Experiencing the Quilt

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Experiencing the Quilt

Charles E. Morris III

As I close this volume I am taken back to my first encounter with the AIDS Quilt in Washington, D.C., in 1992. I was a young, closeted graduate student who along with my friend and peer Rick Pucci joined Carole Blair at the display, where Carole was conducting research for her project on U.S. commemorative culture. I couldn’t have predicted the profound influence that personally seeing and touching those panels, the rush of manifold affective response, interactions with my friends and strangers, the bird’s-eye view, inscribing the signature panel, the ACT UP flyer announcing a political funeral—all constitutive of my experience of the Quilt—would have on my coming out, my politics, my pedagogy, my scholarship.

In light of that memory I am saddened that on October 11, 2009, the National Equality March on Washington for LGBT Rights, orchestrated by a resurgent Cleve Jones, did not include a large-scale display of the AIDS Quilt. This is not 1987, of course, and as has been discussed in these
pages there are many reasons for this absence, some more seemly than others, and we could certainly engage in a spirited and principled political and theoretical debate over the boon or bane of such a display. Whether understood as an ongoing political intervention, or archival exhibition, or embodied performance of cultural memory (all of these, in my judgment), the intimate and sublime event of the AIDS Quilt should be, must be, experienced. And while certainly advocating the deeply powerful and significant ongoing local displays in schools and places of worship and community centers, I also believe that the Quilt should return en masse, if no more in full, to Washington, D.C., again and again, for multitudes to encounter together there.

The important and protracted debates about where and how the Quilt should go (or go at all) notwithstanding for this moment, I want to emphasize the paramount importance of experiencing it, of being proximate to those panels, of finding oneself intimately situated, indeed enveloped, in the environs and scene of its display, of participating in the performance of the Quilt. In that spirit I want to offer a few considerations especially for those scholars of rhetorical studies, though the issues raised here have wider applicability.

The first concerns materiality. For quite some time now, Carole Blair has encouraged rhetorical scholars to take seriously the differential experiences of the objects we analyze, and therefore “translate,” and the critical difference “being there” can make:

It is now common enough to acknowledge the positive, democratizing effects of the “mechanical reproduction” of artworks, but we must also remember the flattening effect of such reproduction—not just the literal two-dimensionalizing of a place and its inhabitant artworks, but also the metaphorical “flattening” of experience. And in doing so, we must pose the question of how we, as critics, make the object “real.” How do we make it matter to our readers? The term “matter” has an important double edge here, as a noun that suggests substance and presence, but also as a verb that implies a rendering of significance.

Elsewhere, with the same issues of reproduction and “experiential habitat” at stake, Blair asked, “What happens when the first of the Quilt’s panels
disintegrates? The NAMES Project will preserve all panels to the extent possible and reproduce them in photographs and into photo representations on its website; however, the literal feel of the panels will be lost, as will the rendered work of therapy for survivors that those panels contain.”

Blair’s question reminded me of Thomas Yingling’s powerful observation on materiality, identity, and community within the context of AIDS:

“It is only in structures such as the quilt or, to a greater or lesser extent, in any demonstration or performance—in the making of artifacts about AIDS—that the disease can become meaningful in a way that allows those affected and infected by it to secure it as an experience and not merely as information. It allows as well an affirmation of identity not fated to succumb to the traps of affirmative, bourgeois culture in its determination to seal that identity and those meanings in a world of alienation and death. Only in such artifacts may the collective experience of AIDS be encountered, and only in encountering that collective knowledge may the gay and lesbian community continue to become visible to itself as something quite other than the site par excellence of social atrophy and alienation.”

In different registers—agent and audience, individual and collective, activist and academic—we see here the vital issue of how AIDS, past and present, gets materialized and mediated, enlivened and flattened, and how important experience and experiential habitat can be to making such materializations matter. If you have taken up AIDS and its history in the classroom, as I have for the past decade among those ever-increasingly “removed” from the epidemic, then this issue resonates as all the more pressing, material.

Second, rhetorical critics and rhetorical theorists of social protest have yet to substantively engage affect—feelings and emotions—as it centrally figures in activist culture, biography, strategy, and performance. From the emotional dimensions of mobilization to the “shared and reciprocal emotions,” “taste in tactics,” “emotional common sense,” and “affective public culture” that sustain and splinter activists personally and communally, to the individual and collective effervescence of tactical performance, to the burnout that often alters or ends activist commitment, affect matters.
That much of the best scholarship on affect to date concerns AIDS activism, as well as GLBT people, also suggests both the need and a means by which to sharpen the queer turn in this field.

Moreover, in thinking again of Blair’s notion of “being there,” rhetorical critics and rhetorical theorists of social protest would do well to follow Phaedra Pezzullo’s lead into the fray. This means to take seriously Pezzullo’s advice, following Robert Asen, Dwight Conquergood, and others that we should engage and account for “actually existing” counterpublics and movements, engage and account for activist bodies, embodiment, interaction, interanimation, and cultural performance. In doing so, we can better understand, indeed we critically manifest, what Pezzullo calls “presence”:

More than simply “showing up,” being present as a mode of advocacy suggests that the materiality of a place promises the opportunity to shape perceptions, bodies, and lives with respect to the people and places hosting the experience. Being “present,” like roll call in school, indicates the significance of someone literally coexisting with another in a particular space and time. Yet, a rhetorical appreciation of “presence” also can indicate when we feel as if someone, someplace, or something matters, whether or not she/he/it is physically present with us. Presence also refers, then, to the structure of feeling or one’s affective experience when certain elements—and, perhaps, more important, relationships and communities—in space and time appear more immediate to us, such that we can imagine their “realness” or “feasibility” in palpable and significant ways.

Following Pezzullo, or Joshua Gamson, Dana Cloud, Ann Cvetkovich, Deborah Gould, Patrick Johnson, and Jeffrey Bennett, among others, such “rhetorical appreciation” may require greater ethnographic commitment, a commitment to oral history, and our presence as participant observers.

Finally, insofar as any present or future display of the Quilt would constitute memory of activism and activist memory, rhetorical scholars of social protest should further consider how the past materializes in the activist present, how activists experience and deploy, activate and
are limited by memory and history. Rarely has social movement and public memory scholarship intersected in rhetorical studies. However, the dynamic relationship between memory and activism makes such critical scrutiny crucial. Kristen Hoerl has demonstrated the extent to which various agents and institutions of mainstream culture distort and obliterate activist legacies and constrain the possibilities of activist countermemory. Ann Cvetkovich revealed not only consequential differences between dominant and counter memories of the AIDS epidemic, but also the affective and strategic import of activist memory and amnesia for activists themselves across time and generation. As she observed, “Like the dead, memories of activism can also be kept alive as something that one has recourse to, even difficult memories.” The activist propulsion derived from memory is also made plain in Alexandra Juhasz’s reflection on her AIDS video archive and experimental documentary Video Remains:

The intrusion of present-day AIDS—suffered differently, represented less, lacking a movement aware of the awful and inspiring legacy of the past—enlivens my old tape and recommits to a contemporary conversation about AIDS, its representations, feelings, activism, and history. I conjured Jim from the AIDS activist video archive, both personal and institutional, private and public, and wondered what others might see in him, and whether we might be ready to revisit this past, not so much to heal as to think again together.

Here the conjunction of memory and movement, a genealogy of activist performance, and queer archive activism all suggest the rich critical and political potential of the Quilt’s pasts and presence. As Peter Hawkins concluded, “For in addition to its ongoing reproduction, the NAMES Project may well give rise to other symbols and strategies than its own, other responses to AIDS extended not only to the dead but to the living.”

My hope is that this volume in some meaningful way will provide inducement to experience the Quilt, and, like the Quilt itself, impel us to feel, and fathom, and fight AIDS with greater vigor and lasting commitment.
NOTES


5. In her discussion of the “Activism’s Afterlives,” Cvetkovich quotes Kim Christensen, whose reflection on the memory of ACT UP should deepen for us the concern about the challenges of materializing the history of the epidemic: “[I taught a] gay and lesbian studies class for a friend of mine, about ACT UP, and these were 90 percent young, out, gay and lesbian people, and a good percent had never heard of ACT UP. Those who had had very bizarre notions about what we had done, and it was really depressing. It was like, ‘Oh, my God, this was only ten years ago, and it’s already gone from public memory.’ Something has to happen here because they can’t reinvent the wheel every single generation” (Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 227). For the first time in my own teaching career, students in the spring 2009 semester of my course covering the history of AIDS activism had never heard of ACT UP or the AIDS Quilt.

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