asked students to account for their feelings of discomfort. I wanted them to explain why their personal pleasure in *The Wizard of Oz* hinged on the diminishment of alternative viewing possibilities, including unexpected queer delights in transparently "straight" narratives. Students were clearly jolted out of their complacent belief that no one would hold them accountable for their perspective, or that their view might have political or ethical consequences: yet the resistance of some to being called out was counterbalanced by

a dawning consciousness among others about how taken-for-granted their way of viewing and consuming popular fantasy stories could be.

I recount these two pedagogical scenarios because they illuminate a central, yet often uninterrogated, aspect of the contemporary national debates around trigger warnings: namely, the slippage between actual experiences of psychological trauma triggered by violent or disturbing media content (what the very concept of the trigger warning was originally intended to address), and the generalized feeling of discomfort aroused in students when they encounter objects, scenarios, and ideas contrary to their worldview. No doubt, just as these two definitions of triggering are not identical, the two classroom experiences I recount were not the same: in the former, my students had been prepared to witness and respond to traumatic content through a semester-long engagement with films about the AIDS epidemic (and they had discussed these movies in an intimate seminar setting that allowed for a sense of trust between participants); in the latter, students responded negatively not to traumatic course content, but to a line of thought that offended their sensibilities in a large lecture setting where individual discomfort has fewer outlets for public airing. Yet it struck me that what really distinguished the two scenarios was less the specific forms of triggering or the distinct logistics of each pedagogical environment, but the subsequent reactions that students had to being made uncomfortable: in one setting *openness* to interrogating their affective responses to the world; in the other, a *defensive* posture against perceived threats to their point of view. While the results of each teaching experience surprised me, what I had wanted out of my course material was, in a sense, to intentionally trigger my students — not in the traditional understanding of triggering as having a negative psychological impact, but in the sense of jolting their sensory experience of the world by creating the space where unpredictable and unsettling affective responses to course content might provoke our dialogues. Clearly, students in my American fantasy course *felt* triggered in some amorphous but no less impactful way by my lecture, but they lacked a critical vocabulary or even the inclination to question what it was they were feeling when they recoiled from my ideas. In the wake of these experiences, I wondered how I might make visible the pedagogical strategy of eliciting a range of potentially discomforting affective responses from students and, thus, lay bare the pleasures and insights of such discomfort. I wanted to know: if we wish to change the way our

students respond to a chaotic and unpredictable world, how should we teach them?

In this essay, I put forward a pedagogical model I call "affective curation," that centralizes the value of intentionally eliciting, or "triggering," uncomfortable affective responses from students in the classroom in order to develop new strategies for retuning, rerouting, or altogether altering students' sense perceptions of the world.[1] My interest is to find productive ways that we, as teachers and scholars, might take students' feelings more seriously and animate lively and productive discussion *about* those feelings while also holding students accountable for their emotional responses toward a range of ideas, objects, and realities. Throughout, I will use the terms *affects*, *feelings*, and *emotions* interchangeably to register the ways in which students' bodily felt sense of the world is often inextricably bound up with emotion states that they verbalize in the classroom. My belief is that the capacity to engage more fully with the vast range of affects available to any given human being is a central aspect of a liberal education that current debates around trigger warnings often obscure, either by centralizing questions of psychological health that bracket feeling states as off-limits to rational deliberation, or by diminishing the value of emotional responses to course material by suggesting that feelings have no place in the classroom.[2] Against both these lines of thought, I wish to explore what it might mean to infuse the contemporary debate around trigger warnings with that seemingly old-fashioned feminist consciousness-raising project of taking feelings seriously, of perceiving one's affective or gut-level responses to the world as a form of knowledge that can be accessed with unpredictable

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1. On the concept of retuning or reorganizing affective states, see Ben Highmore, "Bitter Aftertaste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 118–37; and Paula Ioanide, *The Emotional Politics of Racism: How Feelings Trump Facts in an Era of Colorblindness* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).
2. See, for instance, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, "The Coddling of the American Mind," *The Atlantic*, (September 2015); Rani Neutill, "My Trigger-Warning Disaster: *9 1/2 Weeks*, *The Wire*, and How Coddled Young Radicals Got Discomfort All Wrong," *Salon*, October 28, 2015; Lindy West, "Trigger Warnings Don't Hinder Freedom of Expression: They Expand It," *The Guardian*, August 18, 2015; and Ponta Abadi, "Trigger Warning Debate Ignores Survivors' Voices," *Ms. Magazine*, March 29, 2014.

but potentially ethical and democratic results. *Affective curation* is the name I give to a pedagogical practice in which an instructor strategically organizes course content in such a way as to intentionally trigger a range of unexpected and perhaps difficult emotional responses in students, which then become the object of classroom discussion. In this sense, affective curation describes both a way of preparing course materials as well as a particular form of discussion facilitation that makes students' feelings a question of public concern up for debate and revision.

The triggering of affective states can be one purposeful project of a course syllabus and its field of objects, one that requires the development of an intuitive pedagogy that considers how particular texts arranged in a specific order, or more accurately, *flow,* can have the potential to create a field of affective responses that activates students' sensorium in previously unexplored ways. The point is not to foreclose affective possibilities by "guessing" what emotions one might trigger in advance, but to think critically about the range and kinds of responses that a particular constellation of materials might make available to a given group of students. Affective curation, then, is about the expansion of students' capacity to sense the world around them and to make sense of the feelings such a renewed encounter with the world elicits.

I retain the use of the word *trigger* in my thinking about affective curation, while making elastic its earlier definition, because the term potently captures the feeling of having one's sensorium provoked, or activated, by a wide range of encounters with different kinds of course content or live engagements with other students and instructors. In her contribution to this forum, "Choose Not to Warn," Alexis Lothian brilliantly recuperates an often submerged history of content warning terminology in feminist science fiction fan cultures of the 1980s and 1990s — namely slash-fiction writing and video. The choice to signpost potentially disturbing or traumatic content such as rape, violence, and death was made explicitly available to these writers and filmmakers, but not imposed as a requirement of circulating or uploading narrative content. Lothian explains that in its original print and online usages, content warning terminology was a practice of care for the well-being of other fans and readers, rather than an act of censorship; moreover, she shows that the term "trigger" only appeared much later in the history of such content warnings to explicitly identify content that might have an overwhelming negative impact on a reader's psychological well-being.

The diffusion of the phrase "trigger warning" into the wider culture of higher education, however, means that the frameworks that formerly defined its use in other contexts have necessarily changed and therefore require new ways of grappling with uneven and variegated experiences of "feeling triggered." Simply put, when many students and faculty deploy the concept in casual discussion or classroom dialogue, they often use it broadly to describe forms of *being affected* by what goes on in the classroom setting, including generalized feelings of discomfort, offense, and disagreement not strictly limited to the overpowering experience of trauma. One way to address the contemporary slipperiness of the term is to instruct students and faculty on the historical and strict clinical uses of the concept with the hope that such information will encourage more nuanced deployments of the trigger warning as a critical tool of classroom ethics; another is to inhabit the concept of triggering differently, expanding its meanings to include a range of emotion states that fall outside of traditionally negative affects including pleasure, exhilaration, joy, bewilderment, and thrill, all emotions that might flood students' sensoria when they encounter an image, text, or conversation that allows them to access previously unavailable ideas and experiences. If, rhetorically speaking, the conceptual genie of the trigger warning is out of the bottle, affective curation is one way to put the genie to work, rather than hope for its peaceful return to its gold cage.

Perhaps no group working in higher education is more keenly aware of the necessity of innovating pedagogical approaches to trigger warnings and substantively responding to the cultural conditions that have led to their ascendance than instructors of women's, gender, and sexuality studies courses; it is in these instructors' classrooms that trigger warnings are most spectacularly being tested, contested, revised, and debated. There are multiple reasons for this, but two stand out: first, more than any other courses in the humanities, women's, gender, and sexuality studies classes deal explicitly with the most intimate (and for some, most discomforting) aspects of embodied experience. This includes sexual desire and eroticism, the vast range of romantic and familial intimacies, gender and sexual identity, sexual violence, reproduction and sexual health, and the public dimensions of sex, sexuality, and gender. Second, these courses are generally taught by professors steeped in feminist pedagogical values developed since the 1970s. This includes the cultivation of ethical interpersonal dynamics between

students in order to make the classroom a more welcoming and progressive space for alternative viewpoints and experiences as well as a commitment to seeing the classroom as a site for social justice work through the implementation of pedagogical practices and the teaching of course materials that contest oppressive systems of power. On the one hand, then, the content of women's, gender, and sexuality studies courses has the potential to trigger students more explicitly than other kinds of courses simply by virtue of dealing directly with ideas and objects of study that are considered socially taboo, judged morally base, or associated with traumatic bodily experiences; on the other, the ethical feminist values that organize these courses tend to support the importance of taking students' feelings and experiences about these topics seriously, so the fact that students might be triggered by course materials is honored or given space to be expressed.

In my own teaching practice, what I am calling affective curation is one way that I balance the dual realities of teaching potentially triggering course materials, while also valuing my students' affective responses to those materials without ceding emotional control of the classroom to student discomfort, dis-ease, or negative judgment. Affective curation intentionally brackets or downplays more traditional motivations for organizing class content, including skill-based learning (in which texts are selected on the basis of how well they help cultivate a specific analytical faculty), chronological development (in which content is arranged to cover a historical period or map a developmental arc), or topical units (in which content is organized around pre-selected issues of interest). When we are driven by the demands of skill-based learning, for instance, we centralize sources that will help us impart a particular capability to students that we believe has measurable results: we assign a poem we think can be used to teach close reading skills, a film clip that will develop abilities in thick description, or a music video that can be deconstructed to model ideology critique. Then we measure the level to which these lessons have been absorbed by developing assignments that require students to deploy these skills on various objects through deft argumentation and interpretation. This is extraordinarily important work, but it leaves open the question of what exactly intellectual skill-building is *for* and what substantive effect it has on our students' sensory perceptions of the world: it is perfectly possible for a student to know how to precisely deconstruct the racial logics that organize a news broadcast

about the murder of Michael Brown and the subsequent protests in Ferguson, Missouri. It is another thing for them to feel investment in antiracism, in transforming the conditions that enable racist logics to dominate US media, or to have a felt sense of how these logics might impact their own participation in US democracy. Such affective reorientations require something other or more than ideology critique or close-reading skills, something along the lines of a sustained engagement with sensory or felt experience as an open field of shifting possibilities rather than a rigid set of personalized opinions about the world.

Without jettisoning other important ways of organizing courses, affective curation centralizes the value of collating and arranging course texts in such a way that their distinct interaction across time has the potential to produce a number of intensified affective states that motivate class discussion and force students into the position of questioning their emotional stance toward a number of social and political issues. What might count as "intensified affective states" in different contexts will be ever-changing and requires that instructors be attuned to the distinct environments in which they teach, as well as the affective orientations that tend to dominate in a given student body. Movies, literature, and scholarship that my students at George Washington University considered boring or flat have often electrified my students at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Understanding the reasons why this is so and making course development decisions on the basis of this knowledge has been a crucial part of my pedagogical growth, including a critical understanding on my part of the cultural norms, social patterns, and inherited worldviews of my students in these distinct locations.

As an English professor who teaches in the fields of queer theory, popular culture studies, and radical social movements, my courses commonly center on the question of sexual ethics, or the relationship between people's sexual practices and their political values. In a range of classes that explore feminist and queer politics and US sex cultures, we ask: can sex be a site for imagining new forms of freedom? Does a person's erotic life have anything to do with how they participate in a democracy? Is there, or should there be, a symmetry between how one loves and how one votes? Since I am a visual studies scholar, I often address these topics by making students watch movies and television, read comics, and look at visual art that depicts, among other things, people engaged in a variety of sex acts; people living with and

dying of AIDS; people being subjected to physical and sexual violence; people being emotionally abused; people being shunned by communities; people being embraced by communities; people instructing others how to use condoms; people not using condoms; people being excommunicated from families; people losing jobs, homes, and security; people living happily as out and proud; people trying out new sexual desires; and people changing their identities altogether. I rarely single out any of these images as specifically triggering (which would presume that others are less so) because I am aware that all have the potential to activate unexpected emotional responses, and I explain this to students at the outset of any course. Instead, each week, at the end of a class session, I verbally introduce the following session's reading or viewing assignment to students, explaining some of the kinds of images or experiences they will encounter while providing a base-level background for the assigned source. I might explain, for instance, that the text, movie, or work of art they will be reading or viewing contains scenes of sexual pleasure, bodily violence, or family conflict, but also that it may demand particular kinds of reading or viewing skills, or that it may seem anachronistic in relation to their historical moment. I then give some sense of what the source refers to or narrates, so that whatever triggering content it may have, it is content with meaning and value: because it celebrates traditionally denigrated lives and experiences, because it expands our historical knowledge, or because it forces us to ask difficult social and political questions. In other words, I do not anticipate negative affect, but explain productive affective possibilities. By introducing each text without sensationalizing it, defending it in advance, or presuming how they will feel about it, but merely giving it context and weight, I encourage students to believe they are capable of accessing a range of texts with dramatically varied emotional content (and, consequently, get them to value that capacity as a skill developed in the classroom setting). This sets the stage for a genuine practice of affective curation by making the unpredictable — and potentially transformative — emotional encounter with a text motivation for reading or viewing onward, rather than a reason to turn away from course content.

For example, in my time teaching at a Midwestern state school, I have come to find that while many of my students are eager to learn about queer identity and culture, their perception of what it means to live as an LGBT person is dominated by the traumatic experience of being

bullied and despised and by living in a perpetual state of self-hatred and unhappiness. In my senior seminar "Gay Is Good: Queer Visions of Freedom Since the 1970s," I respond to this questionable but tenaciously held affective stance by curating the first four weeks of the course around a series of literary and political texts that articulate the relationship of LGBT identity to sexual pleasure, personal freedom, ebullience, social flourishing, and ecstasy. Essentially, I expose students to a host of affective states commonly perceived as illegible within their initial understanding of LGBT identity. We begin with Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*, a novel that immediately overturns students' emotional expectations toward lesbian identity both by centralizing the pleasures and aspirations of a woman-desiring woman and by representing a lesbian protagonist who radiates triumphant overcoming of a seemingly endless list of personal traumas, including violent homophobia, misogyny, poverty, and familial abandonment. We move next to Audre Lorde's black lesbian feminist tour de force *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, followed by Andrew Holleron's tragic but equally ecstatic exposé on queer New York City disco culture *Dancer from the Dance.* Finally, we conclude this unit of the course with a constellation of texts about 1970s gay San Francisco, including Armistead Maupin's serialized soap opera *Tales of the City*, the acclaimed documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*, and short selections from the gay liberation anthology *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation.* Through a series of encounters with these texts, my students find that nearly every assumption they have held about the universally tragic qualities of LGBT identity are productively unsettled, muddied, or altogether overturned as they meet a range of characters who experience both trauma *and* triumph, alienation *and* pleasure, self-hatred *and* a variety of forms of coming into consciousness about their identities and desires. The point is not to replace trauma with optimism or reify the logic of "it gets better," but to texture and expand what they can think and feel about queer culture, identity, and ways of life. Throughout, we spend significant portions of class discussion both interrogating students' thwarted assumptions about LGBT life and asking about the motives and effects of these authors' dynamic and exuberant portrayal of gay identity, queer kinship, and sexual liberation: one outcome, for instance, is that straight-identified students find themselves feeling exhilarated by the coming-out stories of LGBT characters, so much so that they are initially confused and perhaps bewildered by their own

affective investment in characters and scenarios they might have previously associated with deviance, negativity, and social death. Such experiences can be understood as a kind of trigger, but one with roots in multiple affective valances not simply reducible to trauma.

Through the careful curation of this set of texts, *I make a queer scene*, both in the sense of setting a stage upon which a constellation of LGBT cultural sources come together to elicit a queer set of unsettling, yet invigorating, affective states, but also allowing students to use the classroom setting as a place to make a spectacle of their own conflicted feelings and see what meaning they can make out of them. In the concluding week of this unit, students find themselves especially galvanized by the combination of *Tales of the City*'s effervescent look at the pleasures of 1970s queer San Francisco and the political promise of Harvey Milk's rise to the role of San Francisco supervisor. When we convene to discuss these sources, my students repeatedly express a wholly new affective state (one I could not have predicted in advance of organizing these course materials): often tearfully, and with not a little surprise at their own emotional intensity, they express an anguished rage that in their elementary and high school education, they never heard of a man named Harvey Milk, nor of the women's and gay liberation movements, nor of the queer promise of cities like New York and San Francisco, nor of the radical consequences of the sexual revolution. What my students express in this moment is not a dangerous or violent anger, but a productive *felt sense* of injustice not only about the diminishment of the lives of queer people in the modern United States, but also about the diminishment of their own education as a result of the virtual invisibility of the social and political possibilities that queer social worlds have provided to countless generations. As a result of the affective curation that shapes the first four weeks of our course content, students find themselves with a language for articulating and grappling with their feelings of anger at what has been kept from them. Almost invariably, they spend the remainder of the semester channeling this newly acquired affective range into imagining a different, queer world for themselves and their peers. As one student put it when I asked what they felt was the greatest lesson they had gained from the course at the end of the semester: "English 630 taught me an ethics of care for the world."

As one might surmise from this example, affective curation is a calculated risk that can threaten to reduce all course content into a

discussion of students' feelings; avoiding this pitfall requires a pedagogi-
cal practice attuned to helping students develop a sophisticated language
for discussing the social and political dimensions of emotion states and,
consequently, for thinking about what triggers them as an occasion for
dialogic interaction with others rather than a moment of psychic recoil-
ing from collective engagement. This can be especially daunting for pro-
fessors because it demands a willingness to be thoughtfully confronta-
tional with students about the way they express their feelings, asking
them to interrogate felt experiences that may initially seem ephemeral
or fleeting. Rather than either outright refusing the seemingly onerous
demand of trigger warnings or else capitulating to their irresponsible
overuse as a tool of emotional policing in the classroom, we might trans-
parently explain to students not only that certain materials will indeed
potentially trigger them in a variety of unpredictable ways, but that such
an outcome has extraordinary value and will be one of the stated pur-
poses of any given classroom experience. An approach such as affective
curation can empower both students and faculty to see the classroom
anew, neither as a "safe space" nor an ideological battleground, but as a
productive site for collectively retuning the sensorium. How their sense
of the world might change for students when they learn to articulate
their visceral experience of the world in a space of accountability and
collective dialogue remains unpredictable. Affective curation suggests it
might be worth finding out.