

# On 'Publics'

## A feminist constellation of key words

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The conjunction of the key words 'publics', 'feelings', 'practice', 'utopian performatives' and 'performance' drive most of my current work, from my own spectating habits and interests, to my blogging on 'The Feminist Spectator', to my more extended research projects. In the following rumination about how these terms constellate around each other and engage my imagination, I find myself wanting to ask for a kind of indulgence from readers, as I trace these issues personally and politically rather than from a strictly scholarly perspective. Yet it seems to me that a feminist scholar shouldn't have to apologize for speaking from experience, especially if she doesn't propose that it's 'the truth'. My own trajectory through and among these key words is perhaps one useful way of mapping their potentially useful proximities. All of these concepts - publics, feelings, utopian performatives, practice - are deeply feminist to me, and the politics of how they are used determine the effects that they can have not just on our work but on what our work *does* in the world.

The discourse of public feelings and affect has been deployed across fields in interdisciplinary ways, often by colleagues whose scholarship boasts a distinct political intent (see Ahmed 2004, Cvetkovich 2003, Muñoz 2009, Hurley 2010, Staiger et al. 2010). In my work as a feminist performance critic and scholar, the concept of a 'public' gathering to see theatre has been generative in very specific ways. My ideas were informed by performance theories I first

read described by Richard Schechner and Herb Blau. Schechner mapped a detailed paradigm of how spectators gather to see performers and then disperse as crucial to a performance's effect. Blau parsed the ideology inherent in performance, from how much the tickets cost to how the programme feels in our hands. Schechner and Blau taught me that the very material aspects of how and why we gather in a live public space at a specific moment and the myriad of individual and collective ways we understand what we see have great social and political import.

The operative metaphor in my first book, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1989), proposed 'stealing the seat' from the 'ideal male spectator' and revising what Monique Wittig once called the 'axis of categorization' so that we could literally see performance from a different, feminist point of view. These acts of meaning-making rely on a public presence, in which individual spectators feel themselves aligned or defiant. *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* promoted mostly resistant readings, quarrelling with the canonization of what I then saw as compliant, assimilationist women playwrights, or with the perpetuation of thoughtless misogyny in the hegemonically male American avant-garde. Given my own attachment to materialist feminism, I also separated myself from a public of what we then called 'cultural feminists', who privileged gender and essence over more intersectional and materialist ways of seeing performance and the world. But through all this argumentative early work, I saw myself as a person within various publics, calling attention

to the boundaries representation drew around me that variously placed me and my own ideology inside or out.

*The Feminist Spectator as Critic* studied the texts of public culture, from plays in performance (that is, performance texts rather than written texts) to the extra-textual cultural apparatus that informs reception (newspaper feature articles, reviews, other secondary sources, as well as theory from various fields). The book also detailed the WOW Café and other lesbian performance projects and places as what Dick Hebdige theorized as 'subculture', or what Michael Warner would call a 'counterpublic'. My next effort, *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Performance* (1993), dug deeper into these various counterpublics, thinking through lesbian sexual practices as performance, considering the gender and sexuality pedagogy implicit in university theatre productions, and commenting on the performances I attended in community sites outside of New York to consider what gender and sexuality meant within and among these contexts of reception and production. Living in the Midwest for those years, my understanding of what a public was and how it was constituted changed from the national (governed by that very parochial presumption that theatre in the northeast represents 'the national') to the local and from high art to community-based. *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* was informed by materialist feminism and psychoanalysis 'lite' in my borrowings from French feminisms and US-based feminist film theory. The ethnographic and cultural-studies methods for analyzing television that were prevalent during my time at the University of Wisconsin-Madison from the late-1980s to mid-1990s (and popularized by John Fiske, my then-colleague in Communications) began to influence my work. The metaphor of a feminist spectator stealing one seat from her singular male counterpart began to shift in my thinking to one in which groups of people gathered and voiced their responses to performance through the dominating or

diverging ideologies of the moment. Seeing a butch-femme and s/m-inflected performance at the otherwise cultural feminist Fourth Annual Lesbian Variety show in Madison in the early 1990s was one of the first moments in which the presence of a dissenting public felt palpable to me, and led me to report, in my essay 'Practicing cultural disruptions', on my sense of the audience's response to performance rather than simply my own.

*Geographies of Learning* (2001) continued along this theme and expanded my working understanding of publics and practices to include the academy and the myriad oppositional or acquiescent audiences we construct for (and sometimes against) our work there. By then, I had moved back to New York City, where frankly the theatre I saw galvanized me less than the institutional politics in which I suddenly found myself embroiled. All at the same time, I chaired the PhD Program in Theatre at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, served as the Executive Director of its Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies; and spent an extended stint as Vice President and then President of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. I was suddenly leading organizations that, though in the scheme of things were small and not terribly powerful, gave me public platforms for advancing ideas, for attempting to create coalitions, for advocating for the vital necessity of theatre and performance, as well as for agitating for gender equity, anti-racism and a critical awareness of the horrors of homophobia.

All three positions required negotiating public audiences that often conflicted. Chairing meetings, devising programming, writing essays for newsletters, speaking with students, colleagues and community people, I needed to become adept at what, in *Geographies of Learning*, I called 'code-switching', the ability to be bilingual in both expert and vernacular modes of speech. Every situation I entered - usually to bargain for one thing or another, whether resources for the PhD in Theatre programme or for a forum for a distrusted perspective in the LGBT movement

or for the value of theatre in colleges and universities - required that I reconstitute anew my sense of into which public I spoke and bartered. And like any administrator determined to be fair, I continually renegotiated my own personal investments in the causes for which I advocated, adjusting the recipe I used to mix my own agenda with the groups I represented.

I lasted through those five challenging years because my administrative positions let me see a rather Benjaminian web of constellations among the publics through which I moved, and working in New York made certain imaginary communities - the theatre community, the LGBT community, the feminist community - palpable even as they shifted and conflicted. The mid- to late-1990s also saw the beginning of the 'public intellectual' vogue. This figure held great appeal to me. I began my career as a theatre critic and was once accused, in a reader's report on a book proposal I submitted to a press in the late 1980s, of being a 'journalist' instead of a scholar. The reporting reader meant that as a slur, but five or so years later the language of the public intellectual seemed to redeem and authorize my own desire to speak to audiences larger than my friends and colleagues. That trend also allowed some academics still another way to accumulate cultural capital; that is, public intellectualism certainly isn't free of hierarchy or fashion. But that discourse somehow authorized engagements with the public sphere and prompted me to use my leadership positions to write op-ed pieces for newspapers, to write to politicians when I had something to protest or applaud, and to commit myself to translating the feminist and queer theories I'd found so inspiring into language that might make it useful for non-experts.

As a theatre and performance person who still believed in the project of live gatherings for which a group of people were willing to turn up at the same time and place to witness and experience the same, unrepeatable staging, how could I forsake a larger public for such a tiny, internal one as the audience of my academic peers? Theatre and performance studies is a

small field, but theatre and performance as what my colleagues and I at the University of Texas at Austin came to call 'public practice' is potentially limitless in its applications and effects. At UT, I followed my own and encouraged my students' desires to engage with the high art, popular and community-based potential of theatre and performance. We theorized and historicized performance as a practice with social use-value in a variety of public settings, from prisons to K-12 schools, from social service organizations to self-defined arts companies, and from literacy programmes to the most elite symphonies, ballets and regional theatres. Conceptualizing performance as a public practice renewed my faith in performance studies' ability to mean something to a wide swath of people across social locations. Our graduate programme in Performance as Public Practice at UT proselytized to that effect, and although most of our students went on to be academics, my hope is that they'll teach and lead programmes themselves that will bespeak the same social commitments to performance and its widespread efficacy.

For what is our field if it doesn't demonstrate modes of embodied civic engagement? I don't mean to suggest that to be a public practice, theatre and performance should be coldly utilitarian. Nor do I mean that performance projects should be funded only if they demonstrate some preordained and usually conservative use-value. Performance studies has productively unsettled our collective understandings of what a public is, from the most private performance, staged between one performer and one other person, to a gallery exhibit, to a rowdy faculty meeting, to a Broadway audience and well beyond. All of these are sites of civic engagement at which performance acts in multiple ways, sometimes for 'the good' and sometimes not. I think of the 'shifts' that inspire so many of us now at the PSI conferences, and of how they, too, constitute and reconstitute publics of various kinds to various effects throughout our annual meetings. The ever-changing nature of how we engage the 'civic'

and how we enact 'publics' enhances our work's import and its pleasure.

And then there is hope, and utopian performativity, where my work now focuses, and the great pleasure I feel and the faith I find in publics gathered for performance. I've been criticized, since *Utopia in Performance* was published in 2005, by academics who see only hegemony in Victor Turner's theory of *communitas*, from which I borrow, and who find the idea of utopian performatives fascist and exclusionary. But I continue to believe that audiences can be stirred to powerful, important common feeling without unanimity, that a theatre can be charged with a sympathetic, shared current of emotion without intentionally leaving out those who might not even notice it happening. Other scholars suspect what they see as the utopian performative's religious overtones. But I would submit that they mistake my faith in the unstructured, rather haphazard presentness of an anonymous public for the practice of something organized and constraining. I continue to look for hope at the theatre, with the distinct belief that occasionally, I'll find it there. That, to me, is a more spiritual than religious practice, a simple agnostic faith that when people gather - a mix of friends and strangers, of those we know and those we don't, which is part of the regular pleasure of being a public audience - something alchemical and even magical might happen. (Some scholars deplore my belief in magic, too, though I don't know how you can study performance without it.)

My trajectory lands me here for now, eager to engage the burgeoning literature on affect and theatre and public feelings that is invigorating the field and its interdisciplines. But on some level, my understanding of performance and publics isn't very academic at all but rather continues to be a practice that I constantly choose to engage. Going to performance - any performance, with any public - demonstrates my belief that it's possible to see, and feel, and think differently than I have (than we have) before. At least, that's my hope, which I continue to find at the theatre.

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